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ALEUTIAN CANADA GOOSE SURVEY
CHAGULAK ISLAND 1983

By
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OBJECTIVES

A nesting population of Aleutian Canada Geese (Branta canadensis leucopareia) was discovered on Chagulak Island in July of 1982. This is only the second known wild nesting population of this endangered subspecies, the other being located at Buldir Island in the western Aleutian Islands. The discovery of this second Aleutian goose population prompted a fox eradication project on nearby Amukta Island in hopes that the geese would naturally expand their population from Chagulak Island. As time and weather permitted during the 1983 fox eradication work on Amukta Island, several trips were made to Chagulak in an attempt to further document the number of geese on the island and to determine if any were banded.

ISLAND DESCRIPTION

Chagulak Island is a part of the Islands of Four Mountains Group in the eastern Aleutian Islands. It is located at 52 degrees 34 minutes N, 171 degrees 08 minutes W and is approximately 842 ha. in size. Chagulak is roughly circular in shape and has a maximum diameter of 3.2 km. (Figure 1). The island is extremely rugged and composed of steep rocky ridges and cliffs with numerous pinnacles. These ridges and cliffs terminate at or near the shore with little (up to 10 meters) or no cobblestone beach extending into the water.

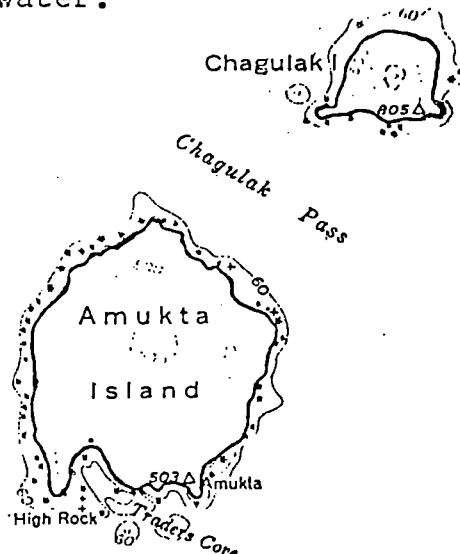


Figure 1. Amukta and Chagulak Islands.

PROCEDURES

Three of the four areas of significant goose habitat on Chagulak were visited by two to four biologists on three separate days to search for banded Aleutian Canada geese. Two of the areas were thoroughly walked and searched (SE point and west side). The actual search pattern varied with terrain and weather (fog limited our visibility and created safety hazards). Observations of geese in these two areas were made with the unaided eye or binoculars. Three nights were spent on the third (southwest arm) area, working from a spike camp. Observations at this location were made with binoculars and a spotting scope.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

A total of 136 observations of Aleutian Canada geese were made on the SW, SE, and W sides of Chagulak Island on three different dates. The majority of the birds observed were either not banded or too far away to determine if they had leg bands. Most of the birds observed were either paired or in small flocks of ten or fewer birds which exhibited some territoriality. The number of potential duplicate observations made is unknown because of changes in weather, time and location. The birds were seen mainly in the mossy/willow habitat and upper edge of the Elymus/umbell habitat.

The highlight of these observations was the sighting of two birds with metal FWS bands and a bird with a red colored leg band. Based on investigation of banding records, these birds were most likely banded on the wintering grounds in California. This would suggest that the Chagulak geese are not a distinct subpopulation as previously suspected, but rather winter with the Buldir birds.

It should be noted again that time and weather limited the completeness of this survey. The time limitation occurred due to the survey being conducted secondarily to the fox eradication efforts on Amukta Island. The following excerpts from the daily accounts of the 1983 Amukta camp will better explain the effort expended and some of the problems encountered in surveying geese at Chagulak.

- 6/9/83 Considered a day trip to Chagulak, but winds and fog precluded it, so concentrated on the trapping effort at the north end of Amukta.
- 6/10/83 Stormy day at our Amukta spike camp - no activity.
- 6/11/83 Strong NW winds would not permit a crossing to Chagulak. Concentrated on picking up traps on north side of Amukta.

6/12/83 Thought about Chagulak again, and even packed up our gear, but then the fog set in around the island and eliminated the possibility. We went over to Traders Cove on the SW side of Amukta and pulled our traps.

