



# THE ROCK'S solid people

By Rob Antle

**I**N THE TINY TOWN OF MAIN BROOK, NEAR THE TIP OF NEWFOUNDLAND'S GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA, LIVES A WOMAN THE LOCALS CALL "THE EIDER LADY."

And the term hasn't always been used as a compliment, Barb Genge says. When she first got involved with projects aimed at conserving the area's dwindling common eider duck population, there was no great love for her work in the community.

It was the late 1980s, a difficult time for environmental causes in Newfoundland and Labrador, no matter how well-intentioned.

Residents of the province were still burning from the glare of the international spotlight turned on them in the 1970s and 1980s. A star-driven international lobbying campaign led to the collapse of the commercial sealing industry.

That left many in the province with bitter feelings.

"It was a pretty hair-raising experience, because a few years before that, they stopped the seal hunt," Genge recalls. "I took a really hard ride from it, because (it's difficult) when you do stuff before it's acceptable."

In fact, in 1989, when Genge began getting involved with conservation work, the term "environmentalist" was still a dirty word in Newfoundland.

"So I got labelled, because I was working to bring back a resource that got depleted. People looked at me as a big conservationist, and figured I wanted to stop hunting."

But that wasn't true. The plunging common eider duck population levels meant there were actually very few birds to hunt. She didn't want hunting to stop; she wanted the season changed to allow the numbers to rebuild.

"I'm not against hunting. I'm just against depleting a resource," Genge notes. If the resource disappears, "everybody loses."

Only after the pages of the calendar flipped from the late '80s to the 1990s—and one resource disaster followed another—did attitudes change.

First, the salmon fishery collapsed. That was followed in 1992 by the most crushing calamity of them all—the moratorium on once-plentiful northern cod, the province's lifeblood for centuries. After these twin tragedies, people began to see what would happen to resources that weren't properly maintained, Genge says. "Some of those people that were hateful to me realized that there was pro-



Left: A solitary common eider drake stands atop a wave-polished rock. Above: Through tireless volunteer efforts, there are currently over 6,000 nest shelters across Newfoundland and Labrador. The residents' local knowledge helps DUC researchers find answers to questions about the species' population decline.

bably something to what we were trying to do there. But if you do stuff before it's cool—we cleaned up the rivers before it was cool—you become a target for all the abuse people want to put on you."

That abuse is now a thing of the past. Since beginning her involvement with Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) in 1989, Genge has worked on a number of projects. She has seen a sea change in how the work is perceived.

"If we don't change here in Newfoundland, we're all dead," she says. "We live on an island, and we depend on everything that either lands on the water, lives in the water, or lives on the land. And if we go around and deplete everything, there's no reason to stay here. Because when there's no wildlife on the land, or no wildlife in the sea, it's a dead place, and who in the hell wants to live in that?"

For many years, she worked on eider enhancement and release projects in the area. Volunteers incubated hundreds of common eider eggs, cared for the birds when they hatched, then released them to the wild. Another project with ongoing DUC support provides shelters built for the incubating eiders to protect their nests from predatory birds, such as the ever-present gulls.

The dedication of Genge and like-minded people made it easier for others to get involved. And today it is obvious that residents of the area have embraced the conservation message.

Last year, local volunteers raised \$15,000 at a Ducks Unlimited Canada dinner in Main Brook, a town of just 300 people. “That means that other people must have bought into the cause, because if they didn’t, no one would have shown up,” Genge notes.

Conservation work is both a personal and professional mission for Genge. She is owner-operator of Tuckamore Wilderness Lodge, which employs up to 19 people in high season.

“If I don’t have a resource—whether it’s a hiking trail, whether it’s birds, moose, caribou, seals, whales, no matter what it is—if we don’t have it, there’s less reason for people to come here,” she says.

Projects such as DUC’s eider initiative make Genge happy she began volunteering for the conservation cause 15 years ago. She vows to continue her work in the future.

“I just thought that this species is worth something. A bird on the table is one meal; a bird in the wild is many meals.”

