

EIDAHS OF BLUE HILL

MARVELING IN THE SPLENDOR OF BIG SEA-GOING DUCKS OFF
MAINE'S ROUGH AND TUMBLE COAST BY JACK HIRT

I GLANCED AT my watch as we scrambled aboard the 20-foot TDB duck boat—4:45 a.m. A setting sliver of moon and a blanket of reach-out-and-touch-'em stars hovered above us. As our guide and outfitter Todd Jackson cracked the throttle, sending us skimming across the gently swelling waters of the North Atlantic, I couldn't help but think of what this day would bring.

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It was a bone-chilling boat ride off Maine's coast, but it was December, and our cruising altitude was such that the cold weather was par for the course.

Finally pulling the boat off plane, Todd idled along the face of a large granite ledge on a 10-acre island's lee shore. But he kept his gaze northward, studying the open water in the pre-dawn light. His indecision was obvious. "What ya thinking?" I asked.

"Well," he piped up, "this is a good spot. But three miles across the bay there's an even better one. Just can't trust the wind, though. We better hang right here."

We got busy setting the rig. Hunting partner Tom Van Handel, his son Rick and I have had our fair share of decoy rigging on the open waters of Lake Michigan. Although Todd's technique varied from ours, we were glad to lend a helping hand.

Just as we finished the basic three-string set of nearly 80 oversized eider blocks, and another dozen scoter decoys segregated on the downwind end of each string, Todd commanded, "Lock and load. It's time to do some gunnin'. Just remember, we want the white birds. We're hunting drakes only unless you want a solitary hen for mounting."

As we scoured the waves for low-scraping flights of sea ducks, I absorbed the breathtaking scenery. The sun rising at our backs lit up a wildly chopping, frothing sea. A spruce-studded, granite-laced shoreline bordered our decoy setup, and had it not been for the salt air, I easily could have imagined occupying a shoreline surrounding one of Canada's larger freshwater lakes.

A sharp jab in the ribs by Todd jolted me back to reality. "Here they come; looks like five hens and one drake."

The flock bored straight in, closing the distance faster than I'd anticipated, and then flared with amazing agility, to pass over the decoy string. It was my shot, and though not all that steady on cramped legs, I managed to splash my first common eider drake. Moments later, Todd's Lab Mallard, a thick-coated, sea-smart black retriever, brought the majestic bird to hand.

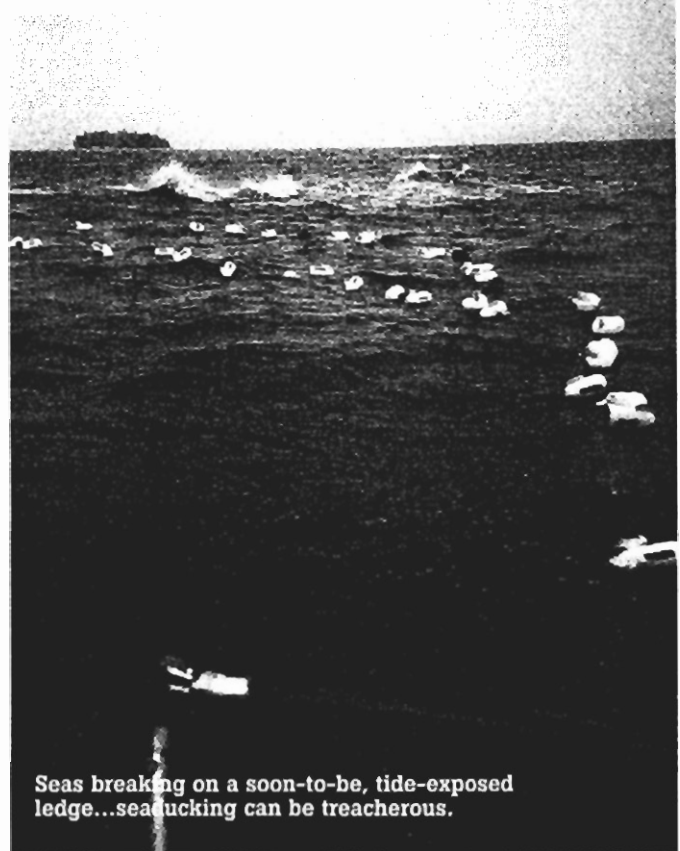
There was no time to admire our work, however. The morning sea-duck flight over the 10- to 12-foot-deep, mussel-laden shoals was in full swing. The action was not fast-paced, but steady, as small flights streaked overhead, with one in four flocks working our setup. We shot mostly eiders, though enough white-winged scoters gave us a look to keep things interesting.

