

Gunning sea ducks is great sport

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The dawn breeze was fanning the fires of day as Galen Ruhlin guided the beamy 18-foot Lund boat through the moorings of a snug harbor situated on Frenchman Bay. Huddled amidships, among mounds of gunning gear, were Al Mitchell of Holden, 15-year-old Tyler Eldridge of Orland, and you know who. Minutes later, the smudgy silhouette of a small island crowned with spruces loomed ahead of us.

When the bow nudged a granite shelf garlanded with rockweed, Al and Tyler climbed out and alternately held the boat while I handed them our shotguns and pack baskets. Directly, after Galen allowed he didn't need a hand at rigging his 22 oversized eider decoys, I grunted my way out of the boat while cussing about gunnels getting higher and boots getting heavier as I got older.

Set perpendicular to the shore in widely separated lines of 10, with two set off to one side, the blocky "tollers" that Galen shaped from slabs of cork were highly visible to trafficking eiders. Painted predominately black and white, in the plumage patterns of drakes, the phony flock tugged enticingly in the ebbing tide. After anchoring the boat behind the island, Galen, who often guides sea-duck hunters for Bill Pidgeon's Eiders Down Inc., came shuffling toward us. "Five minutes 'til gunning time," I said through the rattle of shells being loaded and chambered. "Where's your gun?"

"In the boat," my longtime friend and hunting partner answered. "I'm not shootin', I'm just here to do the fetchin'. I'm as good a retriever as there is on the Maine coast," he added through a smile and a swirl of cigarette smoke. Actually, owing to the island's steep, craggy face and a hauling tide, it's a poor place for a retriever to earn its Alpo. Dangerous, in fact. A dog tangled in a string of heavy decoys can be in serious trouble. Galen and Al Mitchell will attest to that, each of them has saved a dog from drowning.

"Birds on the left." At Tyler's warning we crouched behind outcroppings of ledge. Strung low to the water, a flock of 30 or so eiders approached swiftly while we hoped and coaxed vocally for them to swing toward the tollers. But to no avail. The flock flew by us without so much as wagging or tipping a wing our way. Shaking his head, Galen grumbled, "They're educated. They've been gunned hard the last 10 years or so, ever since the guided hunts got started. It's not like when you could stand up and wave and it wouldn't bother 'em a bit. No siree, they're spooky now, especially the big flocks. What shootin' we get this mornin' will be mostly singles and pairs or small flocks lookin' for company. We'll have to stay tucked down, though; if they see us, we might as well be out here havin' a picnic."

Everything changes, I thought, recalling the times Galen, my son, Jeff, Danny Dinsmore, and I gunned off the ledges around Sally Island, outside of Corea Harbor. You'd have had to have seen it to believe it. The way those big offshore flocks came to the tollers you'd have thought an old drake's will was being read. Obviously, those ducks had never seen a decoy. Straight in they came on wings cupped and committed. Not until we shot did they veer and sweep past so close that we could feel the wind from their wings. It took only 20 minutes or so to bag our daily limits, which then was seven each. Jeff was in his early teens at the time and he still talks about those barrel-warming hunts. Small wonder I'm pushing 70 and I'm still talking about them.

My reminiscing ended abruptly when Al said, "Watch it, boys. Five on the right. They're swingin'. Looks like they might be sociable." The veteran outdoorsman — at 75 years old he's the most avid sea-duck hunter I know of — called it right. It's no secret that watching ducks commit to decoys is the essence of waterfowl hunting, and the five eiders did it like they'd read the script. Banking smoothly, the big ducks, four drakes and a hen, lifted slightly, tucked the wind under their wings and started scaling, tilting and rocking as they descended, using flared tail feathers and splayed feet as air brakes. Only one flew away.

Earlier, Galen told me that Tyler Eldridge was a better wing shot than many of the hunters he ferried to sea duck gunning grounds. Knowing that the Gouldsboro guide doesn't joke about such matters, I watched Tyler shoot and, in a word, was impressed. More often than not, eiders tumbled when he touched off his 12-gauge Stoeger. Equally impressed was a hunter who Galen guided earlier: "You go ahead right and shoot, son," the magnanimous Sport said to Tyler, who had tagged along. "I'll back you up." According to Galen, the hunter soon realized he'd made a magnum mistake. Sounds like one of those "take a good look around, kid, 'cause you're not coming back" situations. Further to his hunting and shooting ability, Tyler has tagged deer, bear, bobcat, turkey, you name it. The only reason he hasn't tagged a moose is that he hasn't tracked down a permit.

Shortly after sunup, the yawning breeze was stifled by a gray blanket of overcast that smelled of snow. Three hours of tide spilled from the bay as we watched and waited and shot at singles, pairs, trios, and the odd small flock of five or so. Actually, I'd rather have it that way than be done shooting in short order. Like all hunting, there's more to sea ducking than shooting. Granted, drawing a bead on a swift-flying eider is challenging and exciting. But aside from dropping the duck — that is, if you keep your cheek on the stock and don't stop your swing — shooting can be anti-climactic.

For that reason much of my hunting time is spent looking and listening, observing and analyzing, and appreciating and wondering. So it was that I sat studying and absorbing the awe-inspiring beauty of the wintry seascape surrounding me: As the tide ebbed, shoals and ledges rose to the surface like mythical sea serpents ... Gulls swooped and skirled behind fishing boats towing long white wakes ... What appeared to be a coot swimming turned out to be a seal sculling ... Moss-bearded spruces sighed wearily at the stale gossip of the wind ... Old squaws chanted their ancient antiphons and I wondered if somewhere to seaward a bell buoy was tolling steadily to the rhythm of rolling swells. Of course, the Maine coast is magical in all four seasons, but I think it's the most mystical in winter.

Again, my reverie was pleasantly interrupted by warnings such as: "Watch it, single comin' straight at us." Or, "These three on the left look like they might do it." Followed seconds later by the reports of duck guns rolling across the bay and into the distant hills where the echoes living there shouted them back to us. The day was nearly 11 hours old when we allowed that, counting a few lost cripples, we'd shot our limit of 15 eiders. For the uninitiated, when a dropped eider dives at the instant it hits the water, then surfaces beyond shotgun range, to keep diving and swimming, the chances of retrieving it are slim. Especially if there's a chop or any amount of sea running. In "billing off," swimming with only its bill protruding from the water, the duck is impossible to see. Even on a calm sea, it leaves only a thread of wake. Believe me, Galen was more than diligent in trying to find the ducks that dove and swam off. In any event, cripples that escape should be counted against the daily limit.

Here I'll say it's a sin and a shame that many of the eiders shot on guided hunts are not taken

by the hunters who shot them. That leaves guides with the problem of disposing of the ducks properly. In other words, finding someone who will eat them. And that's not easy considering the old saw that says the only way to cook a sea duck is to place it on a brick in a hot oven and bake it for three hours — then throw the duck away and eat the brick. Don't believe a word of it.

In that regard I offer a recipe, called Sea Duck Jerome, that makes the thick breast meat of eiders taste like roast beef: After a couple of soakings in cold water, marinate the breast meat of two eiders in buttermilk for 48 hours. Then cut the meat into ¼-inch strips. Melt ¼-pound of butter in a large pan, add three tablespoons of red currant jelly, the juice of half a lemon, a teaspoon of dry mustard, and one cup of bourbon. Bring the mixture to a hard boil, add the meat, reduce the heat, and simmer for three or four minutes. Serve with wild rice and a robust red wine and I guarantee you'll never give away another eider duck.

The smell of snow was strong as we gathered our gear and left the island. Minutes later, with the boat in tow and all hands accounted for, we climbed into our trucks and set a course for Galen's log home, otherwise known as the Gouldsboro Point Good Times Rod and Gun Club. There we transferred slabs of cork from my truck to Galen's cellar. I intended to make a rig of black duck decoys from the buoyant material. But realizing I need another decoy like a porcupine needs another quill, and because Galen was looking for cork to make another rig of eider tollers, I contributed to the cause. With the cork stored, we settled into the kitchen and stretched our belts with bowls of steaming scallop chowder or beef stew thick with barley, take your pick.

Snow was falling so fine and fast it looked like fog when Al Mitchell and I eventually left Gouldsboro Point and turned "to the west'ard," as they say thereabouts. It didn't take long to realize that Route 1 was as slick as seaweed. Worse yet, Route 1A out of Ellsworth was even slipperier. So much so that between Ellsworth and Dedham, three vehicles skidded off the road, one of which nearly rear-ended us. Coasting along carefully and giving other vehicles a wide berth, I thought of the years-ago times when the late Owen Osborne and I drove — slipping, sliding, and fish-tailing — to and from coastal gunning grounds. White-knuckling the wheel, and without taking his eyes from the road, the former BDN sports editor and dyed-in-the-wool duck hunter would say, "You don't have to be crazy to do this, but it sure helps."

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