



## Mike Williams

### Folk Arts: Paiute Culture and Tule Duck Decoys



Fallon, NV  
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Born and raised in Carson City, Mike Williams is a member of the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe. He is dedicated to creating accurate replicas of the canvasback duck decoys, egg-gathering baskets, clothing, and boats woven by his ancestors in ancient times, as a way of honoring and perpetuating their culture, heritage and traditions.

The traditional *Numu* (Northern Paiute) way of making duck decoys utilizes the stem of the tule reed, a member of the sedge family that is indigenous to Nevada. In 1924 eleven tule duck decoys—made 2000 years ago and shaped to resemble the canvasback duck—were discovered in Lovelock Cave, buried in a basket. After seeing photographs of the decoys, Mike was inspired to create precise replicas of this Great Basin tradition. He studied photographs and examples at the Nevada State Museum and taught himself to make and decorate them using the traditional resources and materials used by the People of the Marsh – the forebears of the *Numu* people.

Mike gathers tule stems in the fall, before they are damaged by freezing temperatures. He cuts, twists, weaves, and binds them to shape a duck. Mike makes the binding string from Indian hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) that he harvests locally. He colors the decoys with natural red ochre from northern Nevada mountains and black shading from the resin of pinion pine trees. He may add duck or goose feathers for a realistic effect.

According to the archaeological record and their own oral traditions, the *Numu* were resident in Nevada for many thousands of years before they came into contact with Euro-Americans. They lived in proximity to large lakes and wetlands where their lives were sustained by the native vegetation, wildlife, fish, and fowl. The discovery of the beautifully-preserved ancient decoys in Lovelock Cave was hailed as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries in the western United States, and the tule duck decoy was named as Nevada's state artifact in 1995.

Mike shows audiences how he creates the traditional duck hunting tools of his ancestors, including decoys and egg baskets. He tells the story of how the artifacts were discovered, talks about their history and how they were used, and explains what they represent in modern times. His audiences gain an understanding of the powerful role of the tule plant in the everyday lives of the *Numu*, and an appreciation for the symbolic significance of the tule duck decoy in recognizing a culture that has flourished and adapted to changes in the Great Basin for many thousands of years

#### Program Types

Lecture/demonstrations;  
hands-on workshops;  
residencies.

#### Language Proficiencies

English

#### Fees

Contact to inquire

#### Availability

Contact to inquire

#### Audiences

All ages for  
lecture/demonstration;  
Teens and adults for  
workshops.

#### Venues

Schools, libraries, museums,  
community centers.

#### Technical requirements

Contact to inquire

#### Counties

Statewide