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SUMMER 2018

Hunt Alaska

MONSTER MOOSE

2018 ANNUAL GEAR GUIDE

Editors' Choice Awards
& New Gear for 2018

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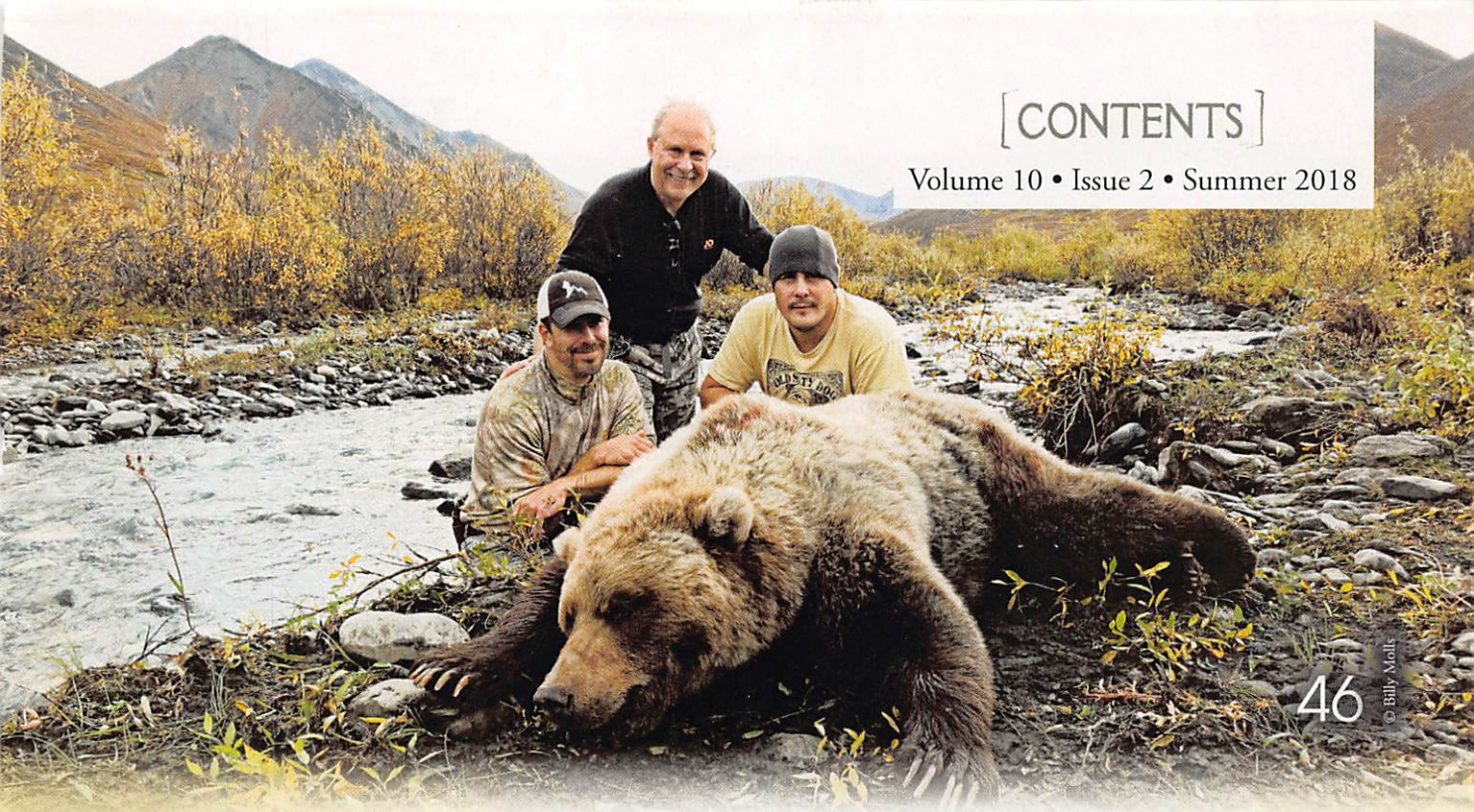


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Stalking Monster Moose

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Hunt Alaska publisher Marcus Weiner hunted the Innoko River drainage last fall for moose with partners Kirk "Sniper" Studebaker and Brian Woobank with help from Alaska Monster Moose Transporters out of Holy Cross. The "Tips for the Field" sidebar is must-read information for anyone planning a moose hunt to this area.

