

By Gary Kramer

Among the 42 species of waterfowl in North America that can be legally harvested, a drake king eider may be one of the most beautiful. And for many collectors and hardcore waterfowl hunters, they have become the crowning glory. If obtaining one is your goal, know that the hunt will be expensive, you'll have to travel to the far north, and almost certainly you will be looking at a guided hunting trip.

Curiously, king eiders are not a rare species. In fact, their distribution is circumpolar, and they are abundant in some regions, with the world population estimated at around one million birds.

Yet, they can be difficult to harvest, mostly due to the Arctic regions they inhabit. Because they are found in the far north, spend the winter in rugged and often dangerous conditions and require certain gear to be hunted, it is nearly impossible to harvest them without a guide. This is not a hunt for a novice waterfowler. Luckily, there are seasoned outfitters that will put you on kings.

More than 25 years ago, bagging a king eider became my quest, so I traveled to Kodiak Island, Alaska, in the dead of winter to shoot one. Back in the day, Kodiak Island was

about the only place where hunters could access the handful of kings that wintered around the island. Even when I enlisted the services of a guide, it took me five days, and I only saw two mature drakes. Still, I managed to collect one.

Since then, a location has emerged where bagging a king eider is virtually guaranteed. However, it's about 800 miles southwest of Anchorage, smack dab in the middle of the same waters made famous by the TV program "The Deadliest Catch." That's right — Saint Paul Island of the

Pribilof Islands, in the Bering Sea.

About eight miles wide and 13 miles long, with a year-round population of about 425

inhabitants, Saint Paul wasn't discovered as a potential king eider destination until the early 2000s. Within a few years, though, regularly scheduled trips hunting trips had become available there, and serious king eider hunting was put on the map.

My trip began with a flight to Anchorage, followed by a 3.5-hour flight to Saint Paul Island. The hunt takes place in December and January, when the weather is notoriously bad — with wind, snow and poor visibility — so I was pleased when the flight left on schedule. The upside of the winter trip is the kings are in prime plumage.

Upon arrival, we met our guide and outfitter, Jeff Wasley, who has been running the hunt operation at Saint Paul since 2010, then headed to the guesthouse just down the road.

Accommodations were comfortable, clean and warm, and we were served home-cooked meals.



A drake king eider is truly the holy grail of waterfowl hunting!



KING EIDER QUEST

The next morning was cloudy and cold, with a stiff wind out of the west. After a hearty breakfast, we jumped in the beat-up Suburban and drove to the harbor, where a 20-foot Zodiac with a 115-horsepower outboard was waiting. We boarded the boat and set out for the open ocean. Shooting time was at 10:30 a.m. due to the far northern location, and the plan was to move offshore and drift with a string of king eider decoys tethered to the stern of the boat — a proven method for sea ducks. Wasley operated three boats, each with a guide and up to four hunters per boat.

Once on the open ocean, we scanned the horizon for birds. The first ones appeared at a distance, and as they winged closer, we could tell they were king eiders. Instinctively, we hunkered down in the boat that bounced and rocked in the 3-foot seas and waited. Unfortunately, the birds passed by at 100 yards, paying no attention to the decoys. Seconds later, I spotted an incoming bird. I was sitting on the port side toward the back and had the best shot at a drake white-winged scoter that was making a beeline for the decoys. When it was 30 yards out, I shouldered my shotgun, swung past the bird and fired. The bird fell dead in the decoys.



The next birds to decoy were a pair of kings that passed downwind, then made a wide turn into the wind and back to the decoys. One of the guys at the bow picked out the drake and stoned it at 35 yards, then the bird was retrieved and passed around to be admired by all on board. As the

morning turned to midday, we added two more kings to the bag. By early afternoon, the increasing wind, chop and swells forced us to call it a

day and head back to the harbor.

While we were in the boat, other hunters were stationed on rocky points jutting out into the Bering Sea. Since it was impossible to set out decoys in these locations, it was a pass shooting affair. Sometimes the kings were inside 50 yards, while at other times they passed beyond shotgun range. This method proved to be important, since during the five-day hunt in Saint Paul, we were only able to go out in the boat for two days. Due to the rough seas, the balance of our time was spent hunting from the shoreline.

The nonresident limit in Alaska allows four king eiders per season, plus four each of the other species of sea ducks. During our trip, everyone managed to bag at least one king eider, with several hunters bagging their four kings plus other sea ducks, including a few white-winged scoters, long-tailed ducks and harlequin ducks.



After several successful seasons at Saint Paul, king eider trips were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 seasons. However, the trips resumed for the 2022-23 season and are once again available for bookings.

Even before Saint Paul was shut down, though, several outfitters had searched for additional locations where kings could be reliably collected. One especially promising location was the southwest coast of Greenland, near the capital city of Nuuk. Several exploratory trips to test king eider hunting had occurred there in 2019 (just before the COVID-19 pandemic wrecked international travel), producing not only king eiders but common eiders, specifically the *borealis* subspecies.

In 2023, eider hunting in Greenland resumed, and I was determined to give it a try. I booked a hunt with Lax-A, an Icelandic booking agency that developed a Greenland package with hunting in February and March, when the birds are in prime plumage. The package included guided hunting, boats, shotgun use, meals and accommodations.

