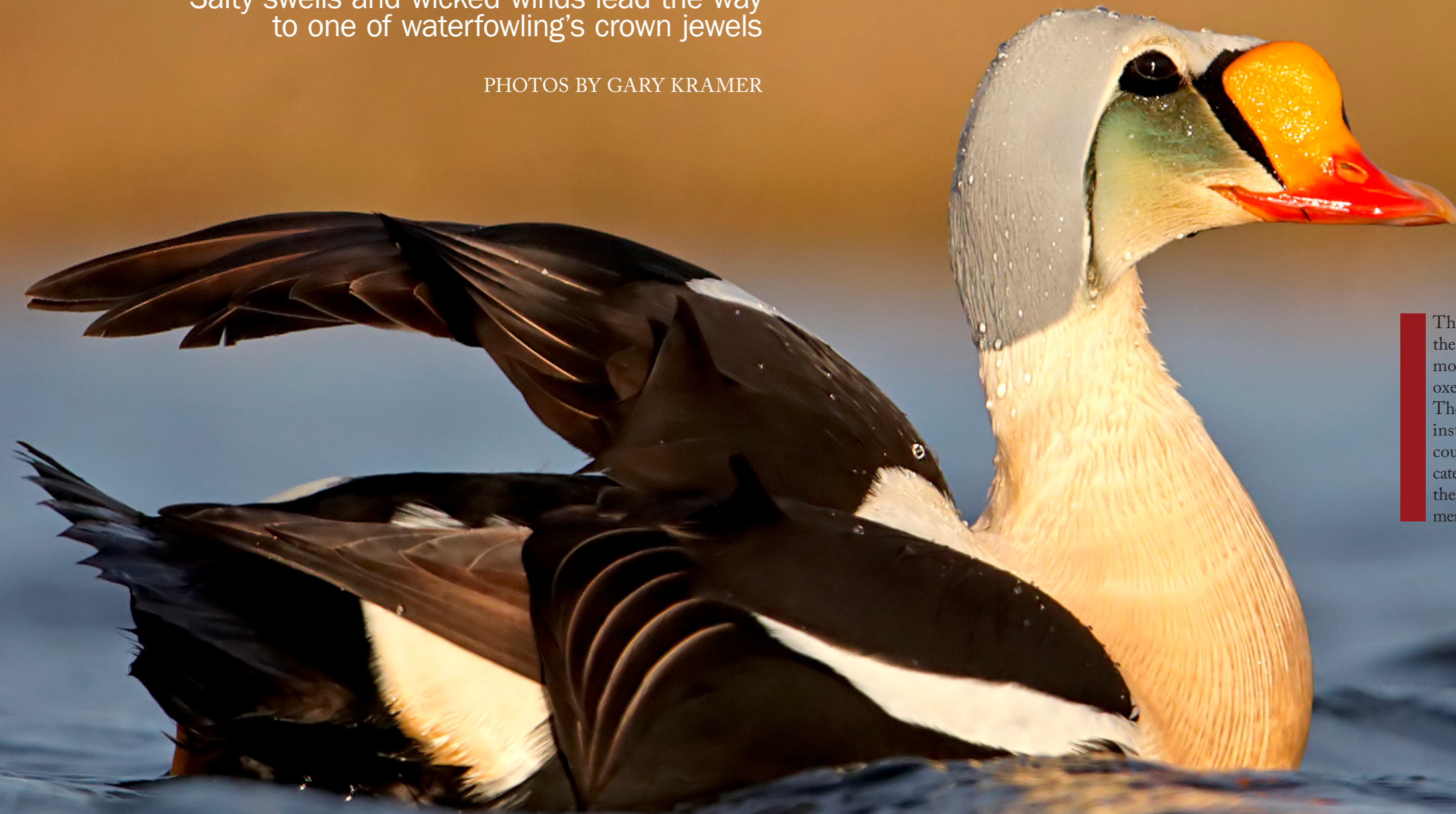


A Quest for Kings

Salty swells and wicked winds lead the way
to one of waterfowling's crown jewels

PHOTOS BY GARY KRAMER



The pursuit of king eiders is arguably the waterfowling equivalent of a hunt for mountain goats, Dall's sheep, or musk oxen in that the challenge is two-fold: There are the physical traits and survival instincts of the quarry themselves, of course, but—more notoriously—these categorically uncivilized creatures consider the harshest, most inhospitable environments on the planet to be downright cozy.



Nesting in the high Arctic tundra and migrating only as far south as the sea ice requires, king eiders are wilderness on the wing. You won't find them loitering with mallards at a park or golf course; they are utterly more wild and free than we'll ever be. Though, when seated atop a granite shelf along the coasts of Alaska's Cold Bay or St. Paul Island, one certainly feels untethered from civilization.

Success in pursuing king eiders requires careful planning and expert guidance. Yet, even then, old fashioned grit is needed to brave the frigid winds and ice-choked swells of Hudson Bay or the rugged fjords of Nuuk, Greenland. But the reward—witnessing a powerful knot of kings or their common eider cousins recklessly skim the salty spray toward your decoys—is surreal, soul-stirring, unforgettable.





This is not just another duck. It is the king—an Arctic enigma, untouchable to all but the most determined. The wild geometry of the king eider’s iridescent greens, bold blacks, signature bluish-gray crown, and orange bill “plate” gives a sense of something elemental, something untamed and—as a crown jewel among waterfowl—something worth enduring memorably miserable northern haunts. ▲

King eiders require specialized equipment and, for most, a trusted outfitter to hunt safely. Gary Kramer recommends [Four Flyways Outfitters \(fourflyways@gmail.com\)](mailto:fourflyways@gmail.com) in Alaska or [Lax-A \(lax-a-hunting.com\)](http://lax-a-hunting.com) for Greenland.

Gary Kramer’s latest book, “[Waterfowl of the World](http://garykramer.net),” contains 1,299 stunning photos and highlights all 167 species of ducks, geese, and swans found on Earth. It is available from garykramer.net.