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WHITEFRONTED GOOSE BANDING AND STUDY PROJECT--1970

This year we shifted the Whitefronted Goose banding project to the Arctic Slope where, to the best of our knowledge, geese have never been banded before. Since the project would be located in an area many miles from commercial facilities, it was necessary to formulate extensive plans and negotiate contracts for fuel and lodging well in advance. After corresponding with all known facilities in the North (which are few with the exception of the oil companies who charge \$55 a day per man for room and board), it was determined that Bud Helmerick's establishment on the mouth of the Colville would be the most centrally located and best suited to our purpose. Helmerick's charge was \$21 a day per man for room and board. We contracted with Fairbanks Air Service to haul 56 drums of 80/87 Av gas to the Gulf Oil winter strip which is eight miles west of Helmerick's. This required two trips with a C-46 at the cost of \$1,380 a trip. A second contract was to be negotiated with Helmerick to haul the drums to his float lake by snow-machine which would have equaled the price of the air haul, but Gulf Oil transported the gas to the lake by truck on their winter road free of charge.

Personnel: Agents Ray Tremblay, Donald Combs (Anchorage M&E); Tom Garratt (Portland M&E); Bill Halstead (Yakima M&E); and John Wendler (Reno M&E).

Equipment: Grumman Goose
Beaver on Amphibious floats
Boat, 8-foot aluminum Fold-A-Boat
Motor, Outboard, 5 h.p.
Aluminum Stakes, 180 each, 5-foot long
Nylon Netting, 3/4" mesh, 10-foot wide in 100-, 200-, and 300-foot lengths. Total 600 feet
Bird Bands, pliers, and other small tools required
Dividers, millibar rulers, and scales were again used to make measurements.

This was the first year we used a Grumman, and it proved to be a valuable asset to the Project since additional emergency gear, extra poles, and personal equipment could be hauled. It proved more versatile for bird driving than the Beaver because of the differential steering ability with two engines; however, it could not be landed in many of the shallow lakes.

We took 180 poles instead of the usual 60. Devised two-inch rubber washers cut from radiator hose around three poles to make tri-pods for use on frozen ground where single stakes could not be driven.

A complete camp consisting of tents, stoves, cooking gear, and rations were kept in each aircraft in the event we were detained by ground fog.

The crew assembled gear, loaded the aircraft, left Anchorage on June 29, 1970, and arrived in Fairbanks that evening. Weather prolonged departure from Fairbanks

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until the afternoon of July 1st with the arrival time of 5:00 p.m. at Helmerick's. It became quite apparent that break-up was at least two weeks behind schedule and the lake on Helmerick's Island that we planned as a base of operations was still frozen solid. It was necessary to roll drums of gas approximately 1/4 mile over the tundra to service the aircraft that were secured on the river. This was accomplished during the foggy stretches of weather.

The fog grounded us until the 4th when the weather turned clear and allowed us to survey the area between the Colville River and Barrow. Most of the lakes were still frozen solid and only few groups of flightless birds were located. It appeared that only 40 percent of the geese were in the moulting stages, and the rest were capable of flight. Also, it became very obvious that the majority of the lakes were quite shallow and a great amount of discretion would be necessary before committing the aircraft to landings, since many of the lakes also had sandy bottoms. For this reason many groups of flightless birds were by-passed, during the actual banding. We adopted the method of evaluating water depth from the air by both crews, and then having the Beaver land first and check the actual depth, prior to the Gruzan's landing. On one occasion the Beaver became grounded on a large lake which had 2 1/2 feet of water in the middle but less than a foot towards shore with a sandy bottom. Agents Combs and Wendler spent a frustrating hour pushing and turning the Beaver until it faced deep water and could be pulled out with the engine.

