

THE RETURN TO Saint Paul

- PART TWO -

IT'S A RACE AGAINST TIME AS THE WINDOW CLOSES ON THE
CHANCE AT A YOUNG FOWLER'S FIRST KING EIDER

BY SKIP KNOWLES

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Ocean swells gleaming in the fickle moonlight slowly gave way to a brooding dark dawn as the storm moved in, the wind picked up, and rain squalls began fighting for space on the horizon. Yet, black specks were already flickering about in the distance, birds in flight low on the ocean.

Gulls or scoters? Murres, maybe? Or the ones that haunt our dreams, the ones we came for, the king? As the light improved, our decoys started to become more visible, and the shapes grew closer, until the distinctive outlines of king eiders appeared. Our hearts leapt.

This was it. After barely sliding into camp two days late due to flight cancellations, we were out here on the Bering Sea, from the home port of the *Deadliest Catch* TV series in wind conditions Captain Jeff Wasley said would normally keep them shorebound. But we had no



choice, we were out of time, so he decided to try to work around the big south wind and ominous ground swells.

We could see them now. The iconic shape of the king eiders' heads, bigger than other ducks, the royalty and monarch of all waterfowl with his gray crown, above the beautiful jade cheeks and the famous, glowing nose. Writers always compare sea ducks to jet fighters because of the long sleek profile, the horizontal flight patterns and the wings set so far back on the body. It is hard not to, but they are far too beautiful for that.

Brandon Fien, WILDFOWL's intrepid young photographer, had been obsessed with seeing a king eider his entire life, so we'd already notched a win. Now, to kill one. To prep for this trip, he had been taking cold showers like the old Arctic explorers used to. I had teased him and thought that excessively hardcore, but



birds get him that hot and bothered, and the skinny youngster from California (now Colorado) was tough as seaducks' feet in the cold rain we were navigating, wearing only his ball cap and no gloves until it got really bad. Evidently there's something to the cold plunge thing if you are stubborn enough to do it. Not me. I took enough cold showers in college whenever I accidentally dated a girl who proved to have higher

moral standards than I'd anticipated.

Now we were getting a cold shower indeed. Dark storm clouds moved in right down on the water like a living wall and brought wild squalls that pelted us with rain and strange popcorn snow.

Back at the ramp, four different trucks had jockeyed to dump boats in the water. Twice as many hunters as my trip 7 years ago and it showed in the ducks' behavior. They didn't bomb in and splash down in the decoys like I'd witnessed repeatedly on that prior trip. In fact, we would not see a single king eider finish feet-down. The birds were clearly warier, but they would still screw up just enough, swinging as close as 20 yards and often within 40.

And there were plenty around, here to feast on shellfish on the reefs around St. Paul Island, the southern end of their migration. It had been closed during the covid years, and rumored to never re-open, so this entire hunt felt like it was on borrowed time. The island is dying with the seafood industry closing, and it's a shame they have not been set up for eco-tourism. Both the sea ducks and the island's crazy history are fascinating.

This was early January, but the spring migration of the king eider can involve huge flocks. According to allaboutbirds.org, two observers at Point Barrow, the northernmost point of land in the United States, once counted 360,000 king eiders passing in just 10 hours, with 113,000 of those in just 30 minutes alone. Such migrations often include other arctic-nesting seabirds as well; long-tailed ducks, Steller's, common, and spectacled eiders, and murre.

A grand passage of sea ducks. How would you like to witness that? King eiders migrate in both daylight and darkness, and through thick fog, the organization reports. Satellite tracking has revealed some kings migrate over land, such as the Alaska Peninsula or the Kamchatka Peninsula of Russia, even moving through high-elevation mountain passes. Imagine chasing Dall

sheep and having a thousand kings go cruising by!

Tragically, it is well established that the Bering Sea crab fleet kills many kings. "They fly into the sodium lights on those big boats at night and it's just *thumpity-thump-thump*," Wasley says. "They are just stupid about them." With the crab fleet shorebound with closed seasons blamed on climate change for the foreseeable future, that impact, if significant, will at least be lessened.

St. Paul is just as interesting as the king eider. Largest of the Pribilof Islands, it has changed very little since the last woolly mammoths died off here just 5,700 years ago, much later than they went extinct elsewhere. Daybreak is around 10 a.m. mid-winter, the low angle of the sun creating a haunting but heavenly light over the barren land. I sat upon a giant whale rib laying a shore on my first trip, only realizing it was not a log when I saw the photo.

THE HUNT

On the run out, sheets of water splashed over the bow and completely drenched both me and the SBE 3 I cradled. You want to take care of your guns in the field but sometimes there is very little you can do. But I wasn't worried. The gun was born for this.

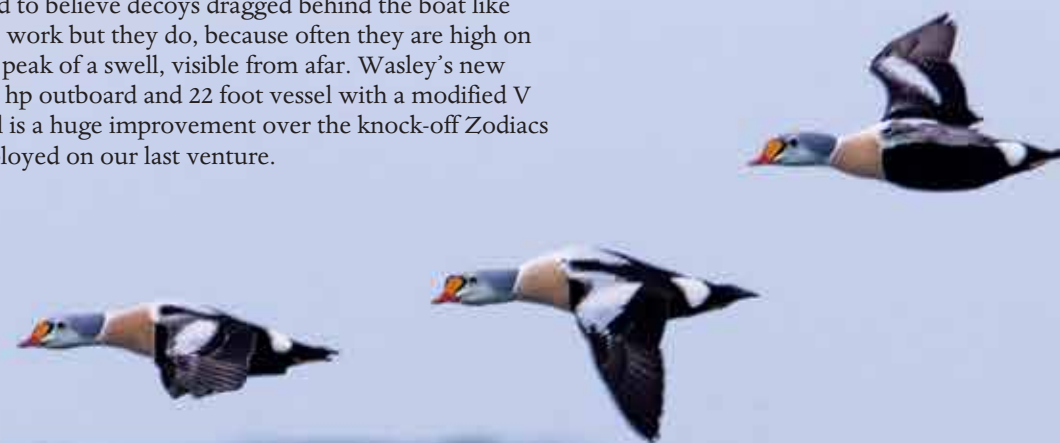
We strung the decoys out in a long gurgling line behind the boat, wobbling to and fro and digging into the water, speeding up and slowing with the great heaving swells as the boat surged the same way. It's hard to believe decoys dragged behind the boat like this work but they do, because often they are high on the peak of a swell, visible from afar. Wasley's new 115 hp outboard and 22 foot vessel with a modified V hull is a huge improvement over the knock-off Zodiacs deployed on our last venture.



Brandon and I sat on each side on the bow, and I got lucky right out of the gate with a long going away shot off starboard thanks to HEVI tungsten, my confidence high with the Benelli and it's fierce BE.S.T finish.

Brandon fired a few warning shots from the heaving vessel and grew frustrated, quiet and wildly intense, though composed, head on a swivel. It is some of the most humbling shooting you will ever do. A pair swung around the back, the hunters in the stern missed and I downed a second king, but we were all distressed to see it swimming a bit, looking dazed in the enormous waves. We all knew it might dive with the boat's approach. I grabbed the net and got ready.

A splash on the surface where the drake had been was all that remained as I reached out with the net, but I could see color below and lunged violently as deep as



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breathe I wanted him to down one so bad. At the shot one crumpled to the sea and we all cheered and hugged as everyone in the boat had a king now and nobody could ever take that moment from us.

The next dawn was almost pleasant, motoring out in choppy seas amid big lazy ground swells. The birds were less thick but we should have finished our annual limits of four birds. I whiffed on a left-to-right single in disbelief, then missed another and clenched my jaw. The rest of my shots connected and I set my gun down.

Twice, two other shooters had layup shots on kings cruising past at 20 yards in three-packs swinging with the wind and missed them all clean. It is something about these seabirds and their regal looks that can just unhinge people...and how do you practice for this kind of shooting? Maybe stand up in a raft on a whitewater river and try to pass-shoot mourning doves?

Another flock cruised through, untouched again by the other shooters, but Brandon caught them on film and we were in absolute awe at the sight of those kings as they swung slowly past the stern, catching the morning light against a dark storm sky. They absolute looked plugged in. Breathtaking. They possess an electric aura.

I could with the handle trying to cut off the diving bird, both hands in the freezing ocean and my shoulders leaning over the rubber inflated gunwales as the boat bounced wildly. The net handle was suddenly heavy and thumping, as I pulled the stunning drake eider out of the water. A cheer erupted. I had dipnetted a king.

"That's all your years as a steelheader paying off!" Wasley said happily.

My heart was racing as I watched young sharp-shooter Brandon, who has murdered wood ducks and teal since he was a wee lad, miss back-to-back shots on his dream bird. With the weather a constant threat to send us back to port, the stress became palpable. The activity was slowing down quickly, and Brandon had not cut a feather. It was the first day we'd managed to get out, and may very well be the last, and time had run out.

"The morning flight was pretty much over," he recalls. "We didn't know if we'd have a chance to go out for the second day, so my anxiety was through the roof. Then those two kings decoyed up the bottom of the spread and I connected on one."