“THE SINCERITY OF THE PEOPLE HAS BEEN GREAT, AND THEIR HELP. THEY’RE VERY FAMILIAR WITH THE AREA THE BIRDS ARE USING, HOW THEY’RE DOING. PEOPLE ARE EXTREMELY HELPFUL AND FRIENDLY.”

Katherine Mehl – biologist, Ducks Unlimited Canada



FOR MANY YEARS WITH THE HELP OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS, THE focus for Ducks Unlimited Canada in Newfoundland and Labrador has been on building and placing nest shelters in areas frequented by eiders. This want-to-help mindset has since evolved into DUC’s eider initiative, an ambitious research project aimed at determining why the eider numbers are limited in Newfoundland and Labrador.

“The focus for us in Newfoundland and Labrador is the eider initiative...that’s taking all of our energies right now,” says Mark Gloutney, manager of Atlantic operations for Ducks Unlimited Canada.

Gloutney says he is heartened by the “team of high-quality individuals that we’re associated with” in the province.

Because of their work, there are currently over 6,000 nest shelters out across Newfoundland and the coast of Labrador and the residents’ local knowledge also helps researchers probe for answers to troubling questions about the species’ decline.

Historically, more than 150,000 pairs of breeding common eider ducks flourished along the rocky crags and islands that dot the province’s coastline. That number has plunged to roughly 12,000

breeding pairs—4,000 of them on the island, the other 8,000 in Labrador. The decline has mystified experts for years.

“There are grave concerns about population levels of eiders and especially common eiders on the north shore of Québec and in Newfoundland and Labrador,” Gloutney says. “We don’t really understand why the numbers are where they are.”

Unlike some of the challenges facing other North American waterfowl, the problem with eiders doesn’t appear to be habitat-based. According to Gloutney, there seems to be plenty of good habitat out there.

“So the intent of the eider research is to collect information, and combine that with information from other researchers to develop an overall model of population ecology, to better understand the factors that limit eiders across their range,” Gloutney says.

“So the impact of this study has a bearing across the eastern part of North America.”

But that research work—and its potentially vast implications—wouldn’t be possible without assistance of local residents—people like Barb Genge—whose knowledge and work helps with both prongs of the eider conservation projects.

EUGENE BALL IS A CONSERVATION OFFICER BY TRADE, BUT ALSO works as co-ordinator for the volunteer search and rescue team in Burgeo, a relatively isolated town of about 2,000 located on the largest of a cluster of islands just off Newfoundland’s southwest coast. For the past couple of years, Ball has been doing some work for Ducks Unlimited Canada. Last summer, for example, members of the Burgeo search and rescue team conducted a duckling survey for common eiders in the area.

Members of the group put their training to good use; they are trained in compass work, grid searches and digital mapping. “So the area was covered really, really well,” Ball says.

Over the span of several days, search and rescue team members took out their zodiac rescue craft, plotted all of the co-ordinates by GPS, and inputted the data into a mapping program. They then forwarded the information to researchers.

It worked out well for all parties. Members of the search and rescue team were paid expenses and a small stipend by DUC, which they funnelled back into new equipment. In addition to search missions, that equipment can be used to carry out other tasks for researchers.