Several more flights were made during the next few days locating geese and checking water depths. No large concentrations were found. The birds were mostly in small groups ranging from ten to twenty on up to several hundred. Fewer than 200 were seen between the Colville River and Barrow and none between Barrow and Wainwright. It was apparent that our most productive area would be in the vicinity of the Colville Delta and eastward towards Prudhoe Bay. It was also apparent that we would be making many drives for small bunches of birds and that water depth in many of the lakes would preclude any operations at all. On one flight we located an estimated 350 flightless whitefronts on an "L" shaped lake approximately one mile long. The lake was full of broken ice and no landing could be made. We returned two days later to find the lake ice-free and the birds gone. Some of the adjacent lakes in the immediate vicinity had also thawed and several small bunches of geese were observed, which were not noticed before. This observation, coupled with several similar experiences gave us the impression that these birds are prone to traveling overland from lake to lake. Normally, I do not believe this is true unless they are molested. Possibly, these birds were not able to molt in the lake of their choice because of the late ice conditions so picked on ice-free lakes in the general area. Later when the desired lake became ice-free, they moved and settled again. A total of 1168 whitefronts and one snow goose were handled with 11 recoveries. Of this total, a random sample of 311 were measured in accordance with the form used in previous years. The best drive we made netted 258 whitefronts and one snow goose.

On the 17th of July we made another reconnaissance trip west of the Colville Delta. Most of the lakes by now were either partially thawed or ice free.

This time we located large concentrations of molting geese on the peninsula north of Teshekpuk Lake. We estimated some 30 to 50 thousand flightless geese in this area. The majority were lesser Canadian Geese, with smaller bunches of brant, whitefronts, and snow geese.

Unfortunately, weather in the form of fog and winds kept us from making any drives in this area. By the 23rd about 50 percent of the geese were on the wing. The weather forecast was for continuing north winds during the next five days so the Project was terminated. At this time both aircraft returned to Anchorage.

Living accommodations were not the best, and I would not recommend Helmerick's as a base of operations for future projects. There are enough Dew Line sites along the coast to establish a crew within easy reach of the field operation and with advanced planning these are available to our Agents. If for some reason we could not be accommodated at one of these sites or at an oil company camp, I would seriously consider establishing a tent camp with mess facilities as being more conducive to maintaining the good morale of a hard-working crew than the Helmerick establishment.

Next year we should concentrate in that area north of Teshekpuk Lake. With a break in weather and the right equipment, a good number of geese and brant should be banded. Most of these lakes are shallow so the only successful way to band will be with small aircraft. I would suggest the use of a float equipped Super Cub and Cessna 180 as being capable of operating in these lakes. I would propose that these two aircraft be supported by the Grumman Goose. The Grumman would carry all of the equipment, boat, motor, nets, and stakes, and land in one of the deep lakes as close as possible to the lake to be worked. Equipment then would be ferried by the smaller planes to the trap site and back to the Grumman at the completion of the banding.

We have already written to Paramus, New Jersey, and obtained permission to accommodate a crew of five men at the Lonely Dew Line Station which is just north of the lakes in question. It will be necessary to ship gas to this site; however, there is an excellent airstrip available and shipment can be made anytime prior to the operation. The Grumman will be operated from the strip and the two float planes from the lagoon or nearby lake, whichever proves the most feasible. If necessary, gas can be ferried to the lake or lagoon with the Grumman.

In summary I believe this year's operation can be termed a success. Although we were not able to band as many geese as we had hoped, we did get a good representative sample from six different locations. The biggest accomplishment was getting established and determining where the birds are located and the equipment necessary for a profitable operation. Weather will always be the limiting factor since fog can and does generate along the coast quite rapidly

and will sometimes last for days. This year the break up was about ten days later than normal which apparently upset the molting pattern of the geese. Even so, we feel the birds in this area molt about a week to ten days later than the interior and west coast groups. For this reason I would suggest starting the next operation on or about July 4th.

Hopefully money will be available for an operation this summer. We cannot count on Agents from Region 1 as in the past; however, we should be able to support the Project with personnel from other Divisions.

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