



# 10 TIPS FOR LAYOUT DIVERS

BY WILL BRANTLEY

**PUT YOURSELF RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLOCK  
WITH A STEALTHY LAYOUT BOAT.**



Brian Rhoades



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## I WAS A LITTLE UNEASY THE FIRST TIME I SAT IN OUR NEW LAYOUT BOAT.

I was anchored in open water in a fiberglass bowl, and the waves were lapping at near eye level. My buddy Tim Daugherty was 300 yards away in the big boat, and it was a long swim to dry land. What if this thing sprung a leak?

Thirty bluebills put a hiatus on the worrying, however. I heard the black-and-white mob before I saw them, the air rushing over their wings sounding like ripping paper. They passed within tennis-racket range over my head, banked around in front of the spread and then bore down on the decoys as if they aimed to attack them.

In an instant, they surrounded me like a swarm of web-footed mosquitoes. At five yards, I picked a bird and fired. A duck fell, but admittedly not the one I was shooting at. The scaup roared out of the spread, and I blindly fired two more harmless shots before they disappeared down the lake.

I laughed aloud as I fumbled for more shells. I usually can hit bluebills, but I'd never physically been in the middle of a decoying flock, shooting at them from

mere feet. I'd have been as well off with a pistol, I think. Over the course of the season, I learned to expect such decoy work in a layout boat and became thoroughly addicted to it.

I don't want to frame these tips as being from the point of view of an expert layout-boat hunter. I'm not. I've done a fair amount of diver hunting, but this past season was my first year hunting from a layout boat. Tim and I pooled our funds on a Mighty Layout Boys single-man boat, and though we've still got plenty to learn, the thought of hunting divers without it doesn't have much appeal anymore. If you're thinking of trying one yourself, here's what I recommend.

### Boat Tips:

#### 1. Know Big Water

Hunting divers in layout boats is a big-water endeavor. I've written it before, but it bears repeating: Big water kills unprepared duck hunters. Layout hunting compounds some of the more dangerous elements, too. You might be a long way from shore, and though layout boats are stable, getting caught in one during a storm is a recipe for tragedy. Before delving into layout hunting, be sure you

and your buddies have mastered the big-water basics and have a seaworthy, dead-reliable tender boat.

#### 2. Towing Or Hauling

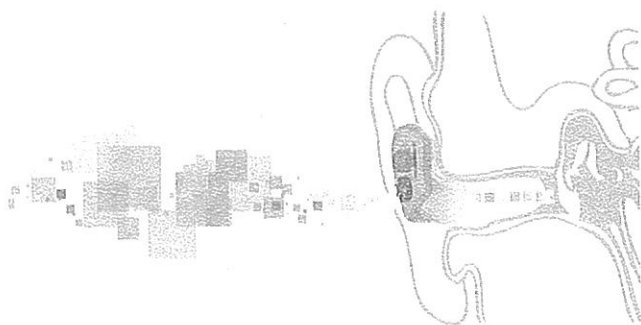
Most layout boats have bow-eyes for towing. In my experience, pulling them on a rope behind the tender boat works so long as you don't go too fast and the waves aren't too big. Violate one of those rules and you'll be amazed at how fast water can fill a layout boat. Towing works best when the nose of the layout boat is kept close to the transom of the tender boat and elevated.

With a single-man boat, it's about as easy to slide it across the gunnels of the tender boat and either strap it down or have a buddy hold it in place. Many layout hunters have frames built onto their tender boats for hauling their layouts. My boat isn't quite big enough for that, but if you're running a larger boat, it's something I highly recommend.

#### 3. Paint Up

Most layout boats are shipped with a battleship-gray paint job. That might work on some waters, but on Kentucky Lake and most other places I've hunted,

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IT'S WHAT THEY DON'T SEE THAT'S IMPORTANT

the water tends to have a greener color. The gray paint job shines like a beacon. We refinished our boat in OD green. It took two cans of spray paint and about 30 minutes. When these boats match the color of the water you're hunting, you become virtually invisible to divers. My advice is to drop your boat in the water before season, evaluate it up close and from a distance, and paint it as needed.

#### 4. Layout Positioning

There's seldom a hunt where we don't adjust the boat's positioning according to how the ducks are working the spread. We use two anchors — one on each end — and set the boat at a slight angle to the spread to allow maximum range of motion for swinging our shotguns. (The angle changes depending on the wind speed and resulting waves, as well as if we have a left-handed shooter.) We've found that offsetting the boat just a bit from the landing zone, like on the opposite corner of the spread, gets us out of the ducks' line of sight.

#### 5. Flag 'Em Down

Whether you need help chasing down a crippled duck or another box of shells,

Layout boats are remarkably stable, allowing a good range of motion. But you'll usually be on big water and you'll need a plan for a quick escape if you're caught in a storm.



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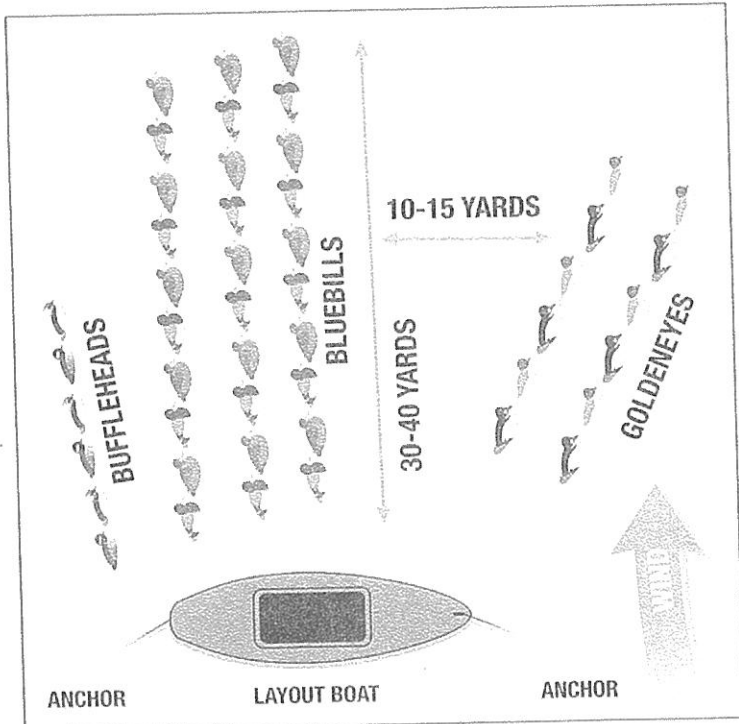
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## LAYOUT BOATS



An ideal layout spread uses classic longline diver rigs and leaves a 10- to 15-yard landing zone.

at a flea market, but anything secure and heavy will work. We've got 3-foot pieces of line tied to our weights with loops on the ends for attaching to the D-rings on our mainlines.

### 8. Longline Deployment

Most of our hunting is done in shallow water (by diver hunting standards) of around 3 feet deep. That seems to be where many of the birds congregate to feed, but it's also easiest to set decoys if you can get out and wade. (Much shallower than that, though, is too shallow; divers won't usually work a spot where they can see bottom.)

Bluebills make up the bulk of our spread, supplemented with goldeneyes and buffleheads. The goldeneyes are all set along one edge of the spread and the buffleheads on the other. These ducks are solitary birds and don't tend to mix it up much with other species. The added white on the perimeters gives a little more visual attraction from a distance, too. The species of decoys you use, of course, depends on the predominant birds in your area. Mix it up with canvasbacks and redheads as necessary.

We first attach an anchor and a single decoy at the head of the line, and then stretch the line and anchor it off on the far end. When all the lines are set in this fashion, we go back with decoy bags and clip the blocks to them in assembly-line fashion. This is much faster than setting

the guys in the layouts must have a fool-proof way of communicating with their buddies in the tender boat. Two-way radios and cell phones are OK until they get wet. A blaze-orange flag is unmistakable, even from hundreds of yards away.

### 6. Be A Good Tender

Lives are in your hands when you're manning the tender boat, so pay attention. Napping on the job is not allowed. A good tender boat is a stable vessel. My 16-foot aluminum modified-V with a 40-horse tiller is enough on Kentucky Lake, but a bigger boat wouldn't hurt. Layout hunters on the Great Lakes often use larger V-hull boats with outboards measured in hundreds of horsepower for their tenders. They provide room for hauling the layouts and all the gear and are safe in the biggest water.

