

# KING'S QUEST

There Are No Easy Days On The Bering Sea

By David Rearick

**F**rom the moment we took flight in the SAAB 340 bound for St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea, I found myself uncomfortably grinning. Trying to shrug it off and hoping that the other passengers didn't notice my mild hysteria. I looked out the window and relived chapters of my life starting with the early years of my waterfowl obsession. While, for some, youthful excitement fades as life progresses, at the age of 33 my often obnoxious excitement about hunting has never subsided. Since my very first hunting experience, there hasn't been a day where I didn't spend minutes or even hours thinking about hunting, and this hunt in partic-





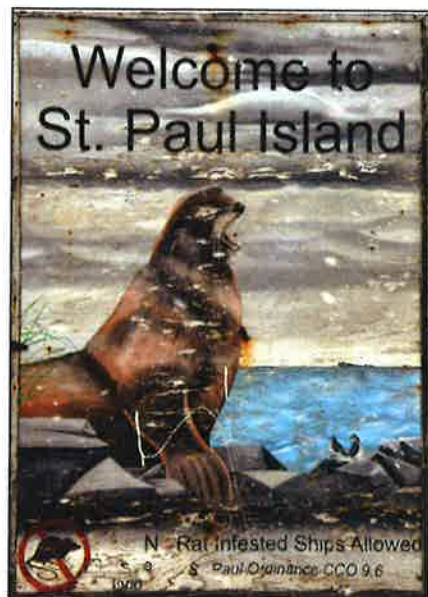


ular was one that I had thought about for more than 10 years. As with every hunt in remote territory, getting there on time with your luggage is more than half the battle. So when our flight departed on time and after I had watched our luggage get loaded onto the plane, it washed away the ulcer-inducing worries. I have a mild case of travel logistics OCD that I typically can't shake. Preparing for a few days of cancelled flights or lost luggage, our group had intentionally booked our flight to St. Paul two days earlier than our hunt dates, so we were actually ahead of schedule. Despite going to the middle of nowhere with nothing to do for 48 hours, it became very apparent two days later that we had made a wise choice.



BY JAY STRANGIS





Fine print bans ships with rats.



Conditions at the port entrance suggest it's a good day to stay inside.

The feeling that getting somewhere always takes longer than the actual time traveled couldn't have been truer on our flight to the island. If the passengers on the plane could have heard me over the incredibly loud prop noise, I may have even asked the pilots "are we there yet" much like that of a six-year-old on the way to the beach. Instead, I constantly looked at my watch and peered through the window hoping for a glimpse of land. When we finally began our descent, and as we broke through the clouds, my first glimpses of St. Paul Harbor were captivating, unlocking the realization that we were a few miles from the best king eider hunting in North America—finally.

## Wrath Of Winter

As we offloaded and made our way to the terminal, we were greeted by our guides, Captains Jeff Wasley and Moe Neale. They immediately asked about our luggage. Having packed plenty of clothing into our guns cases, since they are a must-ride item, we informed them that everything had made it. Being a no B.S. pair of guides, when we asked them about the conditions, they frankly informed us that the weather was taking a turn for the worse. Things were turning "salty." The weather all season up until this point had been exceptionally calm, and while we knew booking the last week was a risk, I had been holding

out hope that the wrath of winter would hold off just a couple more days.

Since we were early, we checked into the hotel at the airport and made our way to camp for dinner. The hunters in camp varied, consisting of bird collectors, duck hunters and those just looking for an exotic hunting adventure. Like most camps, the common bond of duck hunting made us nearly instant friends. I was particularly inquisitive about two hunters from the small island of Malta. They were hunters, but more markedly bird collectors, who as they put it made collecting species of birds their life's work. Equipped with photos on their cameras it was clear that their collections were exotic and extensive, consisting of winged fowl and legally hunted birds of prey from around the world. Their reason to come to North America was simple: to collect a king eider and every other plausible species, but ultimately a bigger prize—a drake wood duck.