6/13/83 After considerable discussion, it was decided to attempt an overnight stay on Chagulak. The gear was packed and Adak was advised of our plans. Headed over to Chagulak at 1630 hours. The trip across the straights took 40 minutes. We then set up a spike camp on the west side of Chagulak Island behind a large sea stack. It should be noted that this is the best landing and camping beach on the island, but even it would be unsuitable during a storm.

6/14/83 It was decided to spend two additional nights on Chagulak in order to survey for geese on the southwest arm of Chagulak. The boat and all unnecessary gear was secured on the limited beach. The long arduous task of backpacking to the edge of the southwest arm (750-ft. elevation) with all our gear then began. It took most of the day (two trips) to get all of our gear to the top and camp set up. The climbing was very difficult due to the steep rugged terrain and wet vegetation.

Our efforts were rewarded as several geese were observed during our climb and after camp was set up. Groups of 5, 8, 6, and 2 geese were observed during the two climbs up the southwest arm. It was impossible to ascertain if any of these birds were banded, as they were flying at too great a distance. After camp was set up, a spotting scope was used to look for additional geese. Two groups of birds were subsequently observed above our camp, composed of 5 and 15 birds respectively. Two of the birds of the group of five had FWS metal bands on their left leg. The fog then rolled in and forced the discontinuation of further observation. Later in the evening nine geese were observed flying over the water on the south side of Chagulak. The distance at which they were seen precluded any determination as to whether or not they were banded.

6/15/83 Fog and rain all morning long precluded any goose observations. An attempt was made at 1100 hours to look for geese, but the fog closed down again. The weather improved slightly at 1630 hours and goose work began again. One biologist spotted a group of 3 birds and at the same time another biologist spotted an additional 30 birds up the hillside and slightly to the left. While we attempted to move closer to the birds, they became frightened and flew away. However, of the larger group, two birds had metal FWS bands and one had a red colored leg band. A continuous watch on 1/2 hour shifts was then kept to observe any returning birds. Six unbanded geese returned later in the evening.

6/16/83 Camp was disassembled and one last check was made for geese. Six unbanded birds were observed. As with the majority of the previous observations, the birds appeared to be paired and acted very territorial. The gear was then carried back down and loaded into the boat. It was then decided to split into two groups. One group would circumnavigate the island and photo record the rugged terrain of the island, since the fog had lifted to about 1400 feet the visibility was excellent. The other group attempted unsuccessfully to climb to the SE point from the north side to search for geese. Pictures were taken of the entire circumference of the island, concentrating on the four major goose areas. The two groups then joined together again and returned to base camp on the SE side of Amukta.

6/17/83 Fox work was conducted on Amukta.

6/18/83 The replacement crew arrived via the charter vessel "Western Pacific" and gear and people were transferred. The replacement crew then returned to the charter vessel and circumnavigated Amukta to help familiarize them with the island. Upon reaching the north side of the island, the fog lifted from Chagulak and it was decided to motor over and look at the SE point again. After arriving, it was decided that the surf was too rough for landing on Chagulak in our Zodiac. The charter vessel then returned to the base camp at Amukta and dropped off the new crew of four and two from the first Amukta crew. The charter vessel with two biologists still on board then departed for Nikolski.

6/19/83 Fox work continued on Amukta and Nikolski.

6/20/83 Fox work continued on Amukta. The two biologists returning from Nikolski on the center vessel stopped at Chagulak on the return trip. They were able to get ashore and climb the southeast point. They observed 12 unbanded birds.

6/21/83 Pulled anchor on the charter vessel and headed for Chagulak. The weather and seas improved slightly and it was decided to check one last area on the west side for geese. This area was thoroughly walked and six pairs and one flock of 17 geese were observed. It is unknown if any of the birds were banded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that additional surveys be conducted on Aleutian Canada geese at Chagulak as follows: 1) a more detailed and longer spring survey for returning geese using spike camps on the island 2) additional biological data, including eggs, blood samples and adult measurements be collected, and 3) an attempt be made to band some Chagulak geese in August.

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