

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Anchorage, Alaska



REFUGE NARRATIVE REPORT

May - August, 1955



ALUTIAN ISLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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IZEMBEK BAY AREA

Cold Bay

Alaska

U. S. DEPT. OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

Cold Bay, Alaska

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1. Subject
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ALUTIAN ISLANDS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

1. Migratory Birds
2. Vagrant Birds
3. Big game animals

IZENBARK BAY AREA

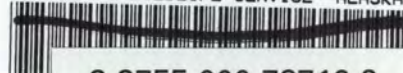
4. Seabirds
5. Marine Mammals
6. Fish
7. Cold Bay Alaska
8. Alaska

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US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE--ALASKA



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This report covers the period from May 1 to September 1, 1955.

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This report covers the period from May 1 to September 1, 1955.

## I. GENERAL

A. Weather conditions. This summer is generally regarded as being a cold and disagreeable one, even here. Snow fell on the Alaska Peninsula in early June and it wasn't until mid-June that a brief warm stretch arrived to be followed by more cold. Near the close of the period fresh snow fell on Frosty Mountain during the night of August 28.

B. Water conditions. Together with the cold there came an increase in precipitation. Throughout the summer, creeks were high affording salmon easy access to spawning grounds and at the close of the period the lakes were at the overflowing point.

C. No fires were observed or reported.

D. During early July Shishaldin Volcano on Unimak Island was reported active but persistent cloudy weather obscured observations from Cold Bay. Late one evening when clearing weather afforded the opportunity we observed the summit to be flaming, or so it appeared. More likely the clouds of steam and smoke were reflecting the inner fires and gave the appearance of flame to us sixty miles away.

When on July 21 the skies again cleared we observed a large cloud hanging over the summit, then suddenly a great column of what later proved to be ash issued from the cone and ascended to about 40,000 feet where it formed the mushroom cloud characterizing the photographic representations of an atomic bomb burst. This cloud expanded while we watched, to an estimated 30 miles diameter and only ceased to grow when the column issuing from the vent expired. Some concept of the forces at work may be gained by understanding that this immense cloud dwarfed not only the nearly ten thousand foot high mass of the volcano itself but nearby 5000 foot Iannothiki Peak and 6000 foot Round Top as well. It brought sudden darkness to the land below and left its geologic record in ash fall for many miles around. The snows of Frosty Mountain at Cold Bay were changed from white to grey, a fact that later revealed movements of Frosty's glaciers.

The cloud drifted north-north east and most of the ash fell at sea, however a considerable fall-out must have taken place on the coastal plain around Shannon's Lagoon. As this is the site of an important red salmon run and fall bear concentration we wondered what influence might have been felt by the wildlife.

Aerial observations made in late August did not show ash concentrations visible from the air and nearly ten thousand red salmon were noted in the creek flowing into Shannon's Lagoon. The



creek flowing into nearby St. Catherine's Cove also showed the presence of salmon (chums), the estimated number of these being unknown here.

## II. WILDLIFE

### A. Migratory birds.

In early August we undertook to visit most of the likely waterfowl nesting grounds in the Izembek Bay area with a view to possible banding of flightless birds. Meanwhile we had already banded (Aug. 1) 139 glaucous-winged gulls as fledglings in Elian Lake.

Since there were sufficient birds, mostly fledglings, to warrant the effort, we set out on the first duck banding enterprise undertaken here. It was a catch-as-catch-can business for we were feeling our way; moreover, other essential business was in progress at the time.

The nesting grounds here are scattered too widely for the use of a boat except in rare instances, so we turned to the use of dogs. Except for the scamp, we were dealing with puddle ducks and the dogs experienced no trouble chasing these into the grass bordering the ponds, pot-holes, and lakes where we found the birds. If the dogs could not manage this alone we disregarded the wetness (for usually we encountered rain anyway) and plunged in to give them an assist. Following this we trailed the magnificent Chesapeake Bay retriever, or the ridiculous chocolate-colored mutt as they methodically tracked the web-feet through the grass. As in every case of this sort we found our success improved with experience and feel that with concentration of effort we might band here a sufficient number of flightless ducks to secure a reasonable return of information.