Although our initial hope was that the hunters who preceded us would be limited out when we arrived, giving us a few extra days on the water, they were, unfortunately, a few birds short. Even if they had been done, the next three days were brutal. Winds of 30 to 60 mph blew nonstop, causing the seas to become angry and the roads to become completely drifted with snow. Instead of hunting, we stayed at our hotel and tried

to pass time. Luckily, there were a few channels of television to keep us occupied, and when the midday soap operas came on, we entertained ourselves by doing timed 40-yard dashes in the otherwise deserted hotel halls. Sometimes you have to get creative to avoid going stir-crazy.

While all of the waiting and lost days could have seemed like pure misery, it was actually nothing of the sort. Despite having little to do, when flights were cancelled over the next three days we were just happy to be on the island. For the traveling hunter, this is just part of the game. Luckily my hunting partners were all like-minded individuals, allowing us to pass the time without anger or disappointment. We stayed positive, at the ready, and when the extended forecast showed a promising day of weather soon, we all crossed our fingers that it would happen.

## Makings Of A True Adventure

After days of waiting, awaking to the unfamiliar sound of calm winds and what appeared to be flat seas out our bedroom windows was a thing of beauty. Shortly after eating a light breakfast, we headed to the launch, boarded the boats, and motored into the harbor, bobbing next to gigantic crabbing vessels as they offloaded their catch. Although the winds were calm and the





Captain Jeff navigates the Berling swells.



Experience teaches "confused seas" are a good place to avoid.

whitecaps had disappeared from the sea, as we turned to head out the port entrance, 15- to 20-foot ground swells greeted us at the mouth. I was mentally prepared for rough waters going into the trip, but as we rode up the face and down the back of the swells, it was wilder than I had envisioned. Hunting from a 14-foot zodiac had me a little nervous when I stepped into it at the dock, questioning my sanity as we tried to break free from the current's grasp.

The temperature was a balmy mid-20s, and while the wind was calm and the spray minimal, the taste of salt touched my lips. As the 1.5-mile boat ride to our spot shortened, I became increasingly comfortable with the zodiac. The craft did not slap the water like a solid-hulled boat would, and when it crested swells, instead of smashing down the other side, we seemed just to snake along. When Captain Wasley finally slowed the boat, my hunting partner Mike Bard and I carefully started moving items around in the boat to make room for rigging decoys.

Still without sea legs, I used what I had learned a long time ago—never lose your horizon for an extended period of time. In the conditions we were hunting, that idea was of momentous importance. Despite a slower than normal long-line rigging, in short order we had a single long line towed behind the

boat consisting of 12 handcrafted king eider fakes. It was the single-best decoy spread I had ever seen—not because of its size or craftsmanship, but for the simple reason that I was going to have the opportunity to complete my North

American Waterfowl Grand Slam over it. Despite the opportunity, I would be lying if I didn't start to wonder if my mental state was intact as we bobbed up and down miles from shore and hours from help. Regardless, the minutes

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ticked off the clock and legal shooting time was upon us.

Our eyes peered in every direction. Harlequin, oldsquaw, and a variety of sea birds and gulls tested our identification abilities as they would disappear and reappear behind the rolling water. Looking to the north, I was caught off guard when Wasley screamed, "drake king, drake king" and I quickly turned my attention to his line of sight.

