



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FWS BEGINS STUDY OF REINDEER ