

FISHERMEN'S VOICE

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News & Comment for and by the Fishermen of Maine

FREE

Chasing Eiders

There's probably no other form of hunting, since I gave up keeping beagle dogs and running through the woods after rabbits, that I enjoy as much as chasing eider ducks. Beautiful birds. Males with that standout black and white plumage. Females with subtle browns edged in black. Rugged green-yellow beaks hooked on the tip for prying tenacious sea life off ocean bottoms. Wear a pelt of feathers that not only allows life as far north as Newfoundland in subzero temperatures but hard as bejezus to penetrate with much less than #2 shot.

I'd take a nickel now for ones we've knocked down only to awaken and dive. Chase with the boat would become a sideshow as bird would dive, we'd wait for it to surface. Might be well away. Head boat wide open in direction, fire off a shot, dives again. Wait what seems like minutes, do the drill again. Now more birds may be landing in the decoys. Sometimes three and four trys. Hate to leave wounded birds. Even then a 50/50 chance they'd go to the bottom hang on to a piece of seaweed to have a seal eat our dinner.

I've chased these high adrenaline sea ducks in early fall from first of October into but not often January. October shooting, especially if warm had lingered, could get off to a slow start. Gunning could often be put off cause "the whole season's still ahead". January was seldom an option with thermometer oftener than not running well below zero and safety level lost somewhere in the red zone. There were memorables on either end but majority were packed in sometimes two and three times a week from late October till Christmas. Weather would have a chance to nasty up, young birds would have added bulk and flocks would be moving inshore to feed.

Usual drill would be to check boat and gear the night before. Tank up with gas. Throw out the empty shell casings and donut wrappers. Park the rig just inside the boat shop door so everything would be warm and dry for early morning getaway. Outboard motor was happier to start with a warm nights sleep. Hour and half before daybreak sneak out of bed, boil the tea water, pack grub pail with donuts and sandwich. Pull on longs. Sometimes shirt and pants. Then insulated coveralls and green or camo foul weather suit. Hip rubber boots, warm cap and gloves (extras in the shell case) would complete the day's attire. With all this I'd often come home soaked and bone chilled. Still grinning.

With gun in cab I'd drive pickemup to the shop, hook up the trailer, slip down over Manset hill to the municipal dock, meet the hunting partner of the morning and carefully back down the ramp. Pull up the waders, edge into the ice water, think to myself each morning "I got to fix that left boot leak", push the boat off and guide her back to the ramp. Park the truck and trailer while partner finished stowing gear. Shuffle back, roll

gingerly over the side into the loaded 14' tri-keel fiberglass skiff, paddle out just far enough for the eighteen horse to clear. Warm her up just a bit. We'd clear the adjacent pier with it's streetlight beaming and head out into the dark.

Interestingly, even on the darkest mornings we could still barely make out mooring buoys, points of land and then the inevitable lobster buoys. We'd run out about half throttle, Guy in the bow watching, calling and waving as we'd head for one or another of several favorite spots. An early morning full moon would take the trip out from "anxious" to ease and splendor with moonlight breaking the shore and ledges background, rippling off the water. Course a full moon would mean high run tides and with that the faster current. Dead and wounded birds would float way much faster and there'd be more trips with the boat to retrieve.

Flynn's Ledge just off Seawall was always a hands-on favorite. Close. About a 15 minute run. Generally have a good half hour before light would scale up to set the decoys. Then spill tea into a cold mug and enjoy the first donut of the day before birds would be flying into the decoys and making us shoot.

How we'd actually set up would depend on a variety of circumstances. Tide, first off, had to be early morning low when birds come in to feed. An incoming tide if we shot off the ledges is a prerequisite. As tide flooded we'd keep pulling in lines of the decoys weighted by old cast iron window weights to not catch on rocks. Gunning from the skiff we'd try to pick a spot where the ledge would break up our silhouette yet let the decoys be seen. Skiff shooting or shore shooting often depended on how hard the wind was blowing, or whether we could ground the boat in a good lee. If the outer ledge was accessible, we'd have to contend with how long we'd have low water and how hard the tide was running. All this laced with the lazy factor and questioning "whatdoyouthinks", made for an interesting start.

Quite often we'd no more than get the decoys set, light not having cracked the darkness, when eiders and other breeds would begin dropping in. Illegal to fire before 1/2 hour before sunrise and we seldom did. More fun to see a bird or two trying to buddy up with the mute decoys as light finally came on.

Over the years I've come to appreciate that hunting and fishing is nothing short of a gamble. Throw the dice and see how they roll. Synopsis of life in general. I've come to enjoy the moment as much as the kill. Opening moments were often the memorables with first sunlight breaking over the eastern islands, the big flocks just black spots beginning to work their way in. The mingle of late darks, early blue, yellows and orange created scenes no artist could ever quite capture in its intensity. Course there were also the offsets when snow or rain would be making up and we'd be hunkered below the gunnels or behind rocks wondering if this was really such a good idea.

For many years I gunned both sea duck and geese with an old Montgomery Ward double barreled 12 gauge. A field model with long barrels, which was deadly especially on long shots. Can still remember the cost. \$75. Young, just bringing up a young family. My buddy Den fired a semi-automatic but I found these around saltwater to be too complicated for me and too often prone to malfunction. For a quick reload the double was far and away the easier. I still have it.

Best gunning unless it was snowing or raining would generally last about two hours. At odd times we'd have our limit of seven each in less than half an hour. Nasty weather would throw the birds "wary" instincts off. Be looking for a safe place to light. Big spread of decoys would look like the place. They'd come out of a squall hell-bent for election, spot the decoys and drop in with no questions asked. Trick is to get a gun up fast, pick out the bird, figure to lead it or not, and fire before it landed. Shooting a bird in the water was only for those mornings when nothing was flying or towling and somehow the trip had to be justified.

By nine AM I'd be back at my desk at the boatyard, phone ringing, decisions to be made with life clicking in Maine the way it should be.

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Sea ducks with fixings: We always ate our game or gave it away to those who appreciated it. Anyone who ever told me they wouldn't eat eider, or coot for that matter, never tried one of my Mother's coot stews or my own sautéed duck breast cutlets.

First order of battle is let the birds hang by the feet for at least three to six days in a cool place. Then breast them out (there's very little meat on the legs). Place the meat in a bowl and cover with milk, turning occasionally. Let soak at least twelve hours, then rinse in cold water. From this point on varieties of cooking are endless. Crozier Fox of Abel Marine used to skip the hanging and soaking and cut them up the first day. Marinate in Zesty Italian Dressing and cook in a cast iron fry pan.

My favorite. Eider cutlets. Cut the breasts in shy 1/2" strips. Pat dry then dredge in flour with salt and pepper to taste (I like to put the flour in paper bag and gently shake the cutlets which allow for a more uniform covering). Set aside.

Heat a heavy skillet to medium; add a liberal daub of butter and cooking oil. Sauté the cutlets, remove, and set in a warm oven. Pour a half cup of good red wine in the skillet. Try this down by 1/2, stirring well with a whisk. Whisk in two to three (depending on amount of cutlets) heaping tablespoons of cranberry sauce (maple cranberry sauce is excellent). Return the cutlets and coat well. Let set for a few minutes and serve with rice and a good vegetable such as celery simmered in chicken broth or oven roasted asparagus.

Fair winds and good roads.

Lee S. Wilbur