

COLD BAY FOWLING

Brant & sea ducks on the Alaska Peninsula

by Gary Kramer

COLD BAY, ALASKA, is one of those places that many diehard waterfowlers have heard about but few have visited.

For years it was the private hunting ground of the locals and the few Alaska residents who made the flight from Anchorage. Decent accommodations and reliable guides with good equipment were in short supply. Over time several guides moved into the area and set up shop. One of these was Jeff Wasley of Four Flyways Outfitters. In the early 2000s, Jeff worked as a seasonal biologist for the US Geological Survey on several waterfowl-research projects. After spending a couple of summers in Alaska, he decided to move there—eventually offering guided waterfowl hunts out of Cold Bay.

So when Dan Connelly, Christian Scutter, Jeff Worthen and I decided to make the journey to Cold Bay, we contacted Jeff and set up a trip for early November. We flew to Anchorage, overnighted near the airport and the next day traveled to Cold Bay on the once-daily Ravn Air flight.

As we stepped off the plane, the cold wind that roared out of the north made us hustle into the tiny terminal, where Jeff was waiting. After the customary greetings, we grabbed our gear, loaded it in the Suburban and five minutes later pulled up to Four Flyways Lodge.

The lodge is in the middle of Cold Bay, a bush town on the western edge of the Alaska Peninsula. Surrounded by a spectacular vista of snowcapped volcanoes, two of which remain active, the uplands are an expanse of tundra, while the lowlands are lagoons and estuaries bordering the Bering Sea.

The area abounds with waterfowl and shorebirds and is home to caribou, foxes and brown bears. Cold Bay is home to about 125 permanent residents, and it boasts a two-hole golf course, a single motel and one store. It is also one of the cloudiest places in the US, averaging more than 300 days of heavy overcast each year.

The array of waterfowling opportunities in the area is incredible, as, depending on the month, you can hunt puddle ducks; cackling geese; Pacific, or black, brant; and sea ducks, including Pacific eiders. Add ptarmigan hunting for those inclined to walk, and you have some of the best and most varied wingshooting in the US. We selected the first week of November for our hunt, because sea ducks are just coming on line and brant populations are generally at their peak just before the birds depart for their Mexican





wintering grounds.

Jeff said that the weather and tides looked good for brant the next morning, so we decided on a shoreline hunt in Izembek Lagoon.

The following day it was a 20-minute drive to the launch site near Grants Point. With the gear stowed in the boat, we boarded Jeff's 20-foot Lund Alaskan at first light. A 25-minute run brought us to an island, where Jeff dropped us off on a rocky point and instructed us to make a blind. From past experience, I knew that placing a couple of pieces of driftwood amongst the natural rock formations was all that was needed. Jeff moved off the point, set out two dozen decoys and then motored around the corner and hid the boat out of sight.

It wasn't long before a bald eagle flew past, heading toward a cove about 250 yards away. As the eagle neared the cove, a large flock of brant lifted off the water and headed in our direction. The birds' flight was low and directly toward the decoys, which were pitching and bobbing in the wind and chop. We crouched lower in the rocks, and Jeff steadied his Lab Dakota. The brant were 25 yards out and about to touch down when Jeff said, "Take 'em!" I shot twice amidst the other shotgun blasts, and a number of birds hit the water. Dakota was sent to make the retrieves. The final tally was seven brant for four shooters—an impressive start to the day.

Cold Bay is the jumping-off point for the Izembek National Wildlife

Refuge, a 498,000-acre wilderness of saltwater lagoons, freshwater lakes and ponds, and tundra. Located 630 miles southwest of Anchorage, the refuge was established in 1960, primarily to protect the habitat of Pacific brant. At the heart of the refuge lies Izembek Lagoon, 150 square miles of salt and brackish water containing the largest eelgrass beds in the world. Alaska has designated the state-owned tidelands and submerged lands of the lagoon as the Izembek State Game Refuge. More than 90 percent of Izembek Refuge is designated wilderness.

During the 18th Century Russian explorers landed on these shores and eventually set up fur-trading posts. The lagoon was named for Karl Izembek, a Russian doctor who accompanied an expedition in 1827.

The Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands during World War II precipitated the rapid construction of American military bases in Alaska. One military outpost was Fort Randall, an Army air base with up to 20,000 troops built at what is now Cold Bay. Three-quarters of a century later, the foundations of military barracks are still present and old jeep trails are visible crossing the fragile tundra.

