

# IN THE LAND of *KINGS*

To Greenland for king eiders and more

*text & photos by Gary Kramer*



Greenland proved to be a productive destination for not only king eiders but also the *borealis* subspecies of common eider (shown here).



◀ It's easy to see why many consider drake king eiders to be North America's most beautiful—and most prized—waterfowl.

through March, when the birds are in prime plumage. So in early March Fritz Reid, Bill Lauenroth, Ed Jagels and I boarded a flight from Sacramento to Seattle to Reykjavik, Iceland, and then to Nuuk. Luckily our flights weren't affected by weather, and we landed in Nuuk around 5 PM. Upon clearing customs and grabbing our luggage, we were greeted by our host, Jesper Øraker, who transported us to a relatively new, clean and comfortable guesthouse with single sleeping rooms and a bathroom down the hall.

Two other hunters had been staying in the guesthouse for a couple of days, and when we met them, we bombarded them with questions. They said that the king eiders were limited but that they each had bagged an adult drake. They added that common eiders were abundant and widespread.

The next morning my alarm went off at 6, and breakfast was served before we headed out. The day was sunny and clear, and we were told that the weather conditions—with nighttime temperatures in the low 30s and daytime highs reaching 45°—had been more like early May than early March. Around 7:30 we were transported to the harbor, where we boarded a 26-foot Targa boat with an enclosed cabin. The run to the hunting area was about 30 minutes, and along the way we flushed several flocks of common eiders.

While prior to the trip we had been provided information on the hunting methods, not until we arrived did we fully understand the tactics. There are basically two ways to hunt king and common eiders in Greenland. The first is from a moving boat. Unlike in the US and Canada, where it is illegal to shoot from a boat under power, in Greenland it is perfectly acceptable. Regulations indicate that shooting can occur as long as the boat is moving at a normal rate of speed (i.e., not racing under full power). The second method is typical of sea duck hunting in North America where hunters are stationed on the shoreline or islands and decoys are deployed to lure birds into range. We would use both methods on our trip.

It wasn't until we reached the islands and fjords that we spotted the first king eiders. It turns out that the best way to locate them is with binoculars, and then the job is to approach in such a way that when the birds flush, they fly past within shooting range. This isn't as easy as it sounds. On several occasions we approached birds as we were heading into the wind, but before we could get close enough they flew away from the boat. The best scenario we found was to locate a pair or small flock and position the boat upwind. Then we would slowly approach and hope that when the ducks flushed, they would fly into the wind and past us in range.

The first day our best opportunity came when we entered

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mong all the waterfowl in North America, drake king eiders are arguably the most beautiful—and for many collectors and avid waterfowlers they have become the Holy Grail. Of the 42 species that can be legally harvested in North America, kings are often at the top of the list but typically the last to be collected.

Their distribution is circumpolar, as they inhabit far northern regions around the globe. They also are quite numerous, with the world population estimated at more

than 1 million. Yet king eiders are difficult to harvest. This is not due to them being rare or found only in a few locations, but rather because of the Arctic regions they inhabit. The rugged and often dangerous conditions where they winter combined with the gear needed to hunt them necessitate hiring a guide. That said, finding outfitters and guides who offer king eider hunting has always been a challenge.

I bagged my first king eider nearly 30 years ago on Kodiak Island, Alaska. In those days Kodiak was about the only place in North America where hunters could access kings. In the early 2000s Saint Paul Island—an Alaska island in the Bering Sea—was found to be another king eider destination, but it wasn't until a few years later that trips were regularly being made there.

In 2020 Covid pretty much shut down world travel, but even before that several outfitters had begun searching for additional locations where kings could be taken. One place they found was the southwest coast of Greenland near the capital city of Nuuk. Some of the first trips to test the hunting were made in 2019, and they produced not only king eiders but also common eiders—specifically the *borealis* subspecies.

It was not until 2023 that eider hunting in Greenland resumed on a regular basis. I was determined to give it a try and booked a trip with Lax-Á, an Icelandic agency that had developed a package including guided hunting, boats, meals and accommodations.

Eider hunting in Greenland is offered from January



a narrow fjord heading downwind. As we approached a hen and two drakes, the birds flushed and flew upwind. Because the fjord was narrow, there were only about 60 yards between the boat and the steep rock walls to either side. Fritz and I were on the bow and ready as the birds flew between the boat and one fjord wall. The eiders passed at about 45 yards, and we each fired twice. To our amazement, neither of us touched a feather! All we could figure was that the long distance, the bouncing boat and the dark backdrop had worked against us. We continued the search, and at the end of the day we remained empty-handed.

The second day we decided to target kings from the boat in the morning, and then in the afternoon switch to a shoreline set over decoys for common eiders and maybe a chance at a decoying king. The morning hunt provided a couple of opportunities, but we brought no birds to bag. We did break a wing on one drake but, as hard as we tried to chase it, the bird dove repeatedly and swam underwater long distances until we eventually lost sight of it.