Todd's intensity for shooting sea ducks really spiced things up. Never taking a moment off, he continually scanned for birds, always able to discern, at a distance, the number of drakes about to work

THE PUDDLE DUCK OPTION

OUR MAIN FOCUS on this trip was sea ducks in general, and eider hunting in particular. But because we were able to fill our daily bag of seven birds each (no more than five eiders, or four scoters per man per day) by late morning, we took advantage of the opportunity to hunt puddle ducks.

Todd refers to all ducks other than sea ducks or mergansers as puddle ducks. Our protected shoreline or quiet bay puddle duck hunts were less than optimally timed, occurring during midday. Conducted over a mixed rig of diver and black duck blocks, they produced gunning at bufflehead and goldeneye. We had a few close calls with the wily blacks, but ultimately they eluded us. Just as with the sea ducks, hunters interested in this type of hunting would be best served to do it during the early morning.



Seas breaking on a soon-to-be, tide-exposed ledge...seaduckling can be treacherous.



TDB duck boat blends well with the surrounding granite ledges.

our blocks. Still, in spite of his best vocal efforts to maneuver every flock into range—"Tip in here!" he'd call, or "Pitch in here, now!"—not all gave us a good look. Rather, they tended to slide to one end of the spread or the other, limiting shooting opportunities to one or two gunners on each volley.

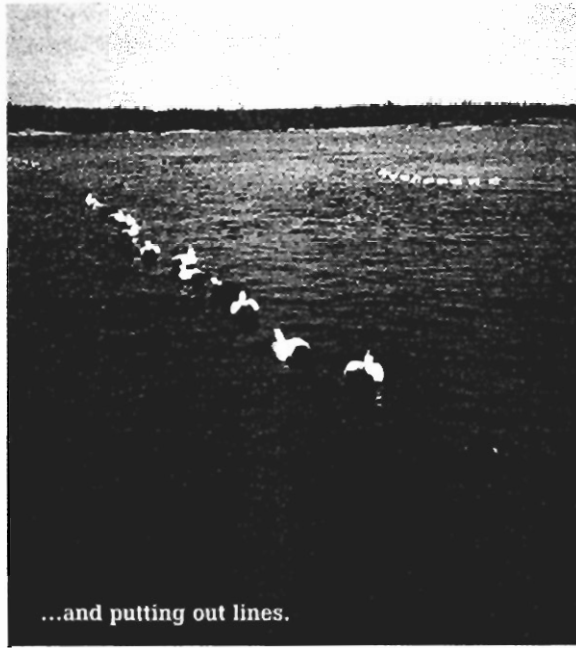
Not one to cut anyone a lot of slack (again, it's that intensity thing), Todd, in his cool, offhanded manner, complimented us (I think), by offering, "You boys aren't really shootin' too poorly." Still, we weren't always dead-on, which led to us chasing down several hard-diving, fast-swimming cripples. This was Todd's priority—no matter how heavy the incoming flight.

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After an action-packed two and a half hours of gunning, and with only two birds needed for our combined eider limit, Todd radioed one of his guides to tell him that we were almost done. That jinxed it, at least for a while. The wind died. The birds quit flying. And the guns cooled. After the heat of the earlier battle, it

bird shot like a cannonball into the surf. Watching them work, as much as anything, made the hunt whole.

On the way back to Todd's lodge that first afternoon we stopped to pick up a box of live lobsters, the centerpiece of that evening's meal. It was something to look forward to almost as much as the next day's hunt.



