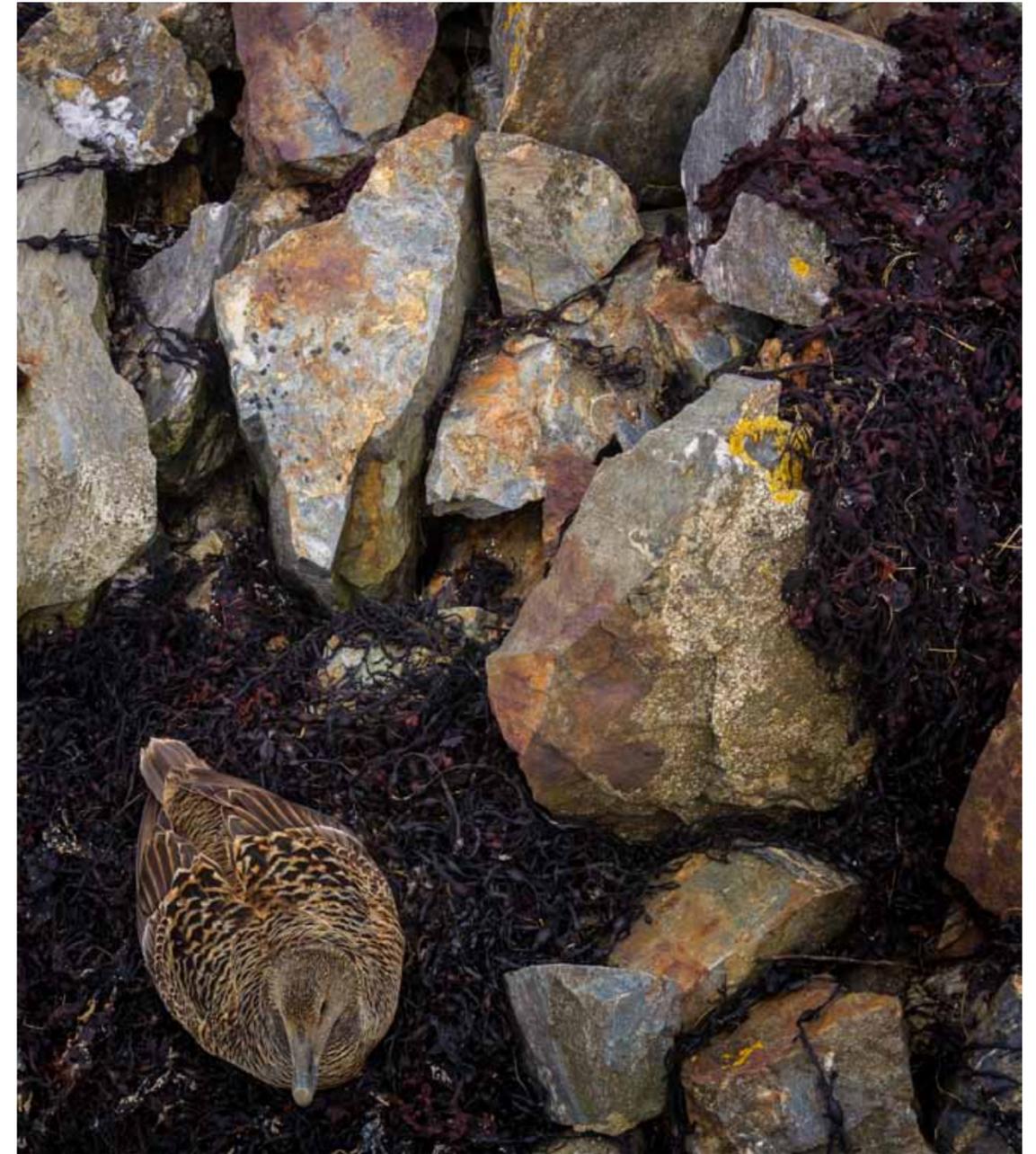


A VISIT TO THE LAND OF THE EIDER DUCKS

# GUARDIANS OF THE BIRDS



Close to the Arctic Circle in Norway lies the UNESCO-protected archipelago of Vega, consisting of more than 6000 small islands. On one of these, the isolated Lånan, the eider ducks and their guardians reign; five women who spend every summer from May to August protecting the birds from nature's predators. In turn, the guardians get to collect the precious down from their nests. It is a collaboration between (wo)man and duck unlike anything else.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY LISE ULRICH

I hope you have your sea legs on today!" shouts Erik Nordum over the roar of the small boat's engine and the waves against the bow.

We have just left a tiny harbour on the main island of the Vega archipelago and set course for the island of Lånan, some 1.5 hours out in the Norwegian Sea – the largest down station in the municipality. The winds are vicious today, and though the sky is still showing plenty of blue, the clouds are racing inland towards the mountain ranges with almost dizzying speed.

