

## Sea world

By Dennis Anderson, Star Tribune

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WINTER HARBOR, MAINE - At daybreak here on Friday, the sky and the horizon were completely obscured in all directions.

A strong wind had pushed snow all night from the northeast, and now the lobster boats in the tiny anchorage not far from this village strained mightily at their buoy lines.

We were hunting sea ducks, six of us from the Twin Cities area. This was our second day, and down a steep, slippery ramp we backed two 18-foot Lunds that would take us to Bill Pidgeon's larger boat.

"She'll be rough out there this mornin'," said Pidgeon, a retired Maine state game warden turned lobsterman and outfitter.

The outboards were soon started and we angled the smaller boats through the slanting snow, white caps splashing over the gunwales in the semi-dark.

The bigger boat, the Sea Pidgeon, appeared in the near distance as if through gauze, half-concealed by the wintry blow.

"Climb aboard now, be careful, be careful," Pidgeon urged as he and fellow guide Keith Martin bumped the two smaller boats against the Sea Pidgeon.

Soon the lobster boat's big diesel was started and the two Lunds were tied behind. Whatever heading and speed we would steam was a matter left to Pidgeon. The rest of us could only brace ourselves behind the boat's small cabin and stay out of the wind and snow and sea spray as much as possible.

Gradually becoming ever whiter, yet still pale, the morning sky never could shake its cold gray patina. Finally we were enveloped by most of the light the day would muster, which wasn't much.

"There!" Doug Lassey said.

Lassey, of Hastings; Joel Bennett, of Sunfish Lake; and Brian Dobie, of St. Paul, along with his sons, Brian and Sean, also of St. Paul, were on the trip.

Lassey had seen a raft of common eiders take wing, startled by our approaching boat.

Drake, or male, eiders can weigh as much as 8 pounds, and their takeoffs don't suggest ease of flight so much as hope against seeming impossibility.

Running first on the water's surface, eiders appear initially to use their wings as paddles as much as aerial propellants.

Spectacularly plumed, the males are a contrast between the whitest whites and the blackest blacks, while hens, though drabber, are upon close inspection hued richly auburn through the neck, head and crown.

Also in these waters are other sea ducks, including longtails, or oldsquaws as they were formally known, and some species of scoters.

"But longtails are difficult to hunt because they stay out in the middle, away from shorelines," Pidgeon said. "When the weather is right, we use layout boats to get them."

To hunt eiders, we lie low and still on granite outcroppings, or tiny islands, hunkered against the cold and wet in camouflage parkas and waders.

The tide will rise throughout the morning and salt water will engulf more and more of the small islands.

Because eiders are big and have deep feathering, they are difficult to kill. We will load only heavy cartridges into our 12-gauges -- generally No. 1s and No. 2s -- to avoid crippling and losing birds.

Also, we will shoot only drakes, save for the odd hen taken for taxidermy purposes.

The rugged Maine coast, with its rocky peninsulas and maze of islands, offers these ducks relative shelter from the sea. And mussels, a primary food source for eiders, are abundant here.

"The common eider population is in good shape," Pidgeon said. "You'll find them down the coast to Massachusetts and also up the Canadian coastline. But many of the eiders we have in Maine nest and live here year-round."

When Pidgeon pulled back the throttle of his big boat, we settled immediately into the pitch and yaw of the stormy sea.

"Get those boats up here!" he barked over the wave-tossed din.

Hand over hand, Martin and fellow guide Galen Ruhlin passed up the lines that held the Lunds fast to the bigger boat.

Soon the smaller boats were alongside to starboard, bumping and clambering.

Four to a craft, three hunters and a guide, we were offloaded into the smaller boats and set out through the snow and salt and wind, seeking eiders.

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Now it is late morning, and the six of us are hunting together on one island.

Overlooking two sets of decoys -- a long string and a smaller bunch set to one side -- we wonder just what kind of duck would fly in this weather.

The wind has grown stronger and salt spray has joined the snow swirling atop the ocean surface.

In the far distance, cut amid trees growing from rock, stand stately island summer homes whose tenants, one surmises, never have been here on days like this.

A warm-weather haven for the fortunate and the wealthy, coastal Maine, with its many fine clapboard houses and long docks, seems rightly a place for summer gardens and long weekends, perhaps also afternoon weddings and receptions that welcome arrivals in boats that carry themselves gracefully through calm waters.

But on this day, those same houses are only ghostly reminders of a season not soon returning.

"This is a lot like some of the stormy days we had hunting bluebills up on Leech Lake," says the elder Dobie.

"But we were younger than and more foolish," Lassey says.

Atop the splash well of one of our boats eight eiders lay neatly.

But this has not been a particularly productive morning. On Thursday, we killed more birds, averaging about three apiece (the limit is five).

"This weather will only turn worse," says Pidgeon, appearing from the island's back side, where he and Martin and Ruhlin are preparing lunch.

"Plan on eating soon," he suggests. "We'll have to get back."

One by one our guns are cased, and we follow a trail leading to the island's other side.

The guides have started a campfire, and when we stand alongside it snow melts from our waders and jackets.

On the water's surface far removed from the island, longtails pitch and wheel in the gale. We see them but know they are safe from us today. Also whatever eiders there are, and wherever they are, they are safe because they have stopped flying.

We begin lunch with cold salmon and capers on crackers.

"Enjoy yourselves," Pidgeon says. "And warm up. In a few minutes we'll boil some mussels and lobsters."

Now well into his second career, Pidgeon nevertheless maintains the air of the college athlete he once was. He doesn't show easily the more than 20 years he spent as a warden, nor the many he has passed as an outfitter.

Also, in winter, he's head of security for the Boston Red Sox's spring training operation in Florida.

"I hung around the ballpark and one thing led to another," he says.

Though they have hunted ducks many years with their father, in places from North Dakota to Alaska, Sean and Brian Dobie never have shared huge pots of boiled mussels poured onto snow-covered rocks, the shells half-open for the picking, with their dad.

Nor, following that, a big pot of steamed lobsters similarly presented.

Says Bennett, "I want to come back next year." "Maybe we should come in November instead of December," Lasey says, suggesting the obvious.

Then, soon, we are back in the boats, the sea now rougher than ever.

Quickly we are wetter still.

When we arrive at the dock, no one is in sight.

Everyone, it seems, has left for the winter.

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