THE COMMON EIDER

After consuming a traditional Maine dinner, I talked with Todd about the common eider, a bird he seems to live to hunt. I learned that these stocky, thick-necked birds are the largest duck in North America, commonly weighing in at 4½ to 5½ pounds. Though often found roosting in flocks of several hundred, they usually fly in much smaller groups. Given their tendency to alternately flap and glide, always low, and often through the troughs of the waves, their speed is deceptive. When they com-

was a relaxing two hours before a pair of big, white singles finally cooperated.

It had been a great morning, with the sights and sounds of East Coast sea duck hunting forever etched into our minds. It had offered everything we'd come for and more, but there were some surprises.

The birds, though certainly numerous enough, weren't overly abundant. And while not known for their smarts, it was soon apparent that they weren't about to surrender to anything less than a strategically located, quality rig. And though hardly comparable to what is needed to fool geese in a short-clipped stubble field, or blacks in a marsh, sit-still, keep-your-face-down stealth was an important part of the program.

If the birds were a surprise, the fact that Todd always hunts in the company of one of his Labs, either Mallard or Ivan, was an unexpected bonus as well. At well over 100 pounds, each of these wide-bodied dogs, similar in conformation to a Newfie, but with shorter hair, appeared nothing if not ponderous at first glance. But they were exceedingly well mannered. And though I'd bet they wouldn't be interested in chasing a rooster pheasant across the driveway, their eyes really lit up when a big white



Old-squaw can also be had off Maine's coastal waters.

mit, as we learned, they decoy hard, low and fast, pushing 50-55 mph. As if their size and speed don't make them tricky enough, their layered feathering and thick down give them an all but armor-coating, making them as tough to kill as any fowl anywhere. Big guns, heavy loads and headshots are the tactics best used when seaduck hunting in general, and eider hunting in particular.

Maine's coast is host to roughly 30,000 pairs of nesting eiders annually. The local birds, along with 140,000 or so migrants, provide outstanding waterfowling for Todd's hunters from October through mid-January. Though far and away his favorite, the eiders are joined by common, surf (Skunkheads) and white-winged scoters, as well as old-squaw. "It's the old-squaw," Todd explained with a devious grin, "that will provide our first-light gunnin' tomorrow."

Facing a stiff breeze, we pounded out into the eerie blackness of Blue Hill Bay that second morning under a thick but high overcast. It was still mild by Maine's December standards. But we were all ready for the wet butt-thumping tide to end when Todd finally cut the power at the face of a two-acre island that was no more than a giant granite boulder. Being somewhat familiar with the drill, setting the rig went a bit smoother. Once complete, Todd motored out of the calm lee waters and dropped anchor a couple hundred yards off, out in the agitated rollers of the open bay.

"Look sharp," he urged. "We're in a major old-squaw flight line here. The birds will be screamin' downwind this morning, passing us near and far."

The words weren't long out of his mouth before sporadic flights of 'squaw came barreling by. The fact they're the fastest

flying of all sea ducks, riding the gusting tailwind really made them rip. (That's my excuse for missing my share, and I'm sticking to it!) Our half-hour barrage from the sometimes violently pitching craft, though fun, produced a scant three birds that fell from flocks we were community gunning. None of us could claim more than mere good luck.

Though the long-tails kept coming, we were soon distracted by flights of eiders working our rig. We all decided to go back to the decoys, and possibly a more gunning-friendly situation.

Having missed the first major wave of the morning, the eider flight soon slowed. There were obviously fewer birds in this area than we'd hunted the day before, and those that did come by, for the most part, didn't like what they saw. These educated eiders would swing far and wide, often circumnavigating the island to give us a second look, before flaring off for good. Even though the situation set Todd to mumbling about the need for fresh, new birds, we still got our chances. Making the most of each one, we eventually bagged out...with nary a cripple to chase...after what had been a long, but satisfying, morning.

After two great days, wild and wooly coastal Maine weather notwithstanding, we'd experienced everything coastal seaduck-ing offers. We didn't know, however, that the next day would produce all the "gunning' weather" any seaducker could want.