When that two-pack came up the behind the skiff and he raised his gun in the bucking boat, I could hardly



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Brandon had set down his gun, going to work with the camera. He caught a rare shot of a bird I'd shot, my biggest ever, as it was hit. A giant rhino of a Roman-nosed king.

I had given Cap a heart attack with my hesitation on my last bird holding my fire because the boat dipped two times right as I squeezed, and so did the gun barrel. I held off but kept swinging the gun on the drake as it flew from starboard to port all the way around the transom, and finally smacked it with a solid shot.

"Thought you were having a senior moment, there!" he yelled over the wind.

"I like to keep you guessing," I quipped.

The true tungsten HEVI-shot was murder, and you could tell whenever we used non-tungsten. Do not go to Alaska without some kind of TSS. All sea ducks are famously tough, but kings, I am certain, have two hearts and four lungs. All the fancy Federal Premium Custom Shop shot-shell loads I'd brought were lost in my luggage, but Cap always has some mix of original HEVI on board. The hunt is pricey these days with taxes, tips and airfare so spend some money on top notch ammo if you come.

On the horizon, we spotted a whale spout in the freezing ocean from a large species, and I was shocked they were still so far north. Soon they were on us, and multiple vast, sleek fin whales cruised past, something I'd never dream we'd see here in January.

The wind roared up about 11 a.m. so fast and nasty it blew us right off. We crashed through the waves back to port, my face so cold I got an ice cream headache piercing into my right eye socket.

LEAVING ST. PAUL

An Argo food truck delivery had never made it and we gorged on an improv diet of soup and noodles and stir fry and lots of overpriced beer. The final night's meal of wine-marinated scoter poppers was a delicious treat, courtesy of Justin and Rebecca Spring. Store prices are understandably ludicrous here (\$11 jalapenos) but nobody lost any weight. Last night everyone was dancing and having fun with the locals who remain on the is-



land, a New Year's bash. We woke up and someone had stolen our gas. There is virtually no law-enforcement on the island with the rapidly dwindling population.

Departure morning, day four, and still no hint of my long-lost luggage, but at this point I was relieved. I didn't want it to show, because I would have to deal with the 40-pound weight limit, and with frozen birds, too. It was over. I'd been dropped in the middle of the Bering Sea with just the clothes on my back and in my pack, and it had worked out fine.

We stood on the tarmac in glorious sunny weather, but bad weather was coming. Our incoming flight on Ravn air was delayed due to lack of de-icing staff and a 70 mph wind was on its way, meaning our getting off the island was now in question.

Someone yelled at me and I walked over to the tiny terminal. There it was. My damned lost black YETI suitcase. What would I have to toss out? But the young pilot was laid back and we made weight, birds and all.



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By the skin of our teeth, again, the trip was a success. We'd given the Benelli SBE 3 a proper test and it performed like a champ. We had travel problems, to say the least, the kind that make you swear you'll never come back. We hadn't even left our Colorado homes and there was talk about flight cancellations four days prior. Alaska presents Wasley with constant logistical problems. To me, the idea of hosting a bunch of often seasick and heavy-set duck hunters on the Bering Sea on a regular basis seems mildly insane.

That night, I asked ol' Cap why he does it, with all the flight troubles and so much lost luggage, it is such an overall pain in the ass. Getting boat parts is a nightmare on the island. It's a lot to endure, and to take it on weekly, along with all your clients' other problems... why would you choose that lifestyle?

"I don't know. Where else would you rather guide?"

He is just one of these people that doesn't stress out. And Alaska gets in your head, and your heart, and the challenges it presents are part of that. A friend went to Kodiak, didn't kill a deer, beat himself up physically, then got too sick to get out of bed for the rest of the trip. "I feel like Alaska kicked my ass, and I want to go back."

We all know that feeling. But St. Paul—king eiders and all—is a one-trick pony. Only masochists go back. I'm certainly never going to.

At least, that's what I'm saying right now. Unless I could find a way to witness that crazy spring migration of hundreds of thousands of kings. If I ever do, I know a young photographer fond of cold showers who won't need any convincing. 🍃



THAT GUN

When you are spending a small fortune to venture into a severe saltwater hunting environment where windows to shoot might not happen at all, you can't have a gun that is less than bulletproof. The Benelli Super Black Eagle 3 with BE.S.T coating not only ran perfectly with many different heavy loads, it looked like it came off the gun store shelf after a simple wipe down. It is apparent that the highest evolution of the adventurous waterfowler's shotgun has come to fruition. The special black BE.S.T. surface treatment's molecular binding is tough to damage and absolutely will not rust. We literally poured seawater out of the barrel and experienced zero problems. Sell all of your pretty-good guns and get one of these. It's a firearm as unflappable as old Captain Wasley himself. —SK