Sea Duck Reflections

by Scott Haugen 34

From Valdez to Cold Bay to St. Paul Island, sea duck hunting in the Last Frontier can be phenomenal for a variety of species including harlequin ducks, scoters, eiders, black brant, long-tailed ducks and others.

Bowhunting for Moose

by Lon E. Lauber 40

Alaska has the most moose hunting opportunity of all 50 states in the Union. Despite this, moose aren't easy, especially for bow hunters. Lon Lauber covers everything from planning an Alaska archery moose hunt to dealing with the beast once it's down.

An Adventure They'll Never Forget

by Billy Molls 46

Billy Molls relives a story of high adventure involving a man and his two sons hunting bear and caribou north of the Brooks Range.

2018 Hunt Alaska Editors' Choice Awards 50

The third annual Hunt Alaska Editor's Choice Awards showcase the best gear we tested in 2018. Categories for this year's awards include Firearms and Ammunition, Optics, Archery, Field Accessories, Knives and Packs, Shooting, Camping, Cooking, and Apparel.

New Gear 66

Now is the time to start gearing up for hunting season! Here's a short list of some promising new items to consider taking to the field with you in 2018. Rest assured, we'll be testing many of these ourselves this fall.



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© Scott Haugen



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© Lon E. Lauber



COVER / Marcus Weiner and Kirk Studebaker took two fine moose while hunting on the Innoko River. © Brian Woobank

Happy hunters with the results of a good morning hunt in a protected bay out of Valdez. Sea duck hunting in this part of Alaska can be nothing short of spectacular.



SEA DUCK REFLECTIONS

Towering, snow-capped peaks greeted us as we entered the secluded bay outside of Valdez. Instantly, the choppy waters laid down and the spectacular scenery ushered in a sense of calm.

Rafts of sea ducks could be seen frolicking on the water further up in the bay, casting silver hues of water in all directions, standing out in stark contrast to the surroundings of the dark bay. A flock of harlequin ducks sped by, skipping to a halt with the rest of the birds. Then a flock of goldeneyes whistled past, followed by buffleheads and scoters.

"See those two points?" pointed Tim Bouchard of Alaska Wildfowl Adventures (www.akduckhunts.com, 907-322-3825), "I'll drop two of you on the one on the right, and Scott, you'll go on the left one."

No sooner had the orders been given

when Captain Brian Rhodes-Bouchard's right-hand man and assistant guide—started snapping lines of decoys together. A raft was soon lowered into the water, and two hunters were aboard, headed for one point of land jutting into the bay.

I was next. Rhodes dropped me on a point of land about 200 yards from the other hunters, and strung out a line of goldeneye decoys on his way back to the main boat. Bouchard and Rhodes motored across the inlet, watching the action through binoculars. The other hunters and I sat, and waited.

It didn't take long until flocks of sea ducks began cruising by, headed into the bay where we'd seen birds active on the surface, and other birds landing as we entered the

bay. Soon, ducks noticed the decoys. The other hunters had the left side of the passage covered, I hoped to attract birds flying up the right side. The plan worked, just at Bouchard had predicted.

With the big tidal shift, the outgoing tide pushed birds out to sea. "These birds will want to get back up in the bay, where it narrows down and where food is easier for them to find," Bouchard had advised. "Just sit tight and be patient, as there should be a good mix of birds moving back in."

The first flock to flank my spread were black scoters. Picking out a plump bird, it's orange upper bill glowing like a beacon, I fired and it folded at the shot. Another flock followed, and another black scoter



Alaska residents Kyle and Gina Smith, couldn't be happier over their prized emperor geese taken on Cold Bay last season while hunting with outfitter, Jeff Wasley.



Bree Dugan is elated with this brant double taken over decoys in Izembek Lagoon.

STORY & PHOTOS BY SCOTT HAUGEN

was down. A flock of harlequins then banked into the decoys, and a gorgeous drake was soon upside down on the water.

Marking the birds from a distance, Rhodes full-throttled the raft across the bay, scooping up my birds along with those of the other hunters. Before it was over I added a gorgeous Barrow's goldeneye and a pair of drake common goldeneyes to the mix, along with a striking little bufflehead. In just over an hour I had five species of prized sea ducks in-hand. The best part? The day was just getting started and we had three more days of hunting ahead.

