

Arctic Survival—

Taking Ducks, Geese Ingrained in the Native Way of Life

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By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

The Eskimo man crouched behind a block of ice near the top of a pressure ridge next to the beach. A moment before he had seen a huge flock of ducks winging their way directly toward him. They were flying low. That was good! Just the way he wanted them — flying low.

He quickly examined his qilamitaaq to see if the strings were not twisted or tangled. The ducks were now almost directly over him. He stood up suddenly, swung his qilamitaaq once or twice and heaved it skyward. The ancient weapon soared into the air and tangled its string on the wings and necks of one of the flying ducks. The duck, unable to use its wings effectively any longer, fell to the snowy ice below.

This was one of the ways ancient duck hunters brought down his quarry for food — the eider duck. Qilamitaaq, his weapon, was made with five oval shaped ivory or bone weights, each one strung with braided sinew and fastened to a duck wing feather grip.

When thrown, the qilamitaaq flared out like the claw of a hawk. When it connected with a flying eider duck it entangled its wings rendering them quite useless. Thus, eider ducks in the Arctic were hunted in the manner described for thousands of years past.

WAY OF LIFE

Spring is now coming on in the Arctic regions of Alaska and Canada. With it will come great flocks of eider ducks on their annual migration to the north. The Eskimos are anticipating the appearance of the eiders and are craving them for food.

After a diet of other meats for a whole year, the coming of the eider will be a significant and satisfying change. Whether the eider duck provides needed vitamins is not known to this writer, but he does know there is strong craving for it.

Whether it is an acquired taste or whether it is needed in the system of the Eskimo makes no difference. The eider duck is an urgently needed food in the Arctic. It is a way of life molded through use down

through the ages.

As any animal, its appearance in the succession of animals in the Arctic, the eider duck triggers a mood peculiar to itself in the life of the Eskimo. It has definite meaning — it enhances his well-being. It is an unmistakable part of the scheme of things, a definite facet in his mode of livelihood — an indisputable part of his way of life.

GREAT MIGRATION

In this month of May, the first of the great flocks of eider ducks will make its appearance over the horizon from the southerly direction following the coast and on up north toward Barrow, finally winding up in the Canadian Arctic.

Migration starts rather casually. It then intensifies toward the end of May as the days grow warmer. Then, great flocks in frequent succession begin to wing their way north. They fly in varying altitudes, undulating slowly now and again, flying invariably in V-formations, their cries mingling — showing darkly against overcast or sunny skies.

They wing north, tens of thousands of them, in seemingly endless numbers through sunlit nights and days. Occasionally, they glide down toward open leads to light, to rest and swim around and to dive for morsels in the sea.

KING EIDER

Two species of eiders are predominantly seen in Arctic Alaska, the King Eider and the Pacific Eider. Drakes of both species are beautifully marked and colored, especially around the head.

The head of the Drake King Eider is the most spectacularly marked of the two. One distinguishing mark of this sea bird is its nose, or knob, that rises almost vertically from the bill just above the nostrils. The color of this knob is bright yellow, bordered by fine black feathers at its base. The ridge of the nose has a stripe tapering to the bill of the same fine black feathers.

There is a rough triangle formed by the eye base of the bill, and the base of the skull. The color of this triangle is light green. From the chin to the base of the skull is a stripe, again of fine black feathers. The

eye is black with a border of fine black feathers on the bottom lid and a stripe of white on the upper lid.

The crown of the head from the base of the skull to the top of the nose is a solid lightish pastel blue. The bill at the base is bright red, blending into grayish white at the tip. To complete the coloring of the head of the King Eider is a white stripe around the neck.

The majestic King Eider and its mate, brown speckled female, travel in the same formation with the Pacific Eider. There seems to be a close kinship between the two species. They intermix in flight and on water.

GREAT CONTROVERSY

The extent of the importance of the eider duck to the Eskimos cannot be denied. This was dramatically illustrated in May, 1961 at Barrow, Alaska when the Eskimo eider duck hunters of that town rose up in force to protest the application of a duck season law. Two hunters had been arrested by Fish and Wildlife agents for shooting ducks out of season.

ASK MASS ARREST

On a Sunday around the last of May, the Eskimos of Barrow held a general meeting and decided a course of action — to go enmasse to a local hotel to be arrested by the two wildlife agents who were staying there.

On the following Monday, 138 men, each carrying a duck, descended upon the hotel.

Such was the story of a people who rose up in defense of a way of life they have enjoyed for thousands of years. The attempt to extinguish that right was too drastic — a way of life that had been a definite factor in their survival down through the ages.

Eider ducks — the unique sea birds that migrate along the far-flung beaches of Alaska and Canada, have a meaning that is more than the nourishment they provide the Eskimos. Their appearance each spring is a harbinger of a better life — a tonic for their well-being.

