

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

FEATURE

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RETURN OF THE MUSK OX TO ALASKA

Include the musk ox in the small but growing number of U.S. wild-life species being restored to range where they became extinct because of humans.

After an absence of over a century, more than 700 of these unusual shaggy grazers have been successfully reestablished in Alaska through combined efforts of the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the University of Alaska.

Musk oxen once ranged much of polar North America and Greenland, thriving in areas where few animals can survive, but humans preyed on the herds until by 1865 the musk ox became extinct in Alaska.

A transplant in 1936 was the first return of the species of our far North. This was the Nunivak Island operation, which amounted to transfer to this National Refuge isle of 34 musk oxen from Greenland. Because Nunivak contained no oxen predators, the species thrived until the herd posed a threat to itself through overgrazing existing forage.

In 1967 and 1968 the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game developed musk ox techniques during transfers of some of the animals to nearby Nelson Island. In 1969 and again in 1970 the techniques proved successful in transfers of more than 130 animals to Barter Island and other areas near Nome and Cape Thompson, where the species had thrived a century before.

Resident Eskimos on Nunivak used snowmobiles to round up yearlings and adults from herds to strategic airlift pick-up points. Biologists used sedative drugs administered through dart guns fired from a helicopter to temporarily immobilize selected individuals for the transfer.

Yearling and adult musk oxen were chosen; the adults were needed to show the young how to survive through severe Arctic winters. Once the animals were transplanted, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game took over management of herds to assure survival of the species.

By human standards of wildlife beauty, musk oxen are odd-looking animals. Twenty-inch-long brownish black hair overlaps a soft gray underwool or qiviut, which is warm enough to protect the animals in 60-below-zero weather. Males stand about 4.5 feet at the shoulders and weigh up to 900 pounds; females are somewhat smaller. Round cloven hoofs enable them to move deftly and swiftly over frozen terrain.

Undisturbed, the herd remains loosely divided into family groups grazing on a variety of Arctic plants, but in the presence of a potential enemy, the animals quickly wheel into protective arcs or circles. With heads pointed toward the enemy in a solid front, and paired horns of the bulls curved upward like hooks, there is a sharp impression that these are formidable beasts.

The 1969 and 1970 transplants partially relieved the overpopulation problem on Nunivak, but the solution is only temporary. There will be an excessive number of musk oxen in the not too distant future, wildlife biologists say.

The cost of the transplants ran more than \$100,000 for fiscal 1969-70, a costly approach to the population problem. A more economical solution is needed for control of the herds on Nunivak.

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