Over the course of the hunt we never hit the same spot twice. One morning we dropped off one of the hunters, Zach LaBorde, in a layout boat and watched him experience some phenomenal scoter action. Another time Bouchard and I hopped out on a small rocky outcropping on the edge of the open ocean, a couple strings of scoter and harlequin decoys in front of us. The action was non-stop, for both species, making for a memorable hunt.

We hunted bays, worked the tides and found ducks on every set. It was sea duck action at its finest. The only bird I failed to connect

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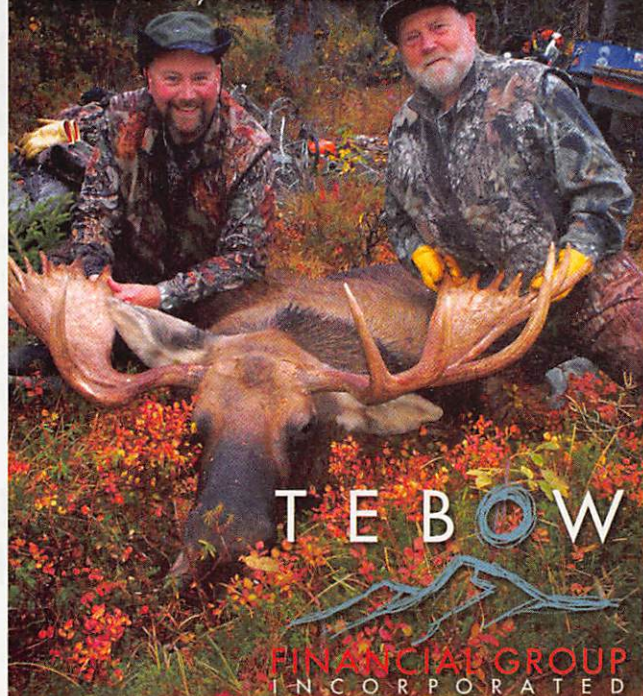


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*Alaskan outdoorsman Stan Tebow with his dad, Jim.
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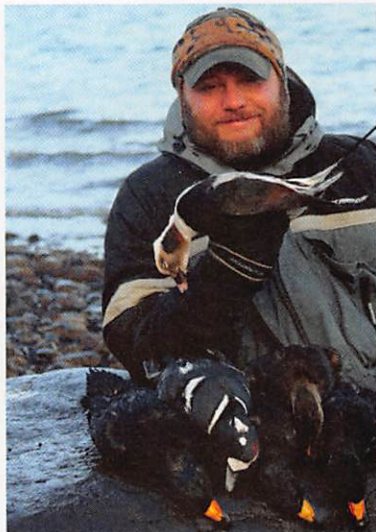
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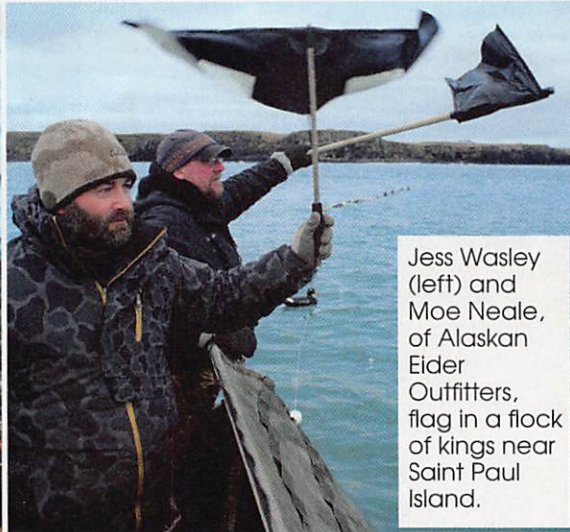
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Ashly Steinke has traveled multiple times from his home in the Lower 48 to experience sea duck hunting in Alaska. Here, he's all smiles over this mixed bag taken from Cold Bay.



Jess Wasley (left) and Moe Neale, of Alaskan Eider Outfitters, flag in a flock of kings near Saint Paul Island.



on that I really wanted during this trip was a dusky Canada goose. I had my chance, but missed. Now I have reason to return.

Sea duck hunting in Alaska is a specialized deal. No matter where you hunt them, having the right decoys, a safe boat and being able to navigate big, potentially hazardous water, is just the start. Traveling seas and bays in the dark, amid fog, and storms that limit visibility that's measured in feet, not yards, is the norm. Having guns and gear that perform in the salty conditions is often easier said than done. Even for most residents, the guided option is the safest,

surest bet of a successful sea duck hunt.

When my wife, Tiffany, and I lived in Point Lay, sea ducks made up an important part of our subsistence diet. Here we primarily relied on king and common eiders, along with black brant. We'd pass shoot them as they traveled the fringes of Kasegaluk Lagoon, on the edge of the Chukchi Sea.

Many of the locals living on the shores of the Arctic Ocean relied on eiders for subsistence, and still do today. Despite the bad rap eiders and other sea ducks get, they make good table fare, and cooking so many

of them in multiple ways, Tiffany got to where every meal prepared was enjoyable.

After leaving the North Slope, I figured I'd never hunt king eiders again. That changed, along with my career. When I left public school teaching after 12 years, I fell into the outdoor industry. Before I knew it I was writing full-time, speaking around the country and hosting multiple TV shows for various networks. It was TV that took me to Saint Paul Island, and back to hunting king eiders.

I hooked up with Alaskan Eider Outfitters, and Captain Moe Neale (www.

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A sight all waterfowlers yearn for, black brant working the tides in Izembek Lagoon.



alaskaneideroutfitters.com, 208-310-1846). Moe and his partner, Captain Jeff Wasley, run a quality operation, and their knowledge of and dedication to hunting king eiders and sea ducks is more than admirable.

"We've got sustained winds of 60 mph this morning, so we'll head to the other end of the island and hunt from shore," announced Neale on the first morning of our mid-December hunt. Most outfits wouldn't have braved those conditions, even from land, but we did, on more than one occasion.

In addition to hunting protected points of land, multiple ponds pocked the island where goldeneyes, long-tailed ducks and some puddle ducks sought shelter. One day when high winds kept us from the sea, we jump-shot a marsh filled with Eurasian green-winged teal. We came away with some great-eating birds, and a pair of gorgeous teal for the collection.

Once that sunny day hit and the winds subsided, Neale, Wasley and I headed out of the port, into the bay. Soon strings of king eider decoys were in place, and the guides pumped the flags. "Flagging is really effective," shared Neale. "When you get rolling swells, every bit of decoying action helps." Since eiders fly so low to the water, they can miss seeing the decoys, so waving flags from the boat, five feet above the water's surface, can make a big difference.

"Here comes a pair, right at us, two o'clock," announced Wasley in an excited voice. Firmly gripping the Maxus, eyes poking just over the edge of the boat, I could clearly see the approaching eiders. My heart pounded in my throat, and I dared not blink for fear of missing a moment of the action. "They're adult drakes, take 'em both!" barked Wasley. Three shots later, both birds were down, and soon I was cradling what many avid waterfowlers claim to be North America's most prized duck.

Another flock of kings caught sight of the decoys, circling the spread twice before committing. "Take the last one, it's the best

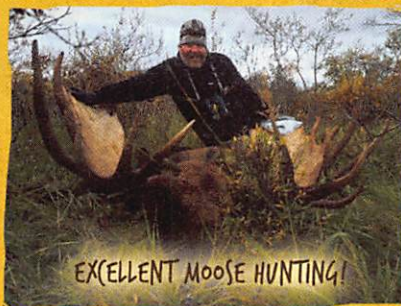
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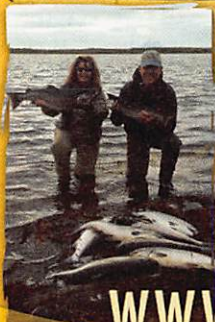
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Pacific black brant are ranked by many as the best eating of all waterfowl, and once you sink your teeth into them, you'll understand why.

Considered by many to be the world's most-prized waterfowl, the author couldn't have been happier with this limit of king eiders taken from Saint Paul Island.

drake," Neale advised. I was one bird away from my four-bird limit.

"It can happen fast, can't it?" Neale smiled. Indeed it can. It was happening so fast, I was in no hurry for that final bird to decoy. Fortunately the eider action was broken when a pair of long-tailed ducks bombed the decoys. As the drakes dropped their landing gear, I raised up and shot. At the moment I pulled the trigger, the birds crossed flight paths and both crumpled at the shot. They were two of the best long-tails I'd taken anywhere in Alaska.

A gorgeous harlequin hit the deck next. Then came another flock of king eiders. They approached hard, but didn't land. They were backlit, making it hard to pick out a good drake. "Let 'em circle and let's see what we got," whispered Neale.