Erik, who each year spends the summer months with his wife Hildegunn out on *Lånan*, is clearly used to seeing his foreign passengers turn greenish on the sea on days such as this, but I refuse to buckle. Until – smack! The boat, which seemed airborne a second ago, crashes down onto the surface of the water after tackling a particularly tall wave. I keep my eyes glued to the dancing horizon, begging that my stomach will return to its original physiological location.

The rollercoaster-like sailing trip to *Lånan* is scenic. We pass numerous tiny islands on our way, and the impressive mountain range of Norway's Helgeland coast looks nothing short of majestic viewed

of traditional dry flatbread to go with it, Margit places the food in front of me, then frowns as she looks to the floor and back up.

"Do you have cold feet?" she asks, eyeing me sternly with a look not unlike that of my late grandmother when I was visiting her and my grandfather's farm as a child.

I reply that I am not cold, thank you, and attempt to get started with my questions. Before I have finished my first sentence, though, Margit gets up and disappears into another room. Seconds later she is back with a pair of woollen slippers that she sets down purposely next to my feet. I dutifully put them on. When on *Lånan* ...

The eider duck is a large sea-duck common on the coasts of northern Europe in summertime, while in winter the birds flock at sea in more temperate waters. The male duck is white and black, while the female is brown. The birds can live to be quite old, Hildegunn tells me, some even reaching 35 years of age. For centuries they have been treasured by humans for their super soft down. When nesting the female duck will pull down from her breast to insulate her eggs, and it is this down the women of Lånan collect by hand once the ducklings have left the

---

"We can thank our mothers for keeping this tradition alive. If they had not made it a ritual to return every summer back in the 70s, the eider ducks would eventually have found new nesting grounds."

---

from out here. Finally, *Lånan* becomes visible in the distance, a small, flat strip of an island dotted with seven colourful houses, some made from Siberian driftwood and planks from wrecked ships. If those walls could talk, indeed.

Feet firmly on land, I meet with Hildegunn Nordum, an ice-blond woman with ever-smiling eyes. She is the daily leader of the local company *Utværet Lånan*, which produces and sells eiderdown products. Hildegunn has kindly agreed to show me around the island and give me an introduction to the century-long relationship between woman and eider duck that has made tiny Lånan world famous and earned it a well-deserved spot on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2004.

We start off with a cup of black coffee at Margit's cosy wooden house, where we are soon joined by her fellow bird guardians, Evelyn and Erna. In total there are five women (usually with their husbands in tow) living on the island from May to August, sometimes visited by their kids, grandkids, and the occasional boat of tourists or local school children.

"Do you want to taste an eider duck egg?" asks Margit.

"Why, yes ..." I reply, before considering how eider duck egg and strong coffee might go together.

Back with a spotted greenish egg larger than a chicken's and a slice

of traditional dry flatbread to go with it, Margit places the food in front of me, then frowns as she looks to the floor and back up.

nests. Eiderdown harvesting is therefore 100 % sustainable and does no harm to the birds. The oldest documented record of eiderdown duvets dates all the way back to the 14th century in a poem of the Norwegian *Sæmundar-Edda* saga. This poem describes a "compassionate king that slept on eiderdown". And it is true that no other duvet filling is so light and gives off so much warmth as eiderdown. The fluff from the eider duck's breast has a special quality: in contrast to down from ducks and geese, eiderdown has small barbs which keep it together, thereby providing eiderdown duvets with a unique capacity to insulate and emit heat. And of course the high value of the downs means the difference between life or death for the birds and their ducklings.

Taking into consideration the slow and meticulous process of gathering and cleaning the down, it is no surprise that eiderdown products come with steep price tags. A duvet, which contains between a half and a whole kilogram of down from up to 70 nests, retails from around 1100 Euros and up to 6200 Euros, and only about 5000 are made worldwide each year. The down comes from Iceland (75%), Norway, Canada, Greenland, and Russia, but the Vega archipelago remains the only place where it is still hand-cleaned.

In recent years eiderdown has been largely replaced by down from





domestic farm-geese and synthetic alternatives. However, none of these beat the durability of eiderdown: eiderdown duvets can be passed down through generations for up to 100 years (or the original down filling sewn into new duvets, if desired).

“An eiderdown duvet is expensive, yes, but it’s also an investment for life,” as Hildegunn puts it.

Furthermore, eiderdown is allergy friendly and the Lånan-produced duvets are made from tightly woven cotton that will not allow dust mites to take residence.

After finishing our coffee Hildegunn and Evelyn take me on a walk around the nesting grounds and show me the island’s eider duck museum (the world’s one and only), all the while taking great care to keep to the paths so as not to disturb other nesting birds who live here. The women’s families have called Lånan home since the middle of the 1800s, back when people rented their houses from the local lords on the mainland in exchange for eiderdown and eggs.