The afternoon hunt for common eiders was a different story. While searching for kings, we had passed several points jutting into the bays and noticed common eiders flying near them and sometimes over them.

Fritz and I were dropped off on one of the rocky points, and from past experience I knew that sitting among the rock formations and staying still were all that was necessary to avoid detection by approaching ducks. The boat captain moved just off the point and dropped a string of plastic decoys into the icy water. By the time the decoys were set, Fritz and I had found moderately comfortable perches

## *As the drake passed amidships, I fired once and dropped him.*

among the dark, barnacle-covered rocks.

It wasn't long before I spotted a trio of common eiders heading in from the open bay. The birds stayed low and flew directly toward the decoys, which were pitching and bobbing in the light wind and chop. As the ducks approached, they gained a bit of altitude as we crouched lower in the rocks. When they were 30 yards out and committed to the blocks, we fired. All three hit the water dead, cartwheeling across the surface. We looked at each other and smiled: three shots, three birds. Not a bad way to start our first try for common eiders in Greenland.

We radioed the boat to pick up the birds, and for the next two hours we experienced some of the best eider hunting I have enjoyed anywhere. Singles, pairs, small groups and one large flock made it to the decoys or passed over the point, offering 20- to 40-yard shots. One pair of king eiders did pass just beyond the decoys, but the birds were simply too far to try for.

The daily limit on eiders in Greenland is 10, and the bag can be all common eiders, all king eiders or a combination of the two. The outfitter recognizes that most hunters shoot

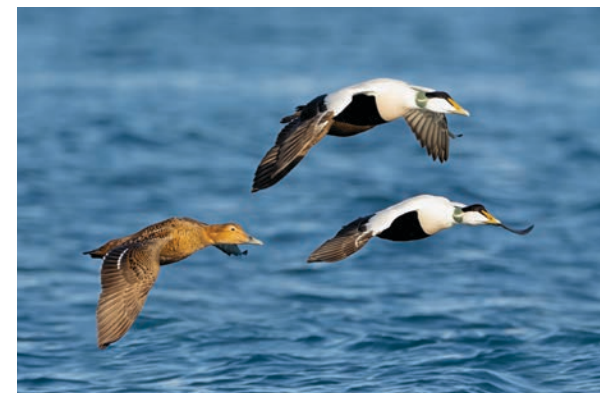
Greenland's capital city of Nuuk is the jumping-off point for king and common eider hunting.

Shooting from a well-maneuvered boat proved to be a productive way to bag kings.



The common eider hunting was some of the best that the author has enjoyed anywhere.

Although the daily bag limit on kings is 10, the outfitter encourages hunters to take only a few.



kings as trophies and encourages them to take only a few. Even though the bag limit is 10, that afternoon after Fritz and I had shot five or six common eiders each, I traded my shotgun for my camera. We ended up keeping a few birds for mounting and giving the rest to the guides and guest-house staff to eat. One evening we enjoyed eider soup that I can honestly say was good.

With an excellent common eider hunt under our belts, the next morning we decided to head a bit farther from Nuuk and look for kings. About an hour into the hunt we spotted a pair in the distance. A combination of shoreline terrain, wind direction and excellent maneuvering by the captain presented me with a good fly-by shot at 40 yards. As the drake passed amidships, I fired once and dropped him. It then took a bit of chasing on the water, but a few minutes later the bird was scooped up and in hand. Then it was high fives all around to celebrate what we had traveled thousands of miles to accomplish.

By the end of the four-day trip we managed to bag four king eiders for our four hunters and missed several other opportunities. We also enjoyed another epic common eider

hunt. (Incidentally, we saw numerous long-tailed ducks, but the season for them had closed at the end of February.)

Most hunters travel to Greenland to collect king eiders as well as the *borealis* subspecies of the common eider. The outfitter realizes the value of the birds and handles them accordingly. They are put in plastic bags, marked with the hunters' names and placed in a freezer until it is time to depart. To import fully feathered birds into the US, hunters must have a Greenland hunting permit (provided), and the birds must be sent to a taxidermist with a US Department of Agriculture permit to accept birds from foreign countries. Hunters can bring frozen birds into the US. Once they reach a port of entry and the birds are declared, the USDA inspector will either allow the hunters to transport the birds to a taxidermist or require that the birds be shipped from the port of entry to a taxidermist. The process is not uniform everywhere. I suggest contacting your taxidermist before the trip to make sure he or she has the proper permit and is familiar with the importation process.

After going to Greenland and experiencing eider hunting firsthand, I can report that the country is now on the list of locations where hunters can collect a king eider and enjoy some excellent common eider hunting along the way. ✈

For more information on eider hunting in Greenland, contact Lax-Á, [lax-a-hunting.com](http://lax-a-hunting.com).

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. His most recent book, *Waterfowl of the World*, provides stunning images and biological information about all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans on Earth and is available from [garykramer.net](http://garykramer.net).