The two most productive areas we have found to date are (1) an extensive marshy area on the shore of Izembek Bay about five miles east of Grant's Point and (2) the marshy areas around Grant's Point. In a marsh just below the base on Cold Bay we observed some candidates for bands but they were on such a large lake we could do nothing with them. In this area we encountered some swans that were flightless and quickly learned they could outrun a man, though not the big dog. Catch was, they offered battle to the dog and feared for a tattered swan and bloody-nosed dog. However, we contrived to stay with the poech while near the swans and we "baggied" two, another at Grant's Point.

An interesting feature of the two adult swans was the presence of a narrow salmon-red streak on the edge of the mandibles. Kortright lists this as a characteristic of the trumpeter "lacking in whistling swan." However, both of these birds were too small to be trumpeters and both had a yellow spot on the lores, a distinguishing mark of the whistler.



Easiest to catch were the mallards for they always took to the grass. Most difficult were the scaup because of their diving habits. These birds apparently nest over a longer period than the other ducks for we caught them in all sizes, many too small to band.

Biggest problem were the bears that chose to sleep in the tall grass of the marshes. We felt it necessary to carry the .375 magnum for in careering madly behind a dog through waist high to shoulder high grass the possibility of landing astride a suddenly awakened bear was very real. We flushed nine of them from the marsh the first day and though none were encountered at sufficiently close range to make out the individual whiskers on their muzzles, they all took to their heels in panic. But the big rifle was a nuisance.

Totals banded are as follows:

Mallard	14
Green-winged teal	13
Pintail	6
Indiwall	9
Greater scaup	9
Whistling swan	3

We limited this more or less exploratory effort to areas accessible by jeep. If a boat were used to reach the outlying marshes more ducks should be available.

Crowberries and cranberries were ripening on the heath just at the end of the period and though in somewhat short supply would be ready for the emperors, lesser Canada and cackling geese soon to arrive.

The great fall migration began as a trickle just about the middle of August. First sign was the twittering of many small birds at night over the lighted base. In the field we noted a few flocks of mallards and green-winged teal flying about the marshes. Then on the 20th we watched about 750 pintails feeding in a quiet cove near Grant's Point. On the evening of August 25 the trickle became a stream as the first brant arrived in Izembek Bay. It was a stormy night and the flocks approaching through the gaps in the Indiakof Islands made way slowly. They were coming in low over the water and dropped into the first patches of eel grass reached.

This is the first time we have witnessed the arrival of brant in the Bay. Ordinarily we drive to the Point and there they are; then further arrivals are obscured by movements of those already present. Lesser Canada geese and pintails arrive high over the Bay and let down in spirals but since we have never seen brant flying high it was a point of curiosity, now satisfied.

Increase of the brant population was slow. By the 26th there were about 10,000 visible from Grant's Point, and at the end of the period, the eve of open waterfowl season, there were between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the usual annual peak. At the close of the period this author had not yet seen a Canada type nor emperor geese although a few had been reported.

An item of interest was a flock of about 50 dowitchers observed in mid-August. At the end of the period about 200 of them were present near Grant's Point.

### B. Upland game birds.

Winter survival of both willow and rock ptarmigan appeared to be good. Nesting seemed to be hampered by the cold summer, if we can judge from several instances of late birds observed in August. These coveys were always of very small numbers indicating a re-nesting.

We made the usual check of coveys shortly before the opening of the hunting season and recorded the following numbers per covey.

13	4	10	8
12	2	8	9
9	2	13	12
8	8	7	13

All of these were willow ptarmigan. Indications are that we have what might be regarded as an average hatch, though not uniform. We found the birds numerous and this makes eight years of good populations in the Izembek Bay area. A closer check might have revealed minor cyclic tendencies and certain it is that there have been variations in numbers, however no gross cyclic manifestations have been observed.

### C. Big game animals.

Caribou - In early July when Refuge Supervisor Spencer was present with the refuge widgeon we made an attempt to locate the main bulk of the Peninsula caribou herd. Earlier attempts by Jay Hammond had been only moderately successful and it was desired to make another search. Despite several hours of flying in the areas where we had observed the big bands on previous years only 1756 caribou were located and these were widely dispersed. The percentage of calves in these 1756 animals was 31%.

In the first few days of June when Spencer was on a waterfowl survey, 14 caribou were noted on the plains along the north side of Unalak Island. These are the first seen on Unalak in recent years by FWS personnel.



**Big brown bear** - With the bears at Cold Bay we experienced difficulties unknown before. Since families have come to live at Cold Bay there are garbage cans in front of every house rather than just those at the mess hall as was the case when this was a military base. Unless these cans were emptied each evening it served to bait the bears into camp where they created problems. Some of the residents welcomed the bears in camp and enjoyed seeing them while others felt differently. Biggest annoyance was having to pick up the garbage scattered about the premises each morning and curiously enough, none tumbled to the obvious conclusion of eliminating the garbage each evening.

One progressive citizen objected to there being a bear in his front yard quietly extracting some goodies from the garbage can when one night his official duties rather peremptorily summoned him to the power house. The few seconds delay caused before this bear bolted aroused an anger in the erstwhile city dweller who never before had waited on an animal but doubtless wasted precious hours of his life quite cheerfully waiting at street corners, theatre marquees, and on a bar tender. We suggested that having wild animals about was perhaps a privilege rather than an onerous restraint but that should he object to the handsome animal availing itself of the largesse afforded by his garbage can, a simple trip to the dump in the evening would do the trick.



**Fig. 1** This young bear took up residence on the Base.



This travail with the bears was longer than usual this year because of the delayed and reduced salmon runs. Many nights we had only dropped off to sleep when a clearing of the dogs announced the arrival of "brer bear". Most of those that arrived in the housing area before midnight we sought to drive out but many times they came and departed without our knowledge. When in early August their visitations became less regular we enjoyed more restful nights.

Perhaps the most trying experience was with two young (probably in their third summer) bears that persisted in living in the camp several days. At the outset we marked them with yellow paint so we knew there was no confusion with the other animals. These foolish bears walked about the camp both day and night and by all indications planned to stay with us. Many times we pursued one or both of them up and down the streets and between the houses but to no avail. Some of the dogs joined in the chase and occasionally householders reached out from their front step and smacked the bear with a broom as he raced by. They had displayed no truculence but the residents were becoming contemptuous of them so something had to be done. We considered capturing and releasing them at a remote point but the big joker in this was the certainty that we would have the local citizenry gathered about and in the way, moreover the matter of catching them would, if successful, in its turn pose the problem of releasing. We put on a concentrated program of hazing them one evening and but for the trouble with people butting in it might have been successful. The urge to photograph this sort of activity all but wrecked our chances of success. Each time we had successfully started them away some chatter-bag would dash up and we'd lose control of the situation. When later that night they came back we tried it again and while watching one, ran into the other as it jumped onto the road in front of the jeep. This did it; for one immediately departed while the injured one stuck around a few days and finally he too disappeared.

A party of four bear hunters spent a week hunting without success in the vicinity of Bennett Point on Unimak Island. Two others hunting near Cave Point are reported to have brought out two trophies.

The poor showing to date for bear hunting on Unimak Island does not reflect the population density accurately. Hunting there has generally been dictated by ease of getting on the island and has rarely taken into account the requirements of bear hunting. Nature of the terrain, distances involved, lack of inland lakes suited for aircraft landings, and most of all a shortage of local knowledge on the part of guides has contributed to the lack of success. It appears that success on Unimak is reserved for the old time bear hunter and his treks rather than the modern airplane excursionist, a condition that recommends itself to this author.

D. **Predaceous birds** - Just as the period closed, increases in numbers of *Gyrfalcons* was noted. In fact the birds became a regular part of the landscape on our trips to Grant's Point.

E. **Fur bearers** - On the 26th of July 15,000 strychnine pellets were dropped from a Navy UP (Albatross) on Anchitka between the Crown Islet and Bird Cape. This marks the first step in an accelerated fox elimination program for the island in which predator agent Jay S. Hammond is cooperating.

Pellets were made at Cold Bay of blubber secured from the concentration of harbor seals in Izembek Bay, packed in 3 gallon cans with pressure lids and shipped to Adak. There we simply waited suitable weather and when the time came, spilled the pellets out the open port as the airplane was flown so that the drop would strike the ground just inland from the beach.

At Cold Bay very extensive land otter sign was noted in the marsh above Mortenson's Lagoon, and in the Izembek Bay marshes the same abundance was present. The animals themselves have frequently been seen in our pursuit of flightless ducks.

F. **Fish** - This was a summer of very light salmon runs especially in chums and pinks. It should be noted this is the first time such a sharp reduction in chums has occurred in Russell Creek, Cold Bay. Pinks, of course, are variable here and these were almost non-existent in Russell Creek. Chums and silvers arrived in Frosty Creek (Cold Bay) on schedule and in about usual numbers just prior to the close of the period. At the same time bright chums were still arriving in small numbers in Russell Creek. Frosty Creek (Izembek Bay) was down to about 1/3 normal escapement but was, never-the-less, one of the brighter spots. Left-hand and Right-hand Valley escapements were low with Left-hand dangerously so.

Fishing pressure in Izembek Bay has shifted from Moffett Bay, where there were once large runs, to Applegate Cove and systematic depletion is now being pursued there. Fishing closed in Izembek Bay not a day too soon.

Several sizeable rainbows were reported caught early in Russell Creek. Dolly Varden fishing in Klam Lake was good as usual but poor in Russell Creek. The usual run of Bollies in Frosty Creek arrived on schedule but little pressure was applied to them.

### III. REFUGEE DEVELOPMENT MAINTENANCE

At Adak we sought to cure the "buge" encountered with the outboard engine and though we were unsuccessful with the means at hand learned enough to know what must be done. Upon our return to Cold Bay a bit of correspondence with the manufacturer revealed the availability of a dry exhaust stack that would cure



the back-pressure problems, and another bit of correspondence procured us a flat-pitched propeller from another manufacturer for use on the heavily laden dory. We had found, and it has been the experience of other users of this engine, that the Mark 20 would perform satisfactorily only with the spark plugs furnished by one particular manufacturer and so we procured an adequate supply of these in the two different heat ranges we require. Thus our "growing pains" in converting to the advantages offered by the modern outboard engine have led us through devious channels of "trial and error" engineering with the result that we are gaining confidence in our equipment.

The dory bore marks of her work in the Shumagin Islands, at Amchitka, and on the long run back to Adak. Proudly flying her Fish and Wildlife Service flag when standing into Adak Harbor she looked the battered veteran that she was. The Navy gave us carte blanche to repair her as necessary in their Ship's Department so we put her inside and with loving care brought her to full efficiency. She was painted inside and on the forward decking with red lead to comply with the directives of the Regional Office regarding use of International orange, and on the outside she was painted base gray. The name "Water Ousel" was placed on her bow and a thirteen inch image of the bird painted below it. A new canopy of heavier canvas replaced the aged one, and new lines and chains went on the anchors. New cars were procured and stainless steel reinforcing placed on the stern. A marine plywood caming on the after edge of the decking had been smashed against the chafing gear of the M. V. Paragon and this was replaced with oak. We remodelled the floorboards to better hold the five fifteen-gallon drums in which we carry fuel. The pine box in which the mariner's compass was mounted had yielded to the continuous wetting it received while in rough water so the instrument was remounted in a hand-finished teak wood binnacle and as if for good measure a teak wood case for the barometer was thrown in. And then one day we pronounced her "in all respects ready for sea."

At Cold Bay we undertook long-needed repairs to the headquarters building. Pipes located within the walls were subject to freezing in winter and these were reinstalled inside the room. Certain parts of the building's framework and walls were repaired or replaced. Cracks under the eaves where wind-driven rain and snow entered were battened. Storm windows were removed, repaired and reinstalled for more efficient insulation. Electrolysis between the different metals of stove pipe and roof-jack has always been a severe problem here where high winds and salt spray speed up the action of stove gases. Every few weeks found us on the roof repairing or replacing pieces and parts so this time we determined to have done with it. A new roof-jack surmounted by a stack (short in this country unless one would have it blown away) and hood, all of stainless steel were installed and guyed with stainless steel wires. Inside the house galvanized iron stove pipe was installed. This has ended the matter. Outside the building was painted a gleaming white



and trimmed with blue. Inside, the office was cleaned and repainted ivory. The furniture, all fugitives from the military days of the Base, was repaired where necessary and painted a variety of pastel colors. The floor, alas, must await another budget.

Other maintenance work such as repairs to warehouses, jeep and outboard engines was also completed. A new transmitting antenna and transmission line was erected and at the close of the period new pole line construction by CAA had put our remote receiver line out of commission so we were about to construct a new, more permanent one.

#### IV. ECONOMIC USE OF THE REFUGE

A new matter presented itself in the form of an application for cattle grazing leases on Kanaga and Tanaga Islands. The application had been filed with Bureau of Land Management and eventually found its way to this office. Since Kanaga is already under permit for fox ranching it wasn't a simple matter of yes or no, moreover, there were some questions we felt entitled to ask the applicant and there was the matter of a statement of our policy with regard to the primary use of the islands. Correspondence addressed to the applicant elicited no response.

Then toward the end of the period came word that JLM had issued a grazing lease for two of the islands in the refuge, Clifford and Finney's Islands. These are small spots of land in the heart of an expanding remnant sea otter population in the Sanak Reefs. They are, moreover, a part of the shoals producing the eel grass beds so necessary to wintering black brant.

Just as the period closed a cattle man came to the office with inquiries regarding various islands in the eastern portion of the refuge. This is only one of several such cattle producers that have visited the area and indicated an interest in such an enterprise. Thus we have a new problem confronting us in the matter of land use.

#### V. PUBLIC RELATIONS

In June, while at Adak we devoted a considerable effort to public relations. This took various forms, viz.: instruction in net tying to the end that crab tangle nets might be produced locally, seal hunting with a number of personnel so that they might gratify their desire for a local souvenir and incidentally make sure they can distinguish a sea otter from a seal and also to procure fish food for the hatchery. The undersigned was invited



to honorary membership in the Williwaw Chapter of the Toastmaster's International, which since it includes all the policy making personnel of the Naval Base is a fine forum for our official activities as well as being personally gratifying.

As related above, public relations with some of our neighbors was sorely strained by the bears but in the end we seemed to benefit by our insistence on leaving them unharmed. The desire to see live bears instead of dead ones has gained ground.

Because of the reduced runs of pink and chum salmon the degree of success in sport fishing was reduced. At the end of the period, however, the beginnings of what promised to be a large (for Cold Bay) run of silver salmon appeared. This occasioned a burst of fishing pressure.

Fishing in Russell Creek has produced a larger take of rainbows than heretofore; It seems likely that this run was heavily reduced during the war years and is only now recovering. These fish all average several pounds and their presence in the creek gives great impetus to the fishing pressure. This author being a fisherman and regarding the rainbow in a hallowed light, understands the moment of exaltation that a six or seven pound rainbow will confer while it flashes in the air.

At the close of August a short flurry of ptarmigan hunting as a sort of warm-up for the approaching waterfowl season took place.

## VI. FIELD INVESTIGATIONS OR APPLIED RESEARCH

It was our intent to carry out the long sought investigation of the sea otter populations centered about the eastern end of Amia Island. Moreover, we had scheduled a search of Little Tanaga Pass for the sea otters reported there. However, to accomplish the former required a run as long as that we had just completed from Anchitka. Due to the persistent failure of all types of spark plugs available at Adak under the high intensity aircraft ignition system of the Mark 20 engine we decided not to undertake further long-range operations at the time.

We did manage a visit to Little Tanaga Pass but at the time were experiencing ignition troubles. We did not deem it wise to enter rough water with an ailing engine and since the sea otter habitat in this pass lies in the midst of a tide rip we were forced to give up this enterprise also.

Submitted by

*Robert D. Jones, Jr.*  
Robert D. Jones, Jr.  
Refuge Manager

October 14, 1955