

Maine offers so much for outdoorsmen that there is truly something for everyone; from bear hunting in the deep woods to woodcock shooting in breaks, yet, it was the duck hunting that drew me to Searsport, Maine, a picturesque town located along the mid-coast of that state.

The temperature in Maine in October is still mild enough for just about everyone, including this southerner, to venture into the marshes for mallards or onto the open bays for sea ducks. All around you are forests of spruce and pine that grow right to the water's edge, forming a coastline that is eye appealing, right down to the rocky harbors where you find lobster boats at their moorings, piled full of lobster pots and colorfully painted buoys. Everywhere you turn from the coast to the hillsides, your eyes are treated to beautiful vistas, but it is the wildlife that turns your head. You see deer in meadows and ducks on the coastal ponds that dot the landscape. If you go out onto the bay, you see rafts of eider, scoter, and longtail ducks in numbers that will amaze you and you never know what else will show up. Whales, puffins, and seals all live in these waters.

Todd Jackson, owner of PenobscotBay Outfitters picked me up at the Bangor Airport, greeting me with his Maine accent and a smile. "Glad to finally get you up for a little hunting," he said as we carried my bags to the truck. As we drove to the lodge 30 minutes away, we talked about hunting in the area. Todd stated that the eider had been everywhere for the last few days and that, with any luck, we should be able to get some great pictures in the process.

Pulling into the lodge, his two Labs, Mallard and Ivan, ran out to greet us, barking and wagging their tails all the way. About this time the other hunters started arriving, including Chuck Petrie of Ducks Unlimited, Steve Panaroni of Cattails and Cornfield Productions, Steve Hoover, owner of Duck Wrangler Boats, and his friend Ken Brantley. After getting settled into the lodge, we rigged a long line with the Quack Eider decoys that we were going to use.

The alarm went off in the early hours the next morning, and we scrambled to put on our clothes and grab a cup of coffee before heading out to hunt. When we reached the bay, we launched both the 21- and 17-foot boats that guide, Sam Cassida, had brought along. Todd fired the 115-horse-motor as we loaded our gear and soon we were off, passing lobster

Gunning eiders while anchored in the middle of a decoy line...



Eider Maine



Setting strings of Quack eider dekes off the Maine coast.

boats in the dark. We made our way out of the harbor as the sun was just breaking over the eastern shoreline, illuminating everything with a reddish glow.

Running out of the protected harbor, we turned into the teeth of a 20-mile an hour wind and headed to our hunting spot. Todd brought the Duck Wrangler up on plane and we skimmed along in the rough seas. As we would learn later in the day, this is not a place for small boats because the bay can be quite rough. Soon we rounded a point where Todd pointed to a small out cropping in the bay and said, "Yesterday there were about 1,000 eiders feeding all around it."

Todd pulled the throttle back and we began placing the anchor and setting the long line full of Eider decoys both in front and behind the boat where another anchor was placed. We motored into the middle of the line and tied off using a special breakaway bridle that Todd has used for years, making it easy to chase down cripples.

The trick to eider hunting is to be in a place where they are feeding, not just in a general area. Doing this requires daily scouting. Sea ducks are hardy, but they feed each day on blue mussels that are found on the rocky outcroppings and ledges that dot the coastline. Todd told

me that eiders are without question one of the toughest ducks around because they endure harsh conditions like no other waterfowl. They will tolerate ice, snow, high winds and rough seas—as long as they can find food.

It didn't take long for the eiders to find us. With a single bird coming hard off the bow, Chuck Petrie broke the ice. Firing one blast of No. 2 shot, he plucked the drake from the cold windy sky. The drake's momentum sent him bouncing across the surface of the bay, right in front of the boat, as I snapped photos of the action. Mallard, Todd's big male Lab, hit the icy water and returned with Chuck's first eider of the day. Soon eiders were everywhere, flying into the decoys as we picked our shots and took only drakes.

Flights of eiders passed overhead all morning long, allowing us to shoot and fill seven limits. We never had to move until it was time to head in for the day, unless we were chasing down a cripple. Even when we were leaving for the day, long lines of eiders and scoters were still in the air, coming and going all around the bay. As we started back the wind was

Getting There

Maine guide Todd Jackson told us that he recommends that his clients use 12-gauge three-inch or better guns and No. 2 shot. He prefers the new three-inch Bismuth because it seems to hit harder and reduce the number of cripples. It is also important to mention here that all the guides that Todd has working for Pencobscot Bay Outfitters are Maine guides and all are U.S. Coast Guard Charter Captains that have grown up in these waters and know them like the back of their hand.

Todd and I talked about the dangers of these waters and the importance of having a solid boat that was built to handle the heavy seas. Todd told us that more hunters get in trouble because they are underpowered and don't wear the proper cloths for the conditions. The dangers here are tide, weather, and the rocks that in some places lay only inches under the surface. "Remember that once you are in trouble out here, you may not have anybody to call. That's why we prepare for all types of emergencies before we go out with our clients," Todd told us.

"I send all of my clients a list of equipment that they should bring when they come up for a hunt, but some just don't listen. They're the ones that get cold and wet and, as soon as we get back in, are off to the store buying new clothes and other equipment that they left at home." It is important to listen to your guide, as he is there to make your trip safe and enjoyable. For more information contact: Penobscot Bay Outfitters, Dept. WF, 118 Nickerson Rd. Searsport, MA 04974-3932; (888) Sea-Duck; www.seaduck.net



Big, sturdy birds, eiders require heavy medicine, like the No. 2 Bismuth used on this shoot.

howling, providing a true test of the gear. The seas kicked-up and became foamy white as we turned into the teeth of the wind heading to the ramp.

DAY TWO

The next morning we set up in the lee of Butter Island in the same fashion as we had the previous day with the decoys in a line and the boat set right in the middle. Our first flight that morning came in low and then turned to the decoys, sailing down the line right in front of us. The scene was as picture-perfect as you will ever see. Todd called the shot and a wall of pellets was sent

forth. Eiders dropped from the sky some 20 yards in front of us like sacks of potatoes. Seven drakes in full plumage lay in the icy water of the Penobscot. We did not even have a chance to pick them up before another group of eiders turned the corner of the island and came sailing-in on us allowing us to add four more to our total. Ivan, Todd Jackson's other Lab, retrieved most of them while Sam picked up those that had drifted off in the swift current.

Scoters were the next to race by and allowed us some more shooting. Time after time, big white wing scoters and surf scoters would wing their way by, close enough to allow us clean kills. We shot close-in eiders and scoters that raised into the decoys, picking our shots until we reached our limits, thus reducing the number of cripples that we had to chase down. Eiders are tough as nails and you have to use the right setup to get them close and the right loads to bring them down.

As our time in Maine came to an end I set the route to the harbor into my GPS unit and pointed the bow of the 21-footer into the rough seas. Sea duck hunting in Maine is worth all the effort, especially if you want to hunt waterfowl in one of the most beautiful places on earth. I guarantee the experience will be remembered long after the memory of other hunting trips have faded away.