These days the area is known more for its waterfowl than its history. According to refuge biologist Patrick Fitzmorris, during the height of the fall migration up to 200,000 geese and 150,000 ducks use the area. The most abundant ducks are pintails, mallards,

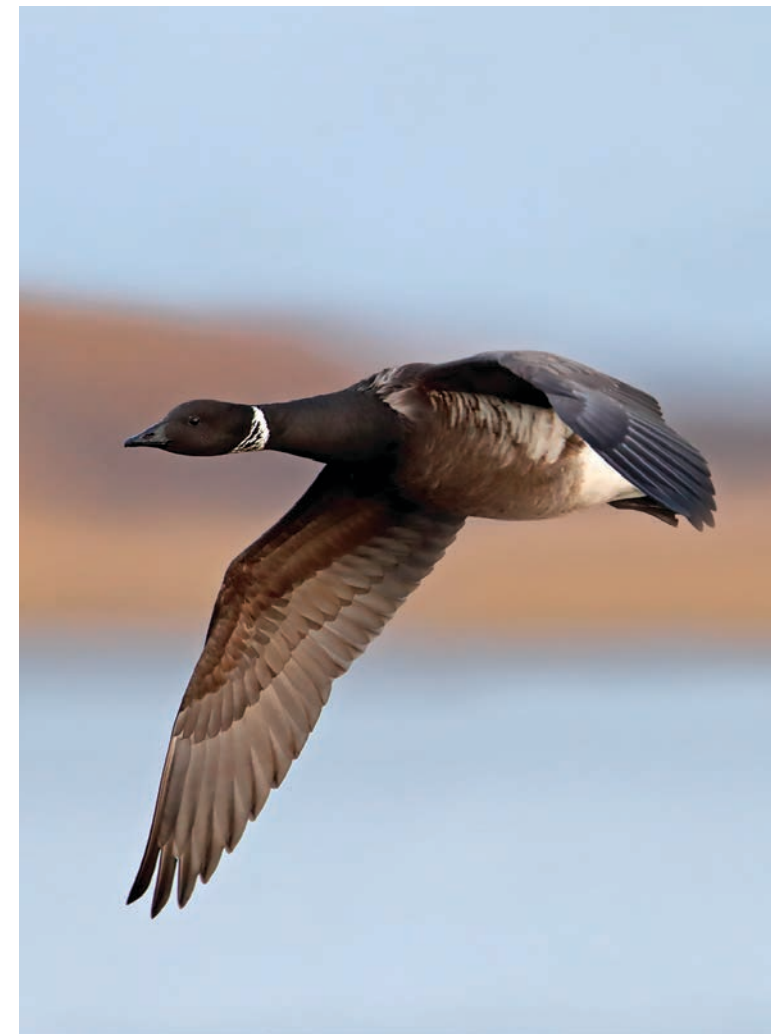
Almost the entire population of Pacific, or black, brant gathers at the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge prior to an early November departure for Mexican wintering grounds. Hunters who set up near eelgrass beds exposed on falling tides enjoy great gunning for the small geese.

scaup, goldeneyes, bufflehead, long-tailed ducks, scoters, harlequin ducks and common (Pacific) eiders. Peak populations occur during October, with puddle ducks and divers more abundant early in the month and sea ducks dominating as the season progresses.

Among the geese that stop during the fall are about 150,000 Pacific brant, drawn by the eelgrass—a submerged aquatic plant that comprises the majority of the birds' fall and winter diet. Virtually the entire population of Pacific brant gathers at Izembek before an early November departure for points south—at which point most of the birds make the 3,000-mile flight to Baja California in less than 60 hours.

Taverner's cackling geese are plentiful, as well, with peak populations reaching 33,000. Emperor geese and Steller's eiders round out the species found near Cold Bay; however, emperors were classified as a threatened species in 1986 while Steller's eiders received that classification in 1992. Although Steller's eiders remain fully protected, the first season for emperor geese in more than 30 years took place in 2017.

The next day the tides were again favorable for brant hunting, so we traveled to Grant Point and launched the boat. This time, however, we ferried a two-man layout boat atop the Lund. Our timing was perfect, as most brant flight activity—and often the best hunting—is on the falling tide. The reason is that brant obtain



much of their food by grazing on the eelgrass flats. One of the best hunting scenarios is to find a location where a layout boat can be anchored or there is a shoreline hiding place near one of the first eelgrass beds to be exposed as the tide recedes.

