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MUSKOX HERD ON NUNIVAK ISLAND INCREASING--NOW NUMBERS 126

The muskox, which bowed out of the Alaska scene a century or more ago, is making satisfactory progress in re-establishing itself, John L. Farley, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior said today.

The muskox likes its terrain wide, bleak and generally cold, Mr. Farley said, and that is just what the United States Government gave it 20 years ago when it established a herd of 31 animals at the National Wildlife Refuge on Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea. On Nunivak the animals wander at will with more than a million acres of subarctic habitat available, a handful of natives who stay strictly away from them, and about 4,900 reindeer which offer little competition for the food and space.

The 31 muskox which were placed on the Island in 1935 and 1936 have increased now to 126. This is 10 more than last year, Mr. Farley said. The calf crop for 1956 was 26, the largest crop to date. But the known loss of five, and 11 unaccounted for also establish all-time marks.

In the past the muskox has proved to be a meek-looking, usually slow-moving, but strictly unpredictable animal--so unpredictable that even Alaskans who are accustomed to having their game wild and big were happy to see the bushy beasts hie away to their island retreat, after a brief stay in an enclosure at University of Alaska, near Fairbanks.

The muskox was brought back for both sentimental and economic reasons. There are big expanses of territory between the tree-line in the far north and the ice-line still farther north. For untold centuries the muskox roamed this habitat, withstanding the hunting of the natives with bows and arrows. But they crumbled under the attacks of man with guns and by the time the United States took possession of Alaska

in 1867 the last of the muskox had disappeared. Canada, however, has a few hundred of the animals still roaming its sub-Arctic plains.

America renewed its interest in the muskox as early as 1927 when Alaskans indicated they would like to have the animals re-established. In 1930 Congress appropriated the necessary funds—$40,000—to bring 34 of them from Greenland, via Norway, and ship them to Alaska, via train from New York to Seattle.

The four or five years during which the animals were kept in the huge pasture at the University of Alaska for purposes of study proved conclusively that the muskox was an unpredictable animal which wanted to be let alone. When the study period was over the herd was transferred to the muskeg wastes of Nunivak, where there are no predators.

It was nip and tuck for a long while. Of the original 34 brought to Alaska 11 died and eight calves had been born, a net loss of three at the time the transfer to the island was made. For the next few years the herd made little progress, population-wise, and by 1948 the herd had increased only to 57 animals. But in 1954 the herd totaled an even 100, thanks largely to a calf crop of 21. In 1955 it numbered 116 and in 1956 it had climbed to 126. Since 1947 known losses have totaled 31; there are 34 animals not accounted for--probably lost on the ice or drowned after plunging down the sheer face of Cape Mohican.

The economic worth of the muskox is still a question for the future. It is in a land which is little utilized except by wildlife. It is making its own fight for its right to re-occupy the land where it once lived by the thousands. Its meat is edible and for those not accustomed to the taste of prime beef it is quite satisfactory. The hide of the muskox would probably be worth more than its wool. This is because the muskox does not stand shearing as does a sheep and because separating the long coarse hair from the wool is too expensive for the amount of wool obtained. Besides that, of course, there is the problem of actually shearing a vigorous animal which might "explode" any time without warning.

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