We awoke that last day to a howling nor'easter and a major change of plans. Over breakfast Todd announced that it would

be Penobscot Bay, which offered sheltered bays as protection from the 30-knot winds.

Arriving at the launch site, the black skies opened up, greeting us with a torrential, horizontal rain. I for one was quite content to stay put in the Suburban, figuring we'd at least wait out daybreak, and a possible improvement in conditions. But Todd popped out of the truck and set about his pre-launch routine as if it was just another day. Which for him, I suppose, it was. It was Tom who then stated the obvious. "Well, I 'spose we'd better suit up. Looks like we're goin' in!"

Only minutes later we found ourselves tucked deep into our parkas, being pelted by sheeting rain en route to another North Atlantic adventure. It was one of those trips that we might've foregone, if we had been asked.

Todd kept his nose and the bow into the wind as he checked out a number of ledges. Just how he could see in the miserable conditions was beyond me. I guess his night vision, no doubt honed by years of experience on familiar waters, was much sharper than mine.

Staying in radio contact with his two other guides, he made sure they were situated before he found a setup. With his options limited by the wind, he finally settled on a small, jagged clump of offshore ledges that offered precious little protection in their lee. Although the wind was still going strong, the rain began to lessen, a good sign. Not only were we probably going to survive, but we

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might actually get a hunt in as well.

With a heavy swell and a churning tide running full bore, Todd asked if we could handle the less-than-totally-stable conditions. We replied, with no small amount of false bravado, in the affirmative.

If Todd's skills as a waterman were evident the previous two days, they were



A brace of common eider.

showcased that dirty morning. Still, it was a battle that took all four hands to set the rig. Once completed, Todd offered in relief, "This is why we hunt from boats in front of rather than *on* the ledges. Transitioning from the boat to the rocks is a tough, slippery, dangerous proposition on a good day. On a day like today, it would be considered suicide."

I'm sure none of us knew what we were in for as we bounced around, watching the day's first dim, gray light soak through the murk and gloom.

Proving it pays to think good thoughts, the sea-duck parade, steadier and far heavier than any we'd previously witnessed, got underway in earnest. Our first visitors were a trio of white-winged scoters that sucked in tight and fell, amazingly, to our three shots. Then, as we came under a full-blown eider attack, reality set in. Blame it on the pitching shooting platform. Blame it on my rain-splattered glasses. Or blame it on whatever, but our shooting percentages dropped off dramatically as flocks from five to 20 eiders strafed the rig in rapid succession. In the

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early going—and something that frustrated everyone given the brutal conditions—we had to repeatedly cut loose of the anchor to run and gun cripples. But in the end it proved little opportunity lost.

The rough weather kept the birds on the move. And the best part was most of them liked our setup enough to want to visit. Mediocre marksmanship aside, we were all too quickly pushing our eider limits when first one, then a second flight of 'squaw buzzed the rig, each leaving a long-tailed, taxidermy-worthy drake behind.

Then came a trophy moment...one that materialized during our last volley of the morning. One that I'll cherish most from this hunt. As Tom and Rick picked their final birds out of a flock working the bow string, I watched a solitary drake...what could have easily been my last...come low over the stern line. In an otherwise world of muted grays and dim, fuzzy edges, the big, strikingly white bird seemed aglow, center-focused in my mind's eye. He hung there fighting the gusty headwind, stubby wings pumping, his neck craning downward not unlike a decoying goose, all but stalled out. As he did this an exceptionally tall roller crashed on the tide-exposed ledge below him, sending a geyser of salt spray skyward. Flaring vertically, but only momentarily to avoid a dousing, this duck of the sea then splashed, casually, into the rig. The bird's ability to handle...heck...apparently revel in the rough and tumble conditions, made a statement, seeming to say, "Hey, this is my kind of weather!"

IF YOU GO

Contact: TODD JACKSON at
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(888) Sea-Duck or (207) 338-1883

Immersed in the show, I hadn't even thought of shooting. That it proved a clear case of "free in, free out" seemed only appropriate. I watched him wing off thinking that with any luck, the big drake and his offspring will grace Maine's coast well beyond my lifetime's memory of his splendor and sea-going style. ✎

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