In early March 2023, my good friend Fritz Reid and I boarded a flight from Sacramento to Seattle, then to Reykjavik, Iceland, and finally to Nuuk, Greenland, without any weather delays. Upon clearing customs and grabbing our luggage, we were greeted by our local host, Jesper Oraker, who transported us to a comfortable guesthouse with private rooms and an exceptional chef dedicated to our group.

There are two ways to hunt eiders in Greenland. The first is from a moving boat. Unlike in the United States and Canada, it is perfectly legal to shoot from a boat under power in Greenland as long as the boat is moving at a normal speed rather than racing around under full power. The second method is typical sea duck hunting, with

shooters stationed on the shoreline or islands with decoys deployed. We used both methods.

The first morning's sunny, clear weather was more reminiscent of May than March, we were told. Nighttime temperatures had been in the low 30s, and daytime highs reached 45 degrees! Reid and I boarded a 26-foot Targa boat with an enclosed cabin and headed 30 minutes to the hunting area, flushing several flocks of common eiders along the way.

About five miles from the harbor, we located our first king eiders with binoculars, then contemplated a way to approach them. The goal was to force the birds to fly past the boat within 40 yards. On several occasions, we approached them heading into the wind, but before we could get within shooting range, they flew away. The best situation was to position the boat upwind. Then we'd need a slow approach downwind so that when the birds were flushed, they'd fly into the wind and past the boat.

As we entered a narrow fjord heading downwind, a hen and two drakes flushed and headed upwind. There were about 60 yards between the boat and the steep rock wall of the passage. Reid and I were on the bow as the birds flew between the boat and the rock wall, and as they passed the





boat, we both fired two rounds. It was four shots and four misses! The 45-yard shots, the rocking boat and a dark background made for tough shooting. We continued the search looking for kings but batted zero at the end of the first day.

On the second day, we decided to target both kings and common eiders — kings from the boat, and a shoreline setup over decoys for common eiders and maybe a chance at decoying kings. Though the morning hunt provided a couple of opportunities for kings and we managed to knock one down, we couldn't retrieve it. As hard as we tried to chase the eider, it dove repeatedly and swam underwater long distances until we eventually lost the bird and gave up.

Luckily, our afternoon hunt for common eiders was more rewarding. During our boat searches, we'd noticed commons flying near several points along the shore, so we returned to one of these locations. From my experience with hunting sea ducks, sitting among natural rock formations and remaining still is all that's needed to fool eiders. The boat captain moved off the point and dropped two strings of decoys into the icy water, and by the time the decoys were set, we'd found a moderately comfortable perch among the dark rocks.

It wasn't long until I spotted a trio of common eiders heading in from the open bay. Their flight was low and directly toward the decoys pitching and bobbing in the light wind and chop. When they were 30 yards out and committed to the blocks, Reid and I fired. All three birds hit the water, cartwheeling across the surface. We looked at each other and grinned. Three shots, three dead birds! We

radioed the boat to come in and pick them up.

For the next two hours, we experienced excellent common eider hunting. Singles, pairs and small groups decoyed or passed over the point, offering 20- to 40-yard shots. Though we saw a pair of kings from the shoreline, they passed outside the decoys, too far to shoot.

The eider limit in Greenland is 10 birds daily, and they can be all common eiders, all king eiders or a combination of the two. Recognizing that most hunters come for kings as a trophy bird to be mounted, the outfitter encourages hunters to take home only a few kings. Even though 10 birds is the limit, we shot five or six commons each, then I switched to photography for the rest of the day. We kept a few common eiders for mounting and gave the rest to the guides and guest house staff for consumption. (One evening, we enjoyed eider soup that I can honestly say I enjoyed.)

With an excellent common eider hunt under our belt, but only failed attempts at kings, we headed further from Nuuk to look for more kings. An hour from the dock, we spotted a pair of them. The shoreline terrain, wind direction and stellar maneuvering by the boat captain produced a good



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fly-by shot at 40 yards. As the birds passed amidships, I fired a single shot ... and dropped the drake king eider. The bird took a bit of chasing down, but in a few minutes, it was scooped up and in hand. It was high-fives all around, as we celebrated what we had traveled thousands of miles to accomplish.

By the end of the four-day trip, we had several king eiders in the freezer, wrapped up and ready to take home. We'd also enjoyed an additional epic common eider hunt.

Most hunters travel to Greenland to collect king eiders, as well as the *borealis* subspecies of the common eider. Understanding the value of the birds, our outfitter had carefully put the birds in plastic bags, marked with each hunter's name and placed in a freezer until we headed home. To import fully feathered birds back into the United States, hunters must have a Greenland hunting permit (provided), and the birds must be sent to a taxidermist with a U.S. Department of Agriculture permit to accept birds from foreign countries. I suggest contacting your

taxidermist before booking a similar trip to make sure they have the proper permits and can guide you through the importation process. (Special permits are not required for the importation of king eiders and other ducks from Alaska.)

Having now successfully hunted king eiders in both Alaska and Greenland, I can say with confidence that the trip will be arduous, the travel extensive and the cost significant — but the reward is worth it. A drake king eider is truly the holy grail of waterfowl hunting! 🦆

To book king eider hunts on Saint Paul, contact Four Flyways Outfitters at fourflywaysoutfitters.com. For Greenland hunts, contact Lax-A at lax-a-hunting.com. Gary Kramer is the author of *Waterfowl of the World*, a 540-page book featuring 1,299 photos and biological information on all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans. Learn more at garykramer.net.

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