The history of Lånan dates back a lot further, though, and records from 1723 show that in those days the island was supposed to produce 12 kilograms of down each autumn. The fact is that it has always been the women who took care of the eider ducks, while their husbands were out fishing at sea. Thus in the old days, the women on Lånan were in charge of not only administering the household, bringing up the children (of which there were usually quite a lot per family), tending to the elders, and keeping animals like cows and pigs, but also taking good care of the eider ducks in the summer months, protecting their nests from eagles, otters, and minks. It was a challenging, but also a proud task. They were career women in their own right, and their work was vital for the survival of the tiny Lånan community. After all, it was the produce of their ducks that paid the majority of the rent, and their daughters who would inherit the guardian title.

Up until the 1970s people lived on Lånan all year round and there was even a school here once, but eventually the harsh winters on the island became too much, as the lure of the mod-cons of the main

younger ones get second choice. Some lay their eggs just next to the small houses, preferring an outdoor nesting experience to the comfort of four walls. These ducks’ eggs and ducklings are especially at risk of falling victims to predators, and the guardians have to keep a sharp eye out to make sure the mother duck is not robbed of her young.

An eider duck lays a minimum of three eggs – any less and she will not bother to stay on the nest, being the strong-willed and perfectionist female she is. Cleverly, the guardians therefore have wooden eggs at the ready to slip into the nests, thereby satisfying the eider ducks’ vanity by numbers. It’s essential that the duck stays on her nest – no nesting, no downs.

In June, the first ducklings stumble into the sea, and the gathering and cleaning of down begins. In order to sort feathers and seaweed from the down everything is filtered through a *harpe*, a square frame with strings that two women operate from each side, strumming the strings with wooden tools (*the harpstikke*) to make the vibrations sort out the down. It takes a couple of weeks to clean just one kilogram of down this way. Meanwhile, the mother duck and her young ones are busy feeding in the sea around Lånan – the mother having lost 40 % of her body weight while nesting for 28 days.

In August the last birds have left the island and returned to the open sea, once again living as wild animals far from human interference. The women shut down their houses and get ready to go home. They too are returning to a different world.

“Sometimes I think of how much easier it would be to spend the summer on the mainland where it’s nice and warm. But then I always come out here anyway. It’s unique, this place, and we ladies have a job to do,” Erna explains.

I am wondering who will take their place when the time comes to hand down the keys to eider duck kingdom.

“We hope someone from the younger generation will take over. Of course we do. Maybe our own children will, or even some of the

---

## These ducks' eggs and ducklings are especially at risk of falling victims to predators, and the guardians have to keep a sharp eye out to make sure the mother duck is not robbed of her young.

---

island beckoned with promises of an easier everyday life (today, Lånan still does not have proper electricity or water installed). The women who had grown up on Lånan, Hildegunn’s, Margit’s, and Erna’s mothers among them, kept returning each spring. The ducks did not forget about their human guardians and, displaying the eider duck’s typical high degree of natal philopatry, duly appeared each May to nest in the safe haven of generations of ducks before them.

“We can thank our mothers for keeping this tradition alive. If they had not made it a ritual to return every summer back in the 70s, the eider ducks would eventually have found new nesting grounds,” Hildegunn says, and the other women nod in agreement.

Today the number of eider ducks on Lånan is astonishingly high – almost 800 nest on the island, giving each of the few women a lot of work to do.

To make it especially appealing for the eider ducks to nest at Lånan, the guardians have always taken pride in building small shelters and houses for the animals, each fitted with a soft bed of dried and crushed seaweed for increased hatching comfort. Some ducks prefer to nest alone in single homes named a *Steinbus*. Others like to keep each other company in larger shelters – the so called *E-bane*. The older eider ducks return to their favourite nesting places, while the

grandchildren, who always have a great time when they come out here. Thankfully, Lånan-women live long lives thanks to all the fresh air, so we don’t have to worry just yet,” laughs Margit.

A hearty dose of bulletproof optimism is essential to living on this tiny rocky island in the sea.

As Hildegunn and Evelyn walk me back to the boat later that afternoon, Hildegunn tells me that she and her husband are building a new, more modern house on the island. It is meant both for themselves and for the future generations of bird guardians, as a way to make life out here more appealing.

“Making it onto the World Heritage List was a life saver for us, and today I’m very confident in the future of Lånan and the eider ducks,” she says, as I board the boat, readying myself for yet a bumpy ride back to Vega.

Pushing off from the small pier, Erik alerts me to an eider duck swimming by with her newly hatched ducklings. They look like thoroughly happy customers and I cannot blame them. They have been born into an exceptional little sanctuary: the land of the Lånan-women.

Oh, and by the way, the eider duck egg tasted pretty great. Just like a chicken’s egg.