"Second one, second bird...take him!" Neale and Wasley simultaneously ordered. I hit the bird a bit far back, and he coasted a ways before landing on the water. Rushing over, for fear the drake would dive and be gone, we were relieved to find him floating on the surface, expired. My king eider hunt had come to a close.

A couple years later I was back with Jeff Wasley, hunting from his cozy camp in Cold Bay. In addition to teaming with Neale for king eiders, Wasley runs his own waterfowl operation in Cold Bay (www.fourflywaysoutfitters.com, 608-385-4580). From September through mid-December, Wasley guides waterfowl hunters from around the world, in what many rank as the top duck and goose hunting destination on the planet.

I've hunted with many great waterfowlers over the decades, and Wasley is among the best. Since boyhood Wasley had a passion for waterfowl hunting, which led to his getting a biology degree and later working for the U.S. Geological Survey, conducting waterfowl studies from Alaska to Mexico. Wasley's knowledge of and passion for hunting these birds is contagious.

I shared camp with five other hunters, all of whom had previously hunted with

Wasley. It was one of the best weeks of waterfowl hunting I'd ever experienced, despite the inclement weather.

When the winds were too harsh to hunt Cold Bay, itself, for common eider, but the tides right in the protected waters of Izembek Lagoon, we headed there for black brant. Hunting these geese from layout boats, in knee-deep water, was a rush. I'd hunted brants before, and rank them as the number one-eating goose by far. Taking a possession limit of these birds home for the family to enjoy was worth the price of admission.

Reacting to calls, cupping into the decoys, string after string of brants poured in. Between flights, rare Steller's eiders also flew by, many landing in the decoys. Protected for years from hunting, Steller's eiders abound in Izembek Lagoon, and just seeing these magnificent birds was the highlight of the trip for most of us.

Another bonus, we had two Alaska residents with us, husband and wife Kyle and Gina Smith. Being residents, the Smiths each held prized emperor goose tags. When the weather broke and allowed us to reach the shores of Cold Bay, I joined the couple on the rocky beach, where they positioned a small spread of decoys.

For the first time in some 30 years, the emperor goose season was opened in 2017 for a limited take by residents only. Kyle and Gina each tagged their emperor geese from different flocks that flew by the decoys. The anticipation of hunting these coveted geese was only eclipsed by their sheer beauty, once in-hand. This year, 25 lucky non-residents will get to hunt emperor geese as limited tags were awarded in the February lottery draw.

"They're an amazing success story," shares Wasley, when asked about emperor goose hunting now being opened on a regulated basis. "We've watched these geese for decades, and now, the opportunity to hunt them is here." After his hunters left for the season, Wasley, an Alaska resident himself, scored on a stunning emperor. The 2017 take of emperors fell very short of the quotas, proving how under-hunted these birds are,

as is the case with waterfowling in general throughout Alaska.

The week we hunted with Wasley, extreme winds were relentless. Only one day did we get to hunt common eiders in Cold Bay. The following week the weather broke, and all hunters in camp scored on their possession limits of common eiders.

Nonetheless, we had a great time. All of us were experienced waterfowl hunters and knew that weather this late in the year would dictate our every move. On days we couldn't hunt ducks or geese, we chased ptarmigan and hunted for glass floats.

One thing the stormy weather did was uncover glass floats that had been buried for decades in the many islands and sandy beaches of Izembek Lagoon. Used as buoys by Asian commercial fishermen, many folks rank finding a glass float up there with scoring on the most sought after of ducks. On this trip our party ended up bringing over 500 glass floats back to camp. Even when the hunting is slow, there's always something to do in Alaska.

As years pass, while memories of the hunt are relived through admiring photos and mounts of coveted sea ducks, the birds themselves are only part of the story. The challenges along the way, the people you meet, the places you see, and the discoveries you unveil are all special. That's what makes waterfowl hunting in Alaska so unique, and once you get a taste of it, you'll be wanting more.



*Note: For signed copies of Scott & Tiffany Haugen's popular book, **Cooking Game Birds**, send a check for \$20.00, to Haugen Enterprises, P.O. Box 275, Walthamville, OR 97489, or order online at www.scotthaugen.com. It features many great waterfowl recipes.*

*Scott is host of **The Hunt**, on Netflix, Amazon Prime and on cable networks worldwide. Follow him on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.*