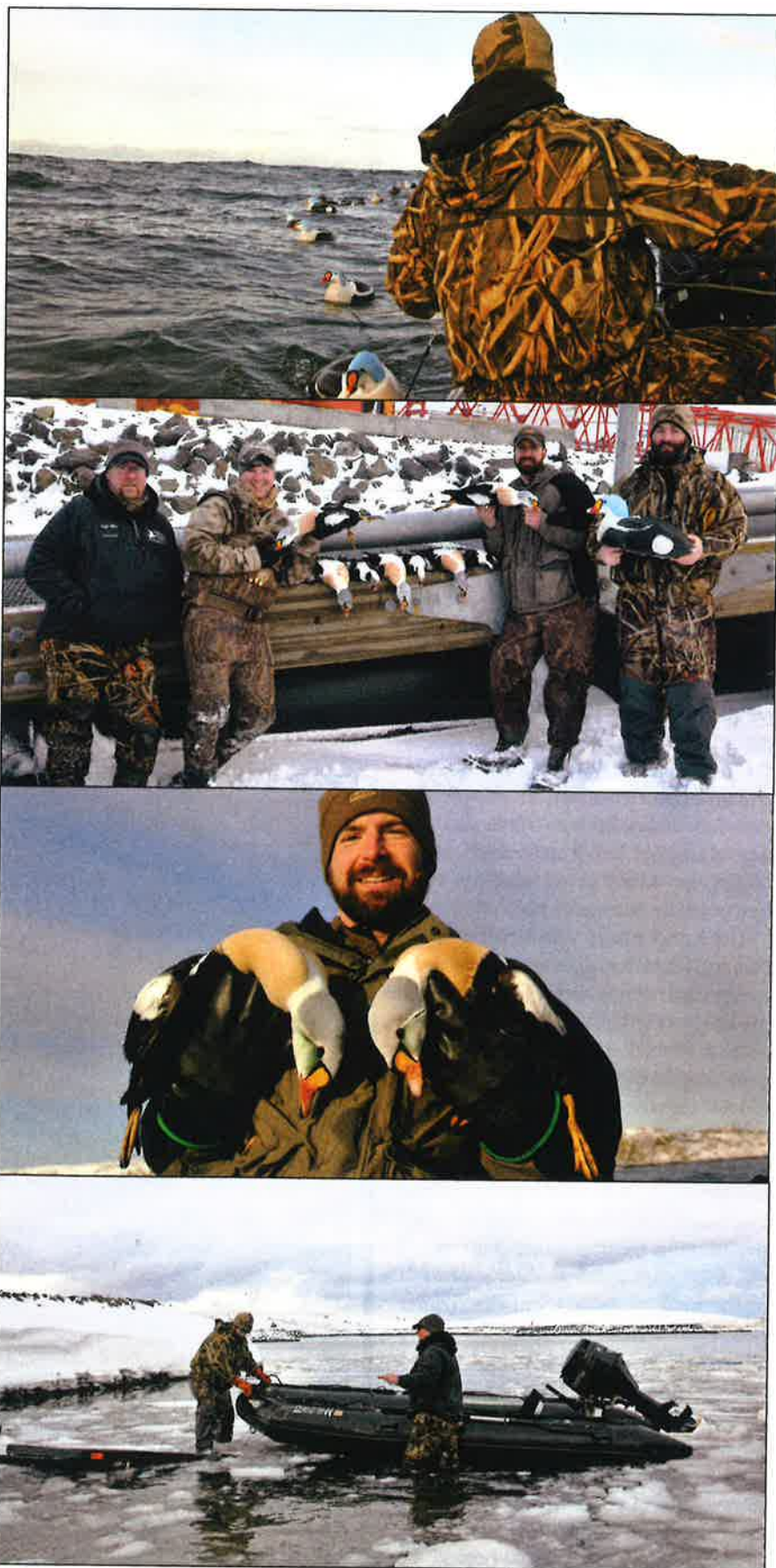
As a single bird approached the decoys, I fluidly raised the gun to my shoulder and squeezed the trigger as my barrel passed the gliding, wings-tipped bird without giving it any thought. The bird instantly folded, and I followed its descent with my gun barrel ready for a follow-up shot. The bird struck the water nearly on top of the decoys, creating a slowly dissipating circle wake, and Wasley quickly motored closer. In one careful motion, he plucked the bird from the water, handing it off to me along with a handshake. A mixture of emotions ran through my head, and I am sure my facial expression was one of awestruck. I marveled at the bird's distinct yellow knob, lime-green face, and peach-colored breast as I held it like a newborn baby. Five years before, I thought the king would never be in my reach, and today it was in my hands—the final duck of my North American slam—and a surreal moment that I will never forget.

### The Hunt Goes On

Despite initial success, as the morning continued, more drake kings were seen, but the ability of the sea to swallow and then levitate the decoys made passing birds unable to key in on our spread. After missing on another king with my cheeks filled with food, it was clear that we were going to have to take the hunt to the birds. Instead of simply drifting in this spot, we were going mobile to drift hunt different areas where birds might be trafficking.

