

Quest for a King

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*An arctic adventure
for
king eiders & more*



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RAMSEY RUSSELL



Cold-hearted hunting. Waterfowlers endure extreme conditions in pursuit of one of duck hunting's most coveted trophies: the king eider.

“Eider!”
“Eider!”
“Eider!”

The staccato voices echoed down the shore as I peered into the slow-rising sun for the one bird that had brought me thousands of miles in January to a small island in the middle of Alaska's Bering Sea.

And there it was: a drake king eider. A mallard-size silhouette framed by the overcast 10 AM dawn; wings beating furiously, body tilting side to side as it fought 40-mph winds in a vain attempt to stay over open water. The line of gunners spread down the

shore tensed, each edging forward on perches of frozen boulders, trying desperately to close the distance to the bird, raising shotguns to shoulders as one of the crown jewels of waterfowling made his haphazard approach. Pushed shoreward by the pounding wind, the king eider could not hold his open-sea line behind a protective wave once it crashed in the shallows. He succumbed to the relentless forces of nature, and then to another gunner's spray of shot.

A jubilant celebration of voices carried inland over the barren snowscape as Dustin Jones, a native Aleut and guide for Alaskan Eider Outfitters, scrambled down the shore through a maze of icy boulders and into the thigh-deep crashing surf to retrieve the colorful bird.

For the next week, each king eider brought to hand produced

a pause of reflection and admiration. And how could it not? In a land of muted grays and whites, the king eider's markings pop, identifying it as a rare and precious gem. A close inspection of the mighty sea duck reveals a multi-hued head—a crown of blue feathers giving way to green cheeks, the plumage so fine and thick it nearly resembles fur. The bright yellow medallion on the orange bill adds to the bird's vibrancy.

So prized and elusive are king eiders that only a handful of waterfowlers have a chance to pursue them every year. Alaskan Eider Outfitters, for example, accepts only 30 hunters a season, with prime dates running from Christmas until the close of the season, in late January. For those hunters enamored equally with adventure as with obtaining a trophy, St. Paul Island, in Alaska's Pribilof chain, offers the best, most consistent oppor-



population is rumored to make its way down eastern Canada, but numbers are neither consistent nor huntable. The hardy birds weigh on average four pounds and have been known to dive to depths of 180 feet in their pursuit of mussels, snails, fish and vegetation. This latter ability strikes fear into the hearts of hunters, as winging a specimen can result in a lengthy chase as the bird continually dives and resurfaces, each submersion taking the prize farther and farther away.

For this reason follow-up shots must be taken quickly, regardless of whether the hunters are on shoreline points or in boats. “If their heads are still up when they hit the water, keep shooting until they’re not,” said Capt. Moe Neale, a near-10-year veteran of Bering Sea duck hunting and co-owner, along with Capt. Jeff Wasley, of Alaskan Eider Outfitters. It was a mantra that became standard operating procedure, with hunters helping each other with follow-up shots to reduce the chances of lost birds—not just king eiders but also harlequins, long-tailed ducks (old-squaw) and the occasional Pacific common eider.



tunities to take a king eider in the country—arguably the world.

Formed by a violent paradox of volcanic eruptions and pressure-loaded sea ice, St. Paul lies directly in the path of migrating eiders. Located nearly 800 miles southwest of Anchorage and only 500 miles from Siberia, the 40-square-mile island provides the only vantage point from which hunters can simultaneously be far out to sea *and* in the direct path of ice as it encroaches southward. While we were in St. Paul, sea ice was a scant 10 miles out; within a week of our departure it would lock up the island until spring.

King eiders have no want of land outside of nesting season, and they stay at sea just ahead of forming ice throughout arctic waters, including those surrounding Alaska, Greenland and northern Norway. A small



basically show up with the clothes on your back and we can outfit you to hunt.”

That outfitter preparedness and the few essentials I carried on the plane—including Cabela’s heaviest windproof balaclava and Columbia’s Omni-Heat Electric Wader Widgeon Jacket—saved my trip after every piece of luggage (including my gun) was short-checked in Anchorage. If not for the extra gear, I would have missed four days of hunting waiting for my stuff.

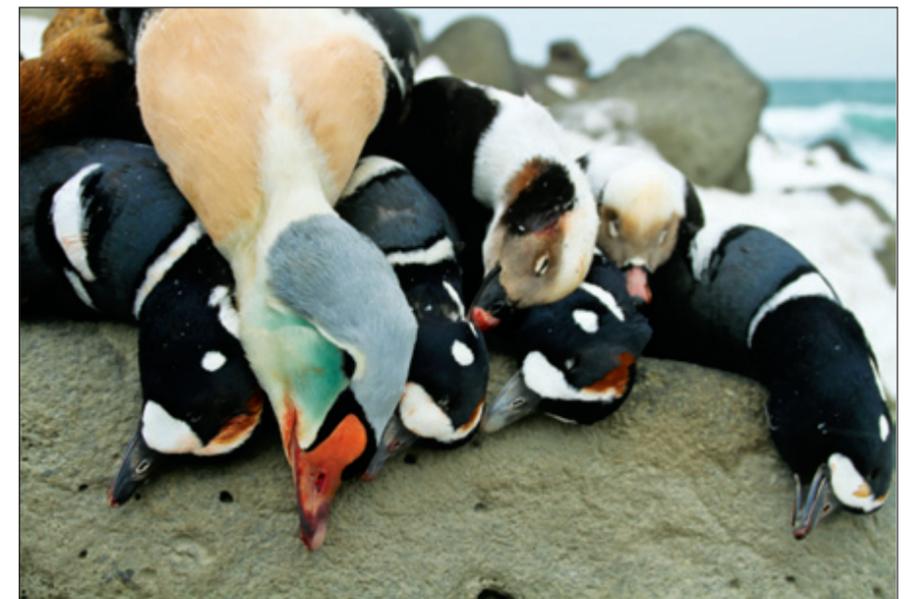
That was a bullet dodged, because St. Paul Island most definitely is not St. Paul, Minnesota, where you can run into town and buy something on a

Hunting locations and styles depend upon the cooperation of the wind; in fact, everything about St. Paul depends upon the mercy of nature, including making it to the island. “Up here Mother Nature is like an ice-cold iron maiden that shows you a little leg now and then,” said Ramsey Russell of GetDucks.com, the booking agent for Alaskan Eider Outfitters. “If she gives you enough respite to make it out to the island, then you go. And then, hopefully, she’ll

show a little leg again during the week and let you get out on the boat or to an advantageous spot on land.”

When you’re talking Alaska in January, travel is sketchy at best, and just getting to the island can be an adventure. (Travel insurance is strongly advised.) Many hunters end up stranded in Anchorage, waiting days for safe flying conditions.

Even if your flight does depart on time, there’s no guarantee your bags will. Weight restrictions and US mail (yes, there are residents on the island) take precedence, and you could end up on the island without your gear. “They do everything they can to at least get all firearms on board,” Neale said, “so we suggest putting essential gear in your gun case and wearing or carrying on everything you possibly can. But regardless, we have gear for our clients, including shotguns and shells. You can



Hunting on St. Paul Island is either from shore or from boats towing decoys, and bags include king eiders, harlequins, long-tailed ducks (old-squaw) and the occasional Pacific common eider.

whim. The island has a year-round population of approximately 500 people, who are served by a Russian Orthodox Church, a general store, one K-12 school, a beer-and-wine-only bar (with odd hours) and a small medical facility. Big business consists of the Trident Seafoods processing plant, where halibut and crab boats, such as those seen on Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch*, unload their cargo. Laborers are *Continued on page 139*

QUEST FOR A KING

Continued from page 77

flown in to cook, clean and package the catch for shipping around the world. If not for the plant, a US Coast Guard station and government subsidies, civilization on the island likely would cease.

When hunters do finally make it to St. Paul, Mother Nature can assert herself in full force, battering the island with gale-force winds for days on end and making every move a potentially life-threatening decision.

According to Russell: “This is a complete immersion into an experience—the violent ocean, ice, volcanic ash. I’ve never felt so insignificant and small in my entire life than on the Bering Sea chasing the holy grail of waterfowl. I’ve also never felt more comfortable and safe than in the hands of Moe and Jeff, and that includes going out in a 14-foot rubber raft. When you’re talking about that environment, you’re literally putting your life in the captain’s hands. Those two aren’t going to risk your life or theirs, but they will do everything they can to safely put you on the birds.”

Getting on those birds is wholly dependent upon wind direction and strength. High winds and rough seas relegate hunters to rocky shorelines, where they face directly into the biting forces and pass-shoot birds unlucky enough to venture too close to shore.

If winds lay down, hunters drag a line of decoys behind a moving boat, trolling in small bays and within a few hundred yards of shore. Every eye scans the sky and undulating surface of the sea. It’s a slow, choppy, wind- and sea-spray-filled affair that suddenly gives way to hurried excitement when a flying king is spotted careening toward the set or is spied hunkered down on the water’s surface, hidden by the immenseness of the seascape and the rising and falling swells.

As curious kings heave into range, either decoying to the bobbing blocks or approached by an unpowered boat as it drifts toward them, hunters decide whose turn it is to shoot and who’s backing them up. It is then that the anticipation of encountering a king—the sole purpose for traveling to one of the most inhospitable places on the planet—begins to electrify the gunner and exert immense psychological pressure on him. More than once I wished that

in the preceding months I had figured out some way to practice crossing shots while bouncing up and down to prepare for those moments . . .

For the first four days of our January hunt—save for one short-lived, sea-spray-filled excursion that was called off when Neale noticed changing wave action associated with the arrival of dangerous conditions—steady 30- to 40-mph northeast winds kept us shore bound.

Those pass-shooting mornings followed a familiar course: a 20-minute drive on a single-lane, snow-covered gravel road followed by an ATV ride over a frozen lake to a rocky protuberance known as Sea Lion Neck, on the extreme northeast end of the island. There each hunter would take up a spot on a rock layered in frozen sea foam and spray and face directly into the harsh wind.

Separated from other hunters by 30 to 50 yards, I constantly would scan the horizon and undulating waves for the identifying outlines and wingbeats of eiders. Wasley and Neale would help identify the silhouettes of passing birds headed out to sea to eat or do who knows what by shouting species names, which then would be echoed down the line by each hunter.

While everyone had traveled to this dot of land to kill a king eider—and to a man would have considered the trip a success if they'd taken just one specimen home—we also targeted petite harlequins, majestic in their contrasting markings of white against indigo-and-slate-blue plumage, as well as tan-and-white long-tailed ducks.

The difficulty of hitting a crossing sea duck was matched by the retrieval process once a bird was down. Dogs aren't allowed on the island because of its importance as a marine sanctuary (the world's largest population of northern fur seals and more than 200 species of birds visit its shores), so the recovery of waterfowl falls to the guides and shooters. When hunting from land, a small area of surf existed to drop birds in; outside of that they would wash out to sea or around the point and disappear in the heavy currents.

Both sides of the arctic twilight seemingly last forever. The sun rose around 10:30 AM, making for unhurried mornings, and crept across the sky, peaking

momentarily in the afternoon before beginning a slow descent into the western sea. With approximately 7½ hours of daylight in January, morning and evening hunts lasted about two hours each—closer to three if we were lucky.

In the first two days I pulled the trigger only four times, and I had just a single juvenile harlequin to show for it. That changed on day four when my bags and Benelli arrived, the waterfowl gods began to smile, and Mother Nature showed us some serious leg when winds dropped enough to allow us two days in the boats.

Splitting the hunting party, three hunters went with Neale on the big boat—a 17-foot sea-class TDB outfitted with a 50-horsepower motor and kicker as well as pop-up sides to help conceal hunters—while a father-and-son team wanted to hunt a small west-side bay from land. Russell and I ventured out with Wasley in a 14-foot inflatable Achilles with a 20-horse engine.

With the harbor already icing up, we

A KING FOR THE BOOKS

On January 15, 2012, Trevor Peterson of Bethel, Alaska, collected a king eider for the history books.

It was Peterson's first day of hunting with Alaskan Eider Outfitters and, while sitting on the shoreline rocks before legal shooting light, he had to watch king eider after king eider pass by. Finally his guide, Dustin Jones, told him it was go time. Moments later a pair of drake kings came zipping up the coast, and Peterson crumpled one with a load of HEVI-Shot No. 2s.

But this was no ordinary king. Turns out that the beautiful drake was sporting a leg band. Upon reporting the band, Peterson learned that the king eider had been tagged on St. Paul on March 14, 1996, as an adult—meaning it had survived an area oil spill and lived in the arctic waters for at least 17 seasons.

To put it into perspective how special this eider was, from 1962 to 2011 only 591 king eiders have been banded. Before this year, only nine bands had been recovered. Peterson's made 10.

—B.L.

didn't just go to sea in a small rubber raft; we had to break through the ice to reach open water on the south side of the island. We capitalized on a few king-eider opportunities as well as added more harlequins to the mix and even a pair of juvenile Pacific common eiders.

That afternoon we carried the Achilles down a makeshift launch on the west side to hunt "The Slick": a long, oily mess of puréed crab particles discharged from the processing plant through a 200-yard pipe into the sea. The Slick attracts long-tailed ducks by the hundreds, and a swarm of the delicate ducks provided fast and incredibly fun shooting for a quick limit.

A sneaky king was resting in the same area, his bright head seeming to glow against the slate-gray water. With a deftly maneuvered drift by Wasley, we eased into gun range just as the drake flushed. I added his royal highness to the day's mixed bag.

With a season's limit of long-tails, which for nonresidents is four—the same as it is for king eiders and harlequins—we worked our way south toward an area known as The Washing Machine: a shallow reef that agitates waves to a frothy white and attracts king eiders and other marine life interested in churned-up meals. Russell added his final drake king to the bag, and I missed a mature, dark-reddish-looking hen king to pair with my drake.

As a group, we had scratched out a few kings, harlequins and long-tailed ducks during the preceding days, but when Mother Nature cooperated, easing her disposition long enough for us to get to sea, we boated 10 kings, making travel hassles, skin-cracking arctic cold and the expense of travel all worth it.

Hunting king eiders on St. Paul Island is as much about collecting a prized and rare species as it is about enjoying an adventure that few other hunters will. It is something that will leave you rich in experience, with stories to tell of hunting the great white north for the elusive king of sea ducks.



Author's Note: Ramsey Russell's full-service travel agency specializing in waterfowl and upland bird hunting worldwide. For more information or to book a king eider hunt with Alaskan Eider Outfitters, contact GetDucks.com, 866-438-3897; www.GetDucks.com.