



BY SKIP KNOWLES  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON FIEN

# THE RETURN TO Saint Paul

## - PART ONE -

BETWEEN COVID, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND CHAOTIC  
WEATHER, A YOUNG MAN'S BURNING DREAM OF A  
KING EIDER IS SUDDENLY ON THIN ICE

**I sat at my computer**, stressed on deadline, when the phone buzzed atop the desk, flashing a name I love and fear. Captain Jeff Wasley. A ring from Cap generally means two things: Adventure is calling, and I will no doubt be spending a lot of time and money a long, long way from home. And this time, it would turn out, over the holidays.

As usual, no small talk.

"They're gonna open up the Rock again," he growled.

Kings!

"You need to do a story on the return to Saint Paul. For a while there we thought it would never open again. What are you doing around New Years?"

St. Paul Island had closed to hunting due to covid, and reportedly would stay closed for the foreseeable future, due in part to politics. I'd cringed at the news of the shutdown, for I had the itch again. I'd gone once way back in 2017, and had to ask myself why I had the urge to return. The flashbacks from that first trip are vivid: The giant dark waves that would scare any mariner, monsters of freezing water that rose up and collapsed with violence off the transom of our tiny skiff as we raced into port. Wind gusts over 80 mph, and towering ground swells travelling at 20 plus knots that smashed well over the breakwater and into the harbor, the notorious home port of the Deadliest Catch TV series. We had been pinned indoors by violent weather for most of a 4-day trip, and the screwed-up plane rides and lost luggage were always part of the game.

It had been a profound experience, though, and one that ended wildly in skin-of-our-teeth success. Defying the grim forecast, the winds dropped just in time for us to make a last-ditch effort, overcome the severe learning curve of trying to shoot from a bobbing rubber boat, and drop 2-3 kings apiece amid two-story-high swells. The shooting was some of the most humbling and rewarding I've experienced. Those kings now stand proudly in my office on a faux reef with a harlequin drake; a Bering Sea tribute done artfully by Kanati Taxidermy.

I was grateful to have experienced it all and come back in one piece. A cherished memory, but there is really only one thing to hunt on the Rock and once you've seen the place and enjoyed the mystery of it, well, you've seen it. I'd figured I would never go back.

Seared in my brain, though, were powerful images of shocking white and black birds with glowing orange and red bills, pearl blue and green heads, electric against the heavy dark sky, flying like jets on a mission amid the swells. It was not rational to go again, but I wanted to, and I realized it is because there is simply nothing else like it. And, I sensed it might be ending soon, as it already had once. Closing first with covid, and in the future, I worried, by climate change. The king crab fishery that made the harbor famous has imploded overnight, and warming seas were blamed. The town is dying, and the clock may be ticking again on a hunt for kings.

These magnificent birds winter-over mostly at the edge of the ice shelf, feeding on shellfish. The southern end of their migration is in the central Bering Sea, but with the sea ice retreating north each year, there is no

reason to think they'll stay further south in the historical St. Paul area, the southern end of their migration.

Plus, I badly wanted to hunt with Wasley again. For a trained biologist he's much more of a Jeremiah Johnson character than a scientist. He is cut from a different cloth, 'ol Cap, one of the most unflappable men I've met. So, I called our friends at Benelli to see if they would support a mission back to the Rock, and they were all in.

Now, I just needed a photographer. One that might be crazy enough to forego the holidays on short notice and head to the middle of the Bering Sea's deadliest port in the dead of winter. Ahhhh... Brandon Fien. Mr. Fien the bird Fiend. He with the five cover shots for WILDFOWL. One of the best in the business, and as it turns out he had been dreaming of doing this his whole life. The wunderkind who had turned into a seasoned veteran photographer at 21, even now just barely old enough to buy beer. He was ecstatic over the idea and also all-in. Holidays are not a problem for the young and single.

As we lined the trip out, the excitement was tempered by memories of brutal weather, cancelled flights and broken-down equipment on past AK trips, and sure enough, we were soon staring at a dreadful forecast after booking flights for Dec. 27-Jan. 3.

#### ANCHORAGE: MOOSE AND MAUDLIN MEANDERING

With a few annoying delays we dropped into Anchorage on Wednesday only to learn our Thursday flight to St. Paul was already cancelled and we had a real iffy

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shot at Friday, and no flight after that was within our trip window at all. Do or die. We were now looking at three nights in hotels and, if lucky, three nights at the lodge. And that was proving to be a big “If.”

I promised to make Brandon shoot first if this worked out at all. We were down to two full days to chase the unicorns, if we could even get there.

We’d had to ditch almost everything—the weight limit on our return flight was 40 pounds total for the charter. Can you imagine that as a cameraman? We had literally repacked in the parking lot at the airport in Colorado.

Stuck in Anchorage, at the landmark Lakefront Hotel, where you can watch float planes land all summer, we saw it was now a frozen desert. We walked by a mounted king in a glass case in the lobby, where they have all kinds of beautiful mounts, even a gun cabinet (gotta love Alaska!). Brandon couldn’t stop staring at the kings. “That is the closest I’ve ever come to one,” he said.