It took 30 minutes to reach several islands with eelgrass beds just offshore. We split into two groups: one pair in the layout boat and the other on shore. The location was selected primarily for layout-boat gunning, and any brant that came to the shoreline setup would be bonus birds. The plan was to rotate shooters into the layout boat until all four had had ample opportunities at birds.

Dan and I were first in the layout boat, with the decoys set downwind. It wasn't long before we heard a single shot from the other group, which was about a quarter-mile away, and then it was quiet. Fifteen minutes passed before I spotted birds in the distance. At first they appeared as little more than dark spots against the gray horizon, but soon forms took shape and it was obvious that they were brant flying only a few feet above the water. The first birds to see the decoys were a flock of a dozen, and they came hard and fast. They were just above the blocks when I said, "Now!" Dan and I sat up, picked birds at the front and back of the flock and fired. By the time our shotguns were empty, four brant had hit the water.

The shots brought Jeff to retrieve the birds and place them in the boat. Shortly thereafter more brant approached, and Dan anchored another. Several flocks, pairs and singles decoyed, and in the next hour we easily shot our three-bird limits.

Jeff picked up the other group and moved them to our location. It turned out that they had had only the one early opportunity and hadn't fired a shot since. We made the switch, putting Christian and Jeff in the layout while Dan and I transferred to the tender. It took just over an hour for the second crew to bag their limits as well.

At the lodge that evening we discussed the day's good fortune and planned the next day's hunt. Another of our priorities was sea duck hunting

from the layout boat, with common eiders our primary interest. There are only a few places in Alaska where Pacific eiders can be hunted successfully. Jeff was one of the first to figure out how to do it, and his layout hunts are some of the most reliable in Alaska. However, in order to make it happen, conditions have to be just right. In contrast to brant being in the somewhat-protect waters of Izembek Lagoon, eiders frequent the open waters of Cold Bay itself. Light-to-moderate winds and no more than medium seas are required. That scenario doesn't happen every day at Cold Bay, especially in November and December when sea ducks are present in huntable numbers. But we lucked out, and conditions looked ideal for the next day.

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The following morning we were up before dawn and, after a hearty breakfast, were on our way. The launch ramp was only five minutes away, and for this hunt Jeff used his 25-foot Barbary Cove inflatable and exchanged the brant decoys for eider blocks.

The run to the hunting area was about 30 minutes and, as we skimmed over the light chop, we spooked several flocks of black scoters and one flock of eiders. When we reached the location Jeff had marked on his GPS, we slid the layout into the water and set both fore and aft anchors. Christian and I were first up and jumped into the layout. Jeff and the others set out about three dozen eider decoys, and then moved off to watch with binoculars and listen for shots.

As the tide dropped, the cloudy sky changed to a high overcast and

the wind picked up. The first flock appeared as a group of about 20 flying low over the water in a line. As they got closer, it became apparent they were eiders; and in seconds they were over the decoys. When they were 25 yards out and committed, I yelled, "Take 'em." Christian and I fired in unison, and two drakes cartwheeled into the salt. Christian took a going-away shot and anchored a third drake. By the time the smoke cleared, Jeff was on his way to pick up the birds. Our good fortune continued, as we added more eiders and a couple of black scoters to the bag. Then we traded positions with Dan and Jeff, who proceeded to shoot a couple of eiders each and a lone harlequin duck.

The next couple of days were near carbon copies of the front end of the trip, with brant and sea ducks the order of the day. Overall, my visit to Cold Bay was one of those waterfowling experiences that had it all: excellent hunting for a variety of species, quality accommodations and food, and a knowledgeable guide—all shared with a group of good friends.

While hunting at Cold Bay requires effort and is a commitment of time and money, it is a magical experience, with uncrowded conditions, excellent action and spectacular scenery. Seeing the largest concentration of brant in the world and an amazing array of ducks is well worth the journey. ✈

The waterfowl season around Cold Bay typically runs from September 1 to mid-December. Puddle- and diving-duck limits are eight per day in the aggregate; sea-duck limits are 10 per day for residents and eight per day (20 per season) for nonresidents, to include no more than four of any sea-duck species. The daily limit on brant is three and on cackling geese is four. For more information, contact Jeff Wasley, fourflywaysoutfitters.com.

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. In 1974, while working on his master's degree in wildlife biology, he documented the nonstop flight of black brant from Alaska to Baja California. His newest book, *Game Birds: A Celebration of North American Upland Birds*, is available from garykramer.net.

The open waters of Cold Bay offer gunning for a variety of sea ducks, including common (Pacific) eiders (here and lower left), harlequin ducks (lower right) and black scoters (below).

