DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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MUSK OX AIRLIFT TO RUSSIA SCHEDULED FROM ALASKA

Forty musk oxen will be captured on Nunivak Island, west of the Alaska mainland, and airlifted by Soviet air transports to Siberia where they are extinct, in fulfillment of another part of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Environmental Protection Agreement of 1972, Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton announced today.

The roundup and airlift of the descendants of ice age migrants are scheduled to take place between March 24 and April 5, 1975. Other cooperative efforts with the Soviets deal with cooperative polar bear and caribou studies, banding and dyeing snow geese that migrate between the two countries, a trip by American scientists to Russia to study the Siberian polecat, and a trip by Soviet scientists to wildlife research facilities in this country involving the migration of birds.

The original population of the musk ox in Alaska was hunted to extinction by the middle of the last century. The reestablishment of the animal began in the 1930's when 31 musk oxen purchased from Greenland were placed on Nunivak Island which had been reserved as a National Wildlife Refuge. The Nunivak herd today numbers about 700.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service cooperates with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in the management of musk oxen. Originally the herd was completely protected on Nunivak National Wildlife Refuge, but as it reached the limit of its food supply, population control measures became imperative. The immediate, but temporary, solution to controlling the population was to transplant excess animals to their original ranges in arctic Alaska. Thus the transfer of these 40 to the Soviet Union will provide further benefit to the Alaska herd.

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Musk oxen have proved easier to capture than many other animals. Eskimos, on their swift snow machines, can quickly corner a herd and capture any selected animal by placing a large net over it. It is then sledded as far as 50 miles to the Eskimo village of Mekoryuk, where it is temporarily penned to await transport to the mainland by aircraft. The Soviet aircraft will land and leave for Siberia from this village. The musk oxen will be placed along the easternmost coast of Siberia across from Alaska.

The musk ox provides a fascinating example of nature's ability to fill all niches of the earth with life, according to Lynn A. Greenwalt, Fish and Wildlife Service Director. Its habitat is so remote that, until a short time ago, knowledge of its behavior and way of life depended on tales of early hunters, hearsay accounts, or reports of brief encounters by explorers. Scientists called it "Ovibos," literally "sheep-cow," but it is neither, nor is it very closely related to either of these animals. Its closest, but still distant, living relative is the "takin" of Tibet and Burma.

Ancestors of the musk ox evolved on the arctic prairies, steppes, or tundra of north-central Asia about a million years ago. During the ice ages, when vast glaciers lowered oceans, musk oxen crossed to North America on a land bridge which joined Asia and Alaska. They moved south with the glaciers as far as Iowa and New York, living then in habitat similar to that which they now occupy. As the glaciers retreated, habitats in southern latitudes changed, and musk oxen survived only in the northernmost tundra regions of North America and Greenland. It became extinct in Asia and Europe, perhpas because of changes in climate, but many scientists believe that primitive man contributed significantly to its demise there as in Alaska.

When white men first penetrated arctic regions, they found the musk ox abundant along coasts of northern and eastern Greenland, and in tundra areas of northern Canada, particularly in the arctic islands of that country. As more white men, mostly whalers and traders, penetrated the arctic, and Eskimos were provided with firearms, musk ox populations were rapidly depleted. Between 1850 and 1920, they were killed indiscriminately for food, or merely for robes, which were exported by hundreds from Canada and Greenland. Explorers slaughtered large numbers on the arctic islands to sustain their expeditions.

Protection was initiated in some areas of Canada at the opening of the century, but measures were not effective in most regions until after 1920. After several decades of protection, the recovery of the population is virtually complete, and numbers in most portions of their range probably equals that when white men first intruded. In mainland areas of Canada there are now more than 1,500 musk oxen, in Canada's arctic islands more than 5,000, and perhaps as many in Greenland. They also have been introduced into Norway and Spitzbergen.

The favored habitat of the musk ox is a land that ecologists call the "high arctic." This is the extreme, northern, fringe of tundra, bordering on polar seas, where night and winter, or day and summer, are synonomous. Plant life is frequently sparse and much of the ground surface may be bare. All vegetation is low growing and even shrubs are dwarfed or creeping.

Amazingly, an important factor permitting their existence is lack of snow. The high arctic is a virtual desert, with annual precipitation of less than 10 inches. Snowfall may be less than 15 inches and is seldom more than 30. Strong winds deposit huge drifts in sheltered areas, leaving much of the ground bare. In the few arctic regions of deep snow, musk oxen do not occur.

Physical adaptations of musk oxen to their habitat are chiefly those which protect it from cold. Most important is its coat, which consists of a thick layer of cashmere-like wool, called "qiviut." The qiviut is protected by an outer coat of long, coarse hair which may reach three feet or more in length, and gives the shaggy appearance which is perhaps the basis of its Eskimo name, "Oomingmuk," or "bearded one."

Musk oxen are a social animal and graze in small herds usually varying from 3 to 15 animals, but sometimes many more. During summer, herds consist of an adult bull with his harem of cows, calves, and immature animals. Adult bulls which do not possess harems are usually found as singles, having little tolerance for each other at this season. In winter, extra bulls may sometimes be permitted to join harem groups, but most form into bachelor bands which are isolated from other animals.

Calves are born during April or May when weather may still be severe in arctic regions. Within a few hours they can follow the mother during her normal movement with the herd. Growth is rapid and a calf weighing 20 pounds at birth may reach as much as 150 to 200 pounds at one year. The rate of growth gradually declines, but full size is not achieved until the age of five or more years, when bulls may weigh 700 pounds and females about a third less.

Musk oxen have few natural enemies. Polar or grizzly bear may occasionally attack them, but probably are seldom a danger. Wolves are a more significant threat, particularly to lone animals and to calves. Behavior patterns of musk oxen when faced with danger suggest wolves were their chief, natural enemy. When pursuers approach and escape is impossible, musk oxen whirl with military precision and present a veritable array of horns that presents some difficulty to an attacking wolf pack. There is a constant shuffling about, as each animal, even calves, attempts to take a position in the front line. Sometimes, when in open terrain, the defense formation takes the form of a circle or ring. More frequently, the line forms on the edge of a cliff or against a bank.

At present, other factors are more important causes of mortality than predators or man. Most deaths occur in late winter when shortage of food or other stresses may cause the death of animals which are sick, injured, or perhaps merely old and past their prime. Particularly severe weather conditions, especially deep snow or icing, may cause the loss of large numbers of animals by starvation, and entire herds have been lost in this manner, particularly on islands where the food supply was limited.

Despite the many natural causes of death, adult mortality under normal conditions is low and many animals may live to old age. So few animals have been marked, however, that the single record of longevity is of a female that died in an accident when 23 years old.

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