That night we grabbed a steak on the town. The streets were tunnels of snow as we cruised in our Uber, passing the occasional moose staring at us. A hooker was standing on a corner with bare legs and a short skirt in the zero-degree weather. Soon Brandon was in his hotel room, frying his brain on YouTube King eider videos while I researched pagan dance rituals that might summon the gods for a break in the weather.

The bizarre low angle of the Alaskan winter sun suggests it is there, but you rarely really see it. The ethereal light is arresting, in the morning filtering down through the frost-covered trees. At the hotel we had a reindeer sausage and egg scramble, intensely delicious. I did not tell my children back home that I was eating reindeer days after Christmas

(#naughtylistforlife). The Anchorage Daily News relayed alarming information about the Arctic ocean, how it was warming so much faster than the rest of the planet. It sounded like we may soon not have a lot of things we’ve taken for granted in an area that produces half of the nation’s seafood.

I told Brandon we needed to get him a king for sure this trip, because this could be it. He asked why, and I told him, if it gets much warmer, there is no need for kings to come this far south. This is when I found out what a true bird nerd my young friend is. He went off talking about the snow goose populations, how he thinks they’re displacing birds and not just shifting flyways, and pushing other species out. He spoke of duck populations he has seen across the country shifting in response to changing weather patterns.

Brandon is from the covid generation that never went back to school or had a graduation. He was always bird-obsessed and showed up to his school in California soaking wet one day, trying to show other kids an amazing photo he’d shot of honkers after biking to the marsh at dawn. They looked at him like a freak. He had become an outcast because he had quit baseball to shoot photos after he’d had a tumor on his arm.

His intensity is unsettling. Sitting in the restaurant that night, he was getting antsy despite the engaging food, drinks, and atmosphere. I asked what he was staring at through the window. “You see how those blocks of sea ice are moving?” he said, and went on to describe elaborate circling patterns he had noticed the ice chunks doing in the current, while I was taking in the bar scene. They were in the far distance, in low light.

“You saw that sitting here!?” I asked.

“Yeah, just watching. Killing me to not have my drone and go shoot that.”



### INTO THE WILD

It was touch and go right up until takeoff if the weather would hold for our Friday flight. On the shuttle to the terminal, we met a corporate seafood executive who was going to St. Paul to kill the island. He would shut down the crab processing plant for good. He confirmed all the bad rumors. The island was surrounded by ice as recently as 2012 but, "Now the ice is nowhere close. It had 550 residents, now 200. Devastating," he said.

Incredibly, I bumped into a crew from Alberta led by Kevin Harris, a well known 'fowler, who had also hunted kings back in '17. They had still been slaughtering mallards in Canada right up to Christmas, he said, and showed us a photo from a Dec. 23 hunt, the biggest heap of green-heads I've probably ever seen, reporting it was, "Still no snow, plenty of open water, and 55 degrees."

Finally, our plane would take off. Maybe. Sitting on the tarmac running late, they announced, "Someone must get off the plane." Weight limit issues. Always chaos in Alaska! Before the flight attendant is even done speaking a woman leaps up and yells, "I'll do it!" and everyone applauded her. She clearly did not want to be on the plane. The flight was full of thick southern accents, mostly guys chasing 41. You will rarely meet a more badass bunch of bird hunters than on a charter flight to chase king eiders. I sat by a guy from South Carolina who fished for "spot-tails" all winter. Redfish, and he invited me.

As we finally circled into St. Paul, and the stark, dead-looking town appeared, I thought of the



warming seas, and wondered to myself...why would the king eiders stick around? Or the people? As I pondered that grimness, an older gal sitting in front of me cheered wildly when her movie ended, clapping her hands loudly. She'd been getting bombed the entire way. Fitting.

On the tarmac, straining with great anxiety, I was hoping to see my black Yeti suitcase amid the luggage and cargo. Nope. Nada. A huge stack of guns for another group of hunters had hogged all the weight capacity and our bags had been kicked off (they have to ship the guns once checked).

I'd been dropped in the middle of the Bering Sea with nothing but the clothes on my back, like half the hunters aboard. By the grace of God, Brandon had







his camera. And soon we were shaking hands with Wasley, and in no time he was trying to outfit the half of us that had no gear with loaner waders in the lodge.

The weather was fifty-fifty on whether we could launch in the morning, he said.

Then suddenly, just like that, we were backing a boat down a snow-packed ramp in 25 mph winds in the morning moonlight, and soon taking a beating with sheets of water leaping over the bow, heading out into a stiff south wind, the hardest to hide from out of St. Paul.

All hands on deck, one hand for the boat, as I dug out decoys for our guide, Owen, on the bucking skiff, who clicked them into the line towing in our wake.

It was the kind of weather they would not normally go out in, but once again, we hadn't even started hunting on this trip, and we were running out of time. We had a large group in camp and Wasley had decided to attempt to work around the big south wind and the usual huge ground swells. I was relieved the waves were only 14-foot rollers, not the 20-foot monsters like last time, with scary dark shadows on their faces as they had threatened to stand up.

Would the birds be there? Would the weather hold just long enough? It was eerily familiar, with all but a handful of hours to hunt taken away by storms, leading up to this moment. 🍃

*To be continued...look for the second half of this king eider quest featuring the Super Black Eagle 3 BE.S.T. in the upcoming September issue.*