The swarming multitudes of them, their cries in the Arctic air, the whistling swish of their flights — these things that are uniquely Arctic, have a precious niche in completing the cycle of the Northern World. Something

or someone, has placed them to round out the scheme of things in the Arctic country. In doing so, they have become an integral part of a way of life — an integral facet that has aided the existence of man in Alaska and Northern Canada.

ONE-SHOT CHANCE

The shadow of enforcement by wildlife agents still hangs over Eskimos who hunt eider ducks for food each spring. In many areas natives get only a one-shot chance at eider ducks. To illustrate this point; at Point Hope the eiders migrate right over or along the nearby beach near the village.

In the latter part of May, the sun melts the snow on the gravel beaches. The ducks seem to follow them as they wing north. At that time the anchored shore ice still clings to shore.

The eiders on their return migration to the south fly low over the sea, occasionally rising only to skim low over the water. They are usually about a quarter of a mile out and more. They are rarely hunted, if ever, on their southerly migration. At that time, the natives are busy fishing with nets on north and south beaches while others move to their summer camps.

PRESSURE STILL ON

The drama of an age-old custom that refuses to be extinguished and a duck season law enacted for temperate zones still goes on and is putting its unrealistic pressure on the natives who hunt ducks for food.

Although the Interior Department in Washington quietly gave sanction to Eskimos to take ducks for food and advised them that they should not give wildlife agents cause to arrest them, it has not given a directive or order, to the agents to relax their enforcement of the law made originally for the lower states and not for Alaska, where conditions are altogether different, seasonally speaking.

APPREHENSION

As a result, the Eskimos are apprehensive under these conditions. They are afraid that more arrests will be made. They say, "When we take game for food, we should not be forced to feel guilty because of game laws." They think that game laws are not applicable to them. "These laws are not fit for us," said James Hawley, of Kivalina.

In the meantime, apprehension and the feeling that they should comply with the law has hurt them, economically. The main feeling remains that they do not want to be denied of a source of food they have had for centuries.

RAY OF HOPE

There is a ray of hope in the disturbing horizon of the duck controversy. The tide that has gone against the natives, on what they think is their inherent right to hunt ducks for food each spring, received a shot in the arm in their favor, not in Alaska or Washington, but in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada. A legal precedent has been made there.

Michael Sikyea, a treaty Indian near Yellowknife, had shot a mallard duck on May 7, 1962. He was arrested and jailed for shooting a duck out of season. Canada, being co-signer of the Migratory Birds Convention of 1916, along with the United States and Mexico, tried Sikyea and found him guilty of shooting a duck out of season. He appealed and was found innocent.

"NOT APPLICABLE"

Justice J. H. Sissons, of the Territorial Court of the Northwest Territories, before whom

Sikyea's appeal was heard, made his judgement on the ground that the Migratory Birds Convention Act did not apply to Indians who hunt for food and did not curtail their hunting rights.

Contained in the decision was the following:

"From time immemorial, the Indians and the Eskimos of the north and their wives and children have in the spring taken migratory birds for food and will continue to do so and this has been and is necessary for their survival and well-being. The effect on the bird population is negligible . . . but it would not matter if it were otherwise."

WILL BE WATCHED

The Crown has appealed Mr. Justice Sisson's decision. The date was not set but it is believed the case will be forthcoming in the near future.

The forthcoming case has aroused unusually strong interest in the Interior Department, and Justice Department at Washington, D. C. and among the branches of the Interior Department, U. S. Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Indian Affairs and other departments. National and international organizations will watch.

The Alaska State Government and its branch offices will be vitally interested. And, of course, the Dominion of Canada and its central government will be watching.

EXPECTATIONS

Among this great array of national and international groups, with no less, if not with greater interest, will be the Eskimos and Indians of Alaska and Canada. These peoples have a great stake at hand that will be weighed in the court of law.

They will watch with intense interest the outcome of this trial. They know that the outcome will have a great bearing on future decisions at Washington, D. C. and the State of Alaska, concerning their status on this question of aboriginal rights — the right to take ducks and geese for food when these birds are available in the Arctic.

BOUNTY OF GOD

Yes, the taking of ducks in the Arctic Alaska and Canadian Arctic is of vital interest to the natives. Its extinction would greatly affect their economy.

At the height of the duck controversy at Barrow, one of the leaders of that big village said of the necessity of taking ducks for survival:

"When God created this world, he made sure that everyone in different parts of the world can survive one way or another. When he placed the white people, the Indians, and the colored or other people in parts of the world where it's warm, he made sure that they could survive from the land by growing crops for food.

"When he placed us in the far north he made sure we could survive from the land by hunting birds for food. It's as simple as that."

EDITOR IS AUTHOR OF COLD BOOKLET



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