As we slowly pulled the decoys behind

Top to bottom: A simple decoy line to catch the eye of passersby; success, after days of patience; Mike Bard with his king eider double; ice-choked launches couldn't stop the guides.







Tim Losk with his first king eider.



A gorgeous king lies among the oversized Judas blocks.

the boat, we arrived in an area where the seas weren't just swelling, they were confused. The tidal current and the wind direction, coupled with submerged rocks, had the water churning in every direction, offering everything from short chop to rogue waves. We kept our distance, but it was clear our move was going to pay off because kings were everywhere and we were in the middle of them.

As a group of birds tried to slip past, buzzing low to the water, Bard took his first birds, dropping two drakes from the bunch. Everyone we consulted before our hunt suggested bringing only tungsten ammo, and our decision to heed their words proved the point when three of four birds knocked down with singular shots required no need for follow-up. Chasing crippled sea ducks in these conditions was a recipe for lost birds and missed opportunities, and I was glad I had spent a few extra dollars after seeing the results.

Throughout the rest of the day, we moved to areas that were safe to navigate—places where my shooting seemed to degrade slowly after the first pull of the trigger. Between wearing heavier clothes, battling the undulations of the water, and trying to remain stable in the boat, shooting was a challenge. Still, after missing a few more opportunities, Bard and I cashed in by doubling on two drakes, bringing our total to five. With a season limit of four each, we were nearly limited out and ready for a good dinner and some reprieve after our first day on the water.

### Right Place, Wrong Winds

The next morning we awoke to howling winds, snow, and shaking windows. Despite a better forecast the night before, our window of good weather had disappeared. However, our guides made every effort to get us out to hunt. A small area on the sheltered side of the island looked like fair game.

Since Bard and I already had kings, and since our friends Tom Losk and Mike Hallam were sitting at zero despite having opportunity (aka missing), we let them make the most of the small window and watched from shore. In no time they both had their first drake kings and added bonus birds, including harlequin, long-tailed ducks and even a common teal. We were all now officially on the board. Tired, wind-burned, and cold, we headed back to the house for a warm dinner and early sleep in hope that the next day would give us another window.

When we awoke and looked outside the next morning, the wind speed was right but the direction was wrong. Instead of west, it was southwest and the seas were far from calm even in the secluded spot we had hunted yesterday. Despite the rougher seas, we decided to push our effort to the limit and put two hunters in each zodiac. Right off the bat, things were looking good as Hallam and I each took another drake, but we headed back in before we were literally, but temporarily, blown off the water.

After pulling the zodiacs back up on shore, we went back to the house for a bowl of hot soup. An hour later, the seas calmed and we were again back out

on the water. While we were in calmer water, the kings, unlike us, seemed to enjoy getting bounced around and had taken shelter in the roughest waters surrounding the island. So instead of kings, we hunted for harlequins, long-tailed ducks, and scoters, finishing the day with a mixed bag of birds all suitable for the taxidermist. After a king's feast of crab legs and seafood and the realization that our hunt was coming to an end, we headed to bed hopeful for one last day of adventure before our afternoon departure back to Anchorage.

We woke up to a calmer wind that allowed us to head back to the big waters, but it was apparent that too many consecutive days of rough seas had pushed the kings out of their normal areas. We hunted for a few hours, took a few more birds, and decided to call it a success. Despite having hunted in some of the worst conditions of our lives, it wasn't a moment of relief but more the start of a desire to look for another waterfowl-hunting adventure.

Although the bird numbers on our Cold Bay hunt may not have rivaled those of a fall hunt in Canada, that wasn't the kind of our expectation. The goals for this trip were simpler. We had done what it takes to make things happen, chosen the right guides who pride themselves on safety and staying positive, made the most out of every window of opportunity, and surpassed our goal of each hunter taking a single drake king eider. With only a handful of birds each to show for it, I would say the hunt exceeded our expectations tenfold. ✦