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ALASKAN MUSKOX HERD CONTINUES TO INCREASE

Wild muskox on the Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska are showing a continuing increase in their numbers, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior reports.

This year's aerial survey, made from June 22 to July 4, indicates that the herd now contains between 94 and 100 animals. The 1953 total was 90. One herd was observed to contain 25 adult bulls and 21 calves. The bodies of four dead animals, all bulls, were recovered.

Thousands of muskox once occupied the arctic region between the tree line to the south and the permanent icecap to the north, and their meat and robes became an important item of commerce in the far north. By the end of the 19th century, whale hunters had exterminated the oxen from much of its former range. The last muskox in Alaska was killed prior to 1865.

Refuges were established in Canada to safeguard that country's residual herds and to foster repopulation of former ranges. In 1927 resident Alaskans appealed to Congress for funds to purchase a small herd of muskox. Three years later, when the funds were approved, the former Bureau of Biological Survey was assigned the job of attempting to reestablish the herd in Alaska. After a two-month trip from Greenland of approximately 14,000 miles, 31 animals were released in a 4,000-acre enclosure at the College Experimental Farm near Fairbanks, Alaska.

During the next four years feeding experiments and studies were carried on to see if domestic herds of these animals could be developed. Because the muskox proved both difficult and dangerous to handle, the entire herd was moved in 1935 and 1936 to the million-acre Nunivak refuge where ample range of good quality was available.

Although the size of the herd has more than tripled since 1930, the breeding potential of the animal is low. It does not breed until its fourth or fifth year and only one calf is produced each year, generally in April or in early May. Since it is an arctic animal, the muskox does not thrive in a temperate climate.

Muskox resemble somewhat a small-sized buffalo, or bison. They have a distinct hump, though it is not so conspicuous as the buffalo's. Their color is dark brownish to black with lighter brown or cream on the back. They grow an undercoat of thick wool, and through this wool grow long black guard hairs that may sweep almost to the ground, giving the animal a stocky appearance.

The muskox is related to wild and domestic cattle but it is generally smaller than most breeds. Mature animals weigh around 500 pounds. Some of the old animals, however, have weighed 900 pounds. From the tip of its nose to the end of its short rat-like tail, the muskox is nearly 8 feet long. The shoulder height, at its maximum, is about 5 feet.

Although the Fish and Wildlife Service has succeeded in reintroducing the muskox to its ancient habitat, it has concluded after years of study that because of their habits, range requirements, and slowness of reproduction, any attempt to raise muskox as a farming or commercial enterprise would be impracticable.

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