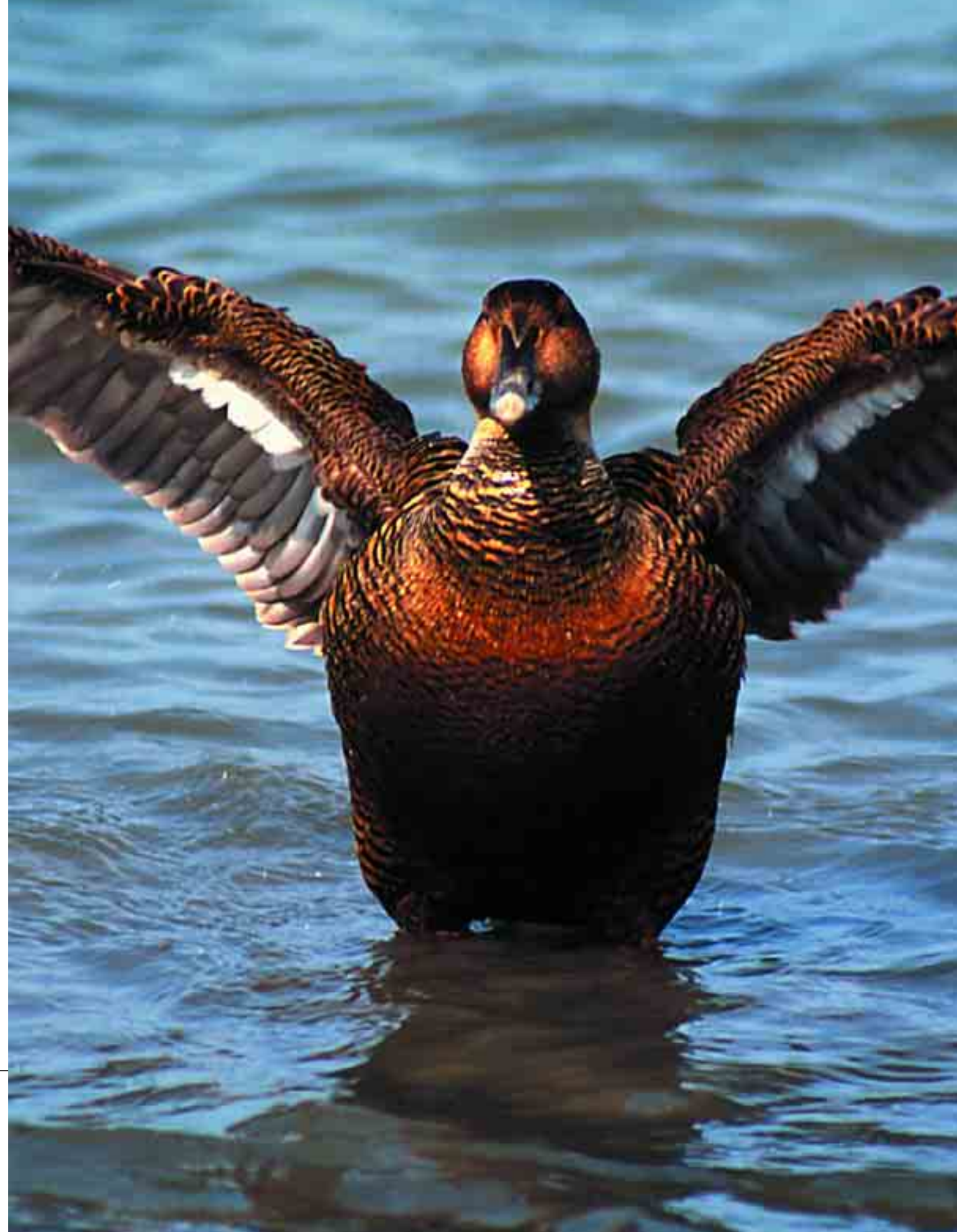
Late last fall, for example, members of the search team moved several eider nest shelters on some of the islands just off Burgeo after Ball says they realized that the eider shelters had originally been placed in the wrong spot. When DUC biologist Katherine Mehl visited the area, Ball and his group showed her where most of the birds nest.

“The team itself, we had a great day out there moving the boxes around,” Ball recalls. “They loved every minute of it.”

It was another example of the importance of local knowledge; one-third of the search team members work as fishermen in the area, plying the waters off the southwest coast of Newfoundland.

Right: A common eider hen stretches her wings. An estimated 12,000 breeding pairs remain in Newfoundland and Labrador, a decline that mystifies experts.

left: © Tim & Barbara Scully 2002 / Hooked on Nature® right: Denis Faucher





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And it was also a telling reminder of the front-and-centre role conservation is now taking in communities across the island.

“The boys on the team down here are actually hunters as well,” Ball explains. “So this would be a big success here in Burgeo, especially because of the way people were brought up.”

The “kill, kill, kill” attitude once prevalent in many outports is now being replaced by a more nuanced conservation message, Ball says. “So you’ve got a situation there now where you’re educating the people that one time you had the most trouble with.”

Years ago, he says, he wouldn’t have heard tell of putting together a volunteer search team, much less an eider counting expedition. But both are now acknowledged as important matters in the community. “I think everybody’s starting to wake up as to what’s going on.”

This year, members of the Burgeo search team hope to do some work at Wreck Island, about 20 kilometres away from their home port. Hopefully, that won’t be the end of Ball’s group’s work.

“We’re looking forward to doing more...it’s going to be really good in the future if we can keep it up.”

DUC BIOLOGIST KATHERINE MEHL HAS SPENT A GOOD PART OF the past year laying the groundwork for the eider initiative and its goal to unlock many of the mysteries surrounding Newfoundland and Labrador’s common eider duck population.

It will take at least five years to accumulate enough data, she says. A longer period would be even better. “The more years you have and the more data you have, the more precise your estimates are.

“No one knows how the population is faring,” she says. “From what it appears to be, the population has stabilized, or maybe is even slightly increasing, but there are no actual estimates. So if we can provide that, that’s a good start.”

Mehl comes well qualified for the project, having done research work in the central Arctic on the population dynamics and breeding ecology of king eiders. For her work on common eiders, Mehl will look at factors similar to what she looked at with the kings—estimates of adult survival, population structures, what proportion of the population are experienced breeders. And with this information, researchers will be able to build a population model, with the goal of answering some of those lingering questions.

Mehl acknowledges that she will be relying heavily on support from the people who make their homes in outports near the bays and inlets of Newfoundland’s craggy coast.

“The sincerity of the people has been great, (and) their help,” Mehl says. “I go out to a community and ask someone to take me out in a boat, and they know where the eider ducks are. They’re very familiar with the area the birds are using, how they’re doing, and how many eiders you’ll find on one island. People are extremely helpful and friendly.”

TERRY SIMMS IS ONLY TOO HAPPY TO ASSIST RESEARCHERS LIKE Mehl. He has worked with the Canadian Coast Guard as a marine communications and traffic specialist for more than 30 years. For the past year, he has been seconded to the job of lightkeeper at Fishing Point, near St. Anthony on the Northern Peninsula.

Simms first heard of Ducks Unlimited Canada and its work about 10 years ago. A biologist from the Amherst, N.S., office visited the

area, and did a presentation on duck-related issues. Suitably impressed, Simms and a couple of his buddies formed their own DUC chapter to help the cause.

Simms knew eider populations in the area were plunging like an anchor heaved over the side of a boat in 20 fathoms of water.

He also realized that his son and grandson would never be able to see the sights he remembered from his own childhood. He remembered spending time with his father in Hare Bay watching the flocks of birds as they migrated north in the spring and nested in the summer.

Simms—like “Eider Lady” Barb Genge, who lives in nearby Main Brook—has worked to place shelter boxes in remote areas. He also volunteered on the incubation and release program that saw hundreds of ducks a year sent to the wild.

Like Genge, he has seen attitudes change over the decades. When DUC began showing concern—and a willingness to spend time and money—in the area, the locals responded in kind.

MORGAN ANDERSON HAS SEEN IDEAS ABOUT CONSERVATION spread in the province—from his former base of operations at L’Anse aux Meadows to his new home hundreds of kilometres away in Rocky Harbour, from a national historic site to a national park, from one generation to another.

Anderson is now the senior park warden at Gros Morne National Park on Newfoundland’s west coast. Before that, he worked at the national historic site in L’Anse aux Meadows. That’s where the remnants of an 11th-century Viking village mark the earliest known European settlement in North America.

While working at L’Anse aux Meadows in 1995, Anderson first came into contact with Ducks Unlimited Canada, through its incubation and release program.

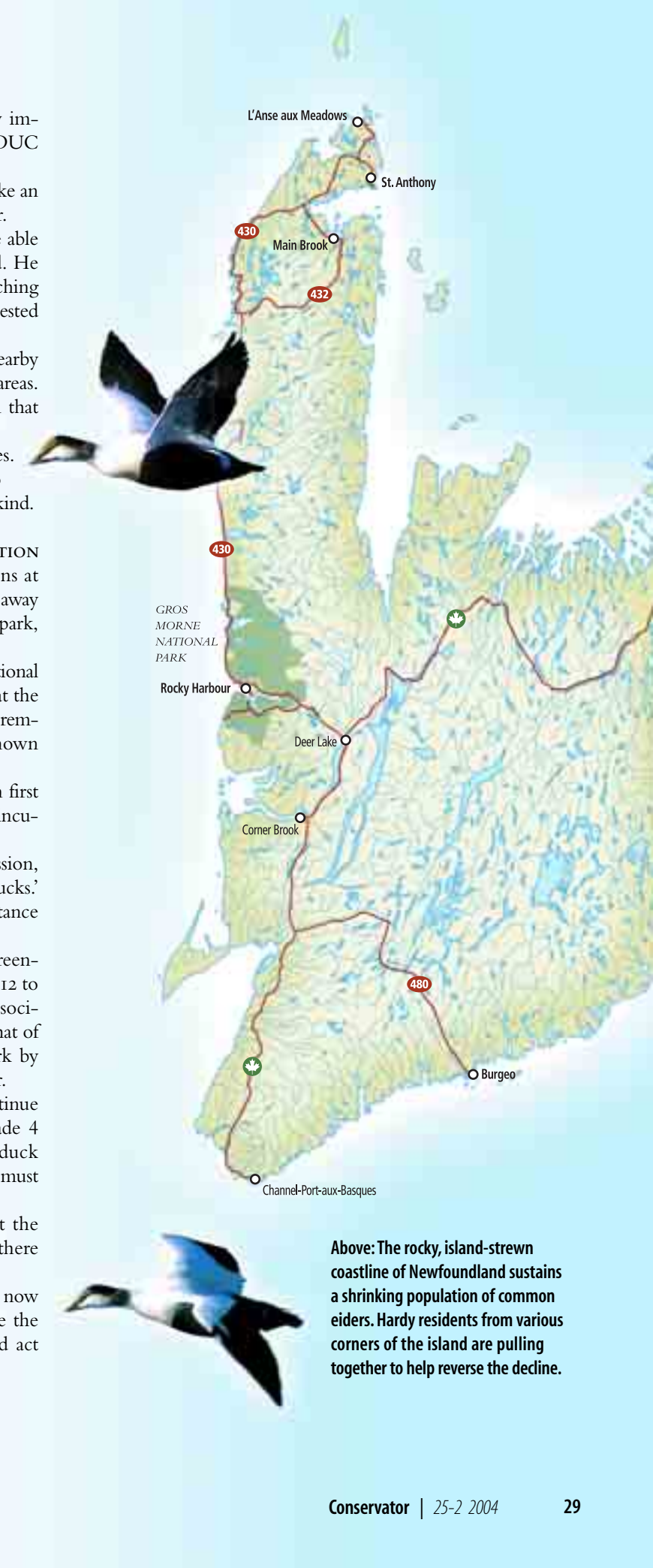
At that time, children didn’t know much about DUC’s mission, he recalls. “All they knew about was ‘Dad brings home five ducks.’ But since then, I think they’re really catching on to the importance of conservation.”

Anderson takes special pride in his work with the DUC Greenwing youth education program. Each year, he takes kids aged 12 to 17 on a day trip to L’Anse aux Meadows. They play games associated with conservation, from the importance of wetlands to that of eider ducks in the area. He is hoping to continue that work by expanding the program to his new home in Rocky Harbour.

In addition to the Greenwing work, he also hopes to continue his efforts with DUC’s Adopt-A-Class program, taking Grade 4 students from the local school on field trips to place eider duck boxes. Those nine- and 10-year-olds are the generation that must be targeted, he says.

“If we don’t start getting the awareness out there about the importance of conservation, the importance of protection, there will be no eider ducks here.

“I grew up in the fishing industry. My two kids growing up now won’t know what a cod fish is the way I knew it. It will be the same with the eider ducks...if we don’t stop and think and act now, then they won’t be there for future generations.” ✎



Above: The rocky, island-strewn coastline of Newfoundland sustains a shrinking population of common eiders. Hardy residents from various corners of the island are pulling together to help reverse the decline.