

R/V Tiglax: Alaska Maritime Refuge's Vehicle for Research

By Andrea Medeiros

Imagine working on a ship that takes you 15,000 miles through remote islands, from the Gulf of Alaska to the Bering Sea, in support of conservation. Six U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service jobs provide this opportunity, all operating out of Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge aboard the *R/V Tiglax*.

“Sometimes you don’t see another ship for days at a time,” says Captain Billy Pepper, who has worked on the *Tiglax* for more than 20 years and is responsible for the ship as well as hiring and managing the crew. Combined, the captain, first mate, two deckhands, a cook and an engineer have 60-plus-years’ experience sailing the refuge.

Constantly on the move during the six-month field season that starts in April, the crew works 12 hours a day, seven days a week and is always on call. The *Tiglax* is at sea for extended periods of time without Internet or cell service. Beyond the hours and the isolation, weather, mechanical problems, medical issues and even natural disasters can challenge the crew.

The challenges of working on the *Tiglax* are counterbalanced by being among rocky islands with spectacular scenery, abundant wildlife and distinctive cultural histories. Every summer more than 40 million seabirds nest on Alaska Maritime Refuge. One of the islands, Buldir, boasts more nesting seabirds than anywhere else in the Northern Hemisphere. The *Tiglax* also encounters whales, porpoises, seals, sea lions and other marine mammals.

Built in 1987, the 120-foot-long *Tiglax* plays a critical role in meeting Alaska Maritime Refuge’s research purpose by supporting scientists from the Service, universities, the U.S. Geological Survey, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and elsewhere.

Umnak and Samalga islands in the eastern Aleutians have been part of the refuge since 1913. Last summer, thanks to the *Tiglax*, refuge biologists were able to survey the islands’ coastlines for the first time. They discovered tens of thousands of shorebirds in the intertidal zone of Samalga Island, potentially a globally significant resting area for shorebirds on their summer migration.

In 2015, the *Tiglax* also supported a regular survey of sea otters in the western Aleutians and a second, rare survey on the hard-to-access Pacific Ocean side of Amchitka Island. Both will help biologists better understand sea otters.

What other new discoveries are out there on Alaska Maritime Refuge? The possibility of being part of making a new one keeps the crew of the *Tiglax* coming back.

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CAPTION

The *R/V Tiglax* cruising off Bogoslof Island. Built in 1987, the *Tiglax*, which means eagle in Aleut, is 120 feet long and has a range of 14,500 miles before refueling is needed. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service vessel supports scientific research at Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. More photos: <http://bit.ly/1MGt2KZ> (Paul Wade)