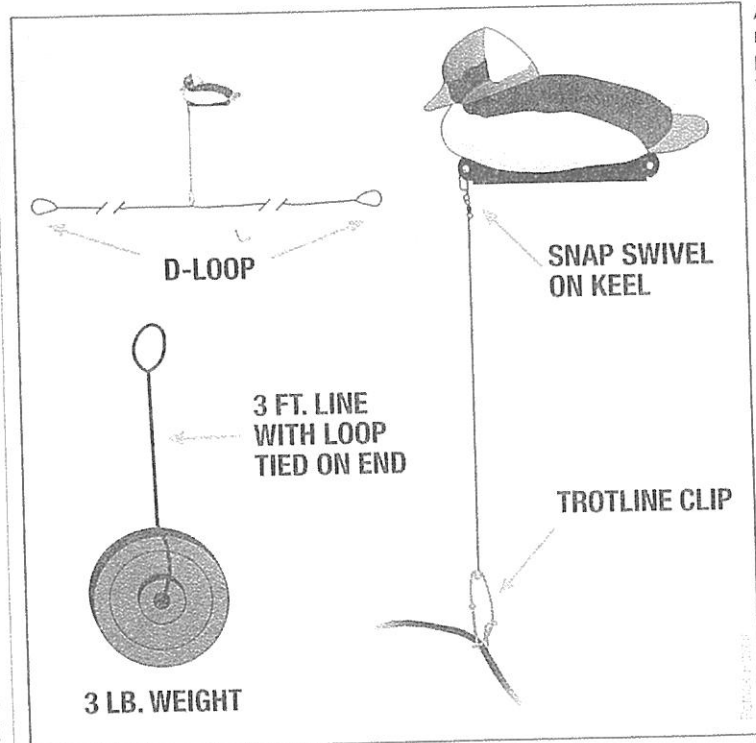
If you have a boat suited to the open water you hunt, it'll work as a tender boat in a pinch. The tender's primary responsibility, beyond keeping the hunter safe, is retrieving downed birds — which can disappear in a hurry in windswept open water, particularly if they're not dead. Keep a shotgun handy for finishing cripples and binoculars at your side to see what's going on.

### Decoy Tips

#### 7. Longline Rigging

Individually rigged decoys work, but classic longline diver rigs are faster, easier and

more secure in windswept, open water. You can buy longlining kits or make your own. We used trotlining cord to make main lines approximately 20 to 30 yards long with D-loop snaps on each end. The decoy leads are about 3 feet long with the trotline clips on one end and snap-swivels clipped to the decoy's keel on the other. The weights we used are 3-pound dumbbell weights Tim found



A longline rig can be put together with trotlining cord, D-loop snaps, snap swivels and weights, or you can purchase a ready-to-go longlining kit.

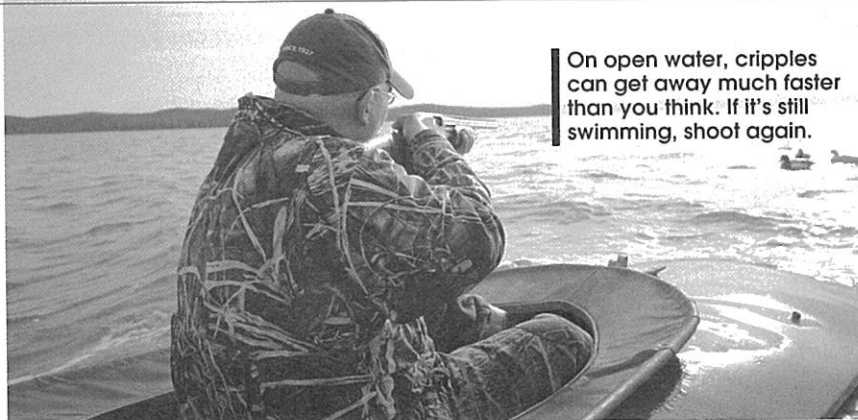


complete lines individually. Birds might work anywhere between the lines, but we typically leave a large landing zone 10 to 15 yards wide between the goldeneyes and the rest of the spread, and that's where we expect most of our shots.

**Duck Tips**

**9. Scout Open Water**

Heavily pressured divers learn to avoid shorelines, points, islands, floating blinds and anything else that looks as though it could hide a hunter. Instead, they often



On open water, cripples can get away much faster than you think. If it's still swimming, shoot again.



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“raft up” on choice feeding and resting areas offshore. The area might be a sand or mussel bar a few feet under the water. Whatever it is, you can hunt it with a layout boat. The ability to move around, adapt and set up on the X, regardless of whether there's dry land cover around or not, is what makes this style of hunting so deadly.

Scouting these spots is no different than other types of duck scouting. You're watching for concentrations of birds and flight paths from a distance, and then homing in on what you see for a setup. If you find some birds, make visual landmark references if possible. If not, ease your boat to where they're sitting and enter a waypoint into a GPS. A GPS and depthfinder definitely make things easier. Even if you know the lake well, offshore spots are difficult to find in the dark without electronic assistance.

**10. Move Fast**

Hunter reluctance to pick up and move when the birds are working elsewhere saves the lives of countless public-land ducks every season. It's imperative not to fall into that rut when layout hunting. Despite your best efforts to pinpoint the X on open water, it's still easy to set up 100 yards shy of it.

Divers certainly learn to avoid blinds and islands in the name of self-preservation, but in the grand scheme of things, they're pretty dumb and sometimes almost robotic in their actions. Set up a good spread of decoys in their flight path and they'll work them, but you have to be in the flight path. If you're sitting in the layout and watching bird after bird buzz by just out of range, it's time to move toward them. With longlines in wadable water, moving doesn't take long, and because you don't have to worry about cover, you have nothing to lose. Keep adjusting, and the magic setup will materialize. ➤