

# “Sea Otter” and the Geese

By Bruce Woods



Robert “Sea Otter” Jones first came to the Alaska’s Aleutian Islands as a radar officer in the U.S. Army during World War II. He moved to Kodiak after the war, but turned his attention to the Aleutian archipelago again in 1948, when he joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as manager of the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge,

A skilled dory operator, Jones visited the remote reaches of the islands in his care, often landing on dangerous, surf-battered shorelines in the sturdy little work boats. His nickname dates to the 1950s, when he was involved in attempts to return northern sea otters, which had been driven nearly to extinction by the fur trade, to their former range.



Ironically, although the “Sea Otter” nickname stayed with him, one of the highlights of Jones’s career involved a different species: the Aleutian cackling goose. These birds were also victims of the fur industry. In the mid-1700s, Russian fur traders first introduced nonindigenous foxes onto islands in the Aleutian chain. All of these islands were within the sole breeding range of the Aleutian cackling goose. Unfortunately, the birds were particularly vulnerable to predation.

So hard did these introduced predators hit the goose population that not a single bird was observed between 1938 and 1962. The Aleutian cackling goose was thought to be extinct.

But “Sea Otter” Jones never gave up hope. As Vernon Byrd, former Supervisory Wildlife Biologist at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, tells it: “Bob thought there might be geese left somewhere. He started trying to take foxes off one island so, if he ever found geese, he could either restore them or they would come back on their own. That was really sort of the beginning of the recovery program.”

In 1962, Jones forced his dory through the surf and rocks to land on remote Buldir Island. It was here that he found his Aleutian cackling geese. At the time, he estimated that this remnant flock, perhaps the world’s entire population of the geese, numbered no more than 300 birds. In 1967, the rediscovered goose was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Protection Act of 1966.

In the 1970s, Service biologists began moving birds from Buldir to other islands from which foxes had been eliminated. Protection of the birds on their California and Oregon wintering grounds (including hunting closures, the establishment of California’s San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge in 1987, and partnerships with private landowners in the Pacific Northwest, who managed habitat on their own lands for the benefit of the geese) greatly aided the species’ comeback.

By 2001, with a population of 37,000, the goose was declared recovered and removed from the national list of endangered and threatened species.

“Sea Otter” Jones retired from the Service in 1980. He passed away in 1998, leaving a conservation legacy that few have ever equaled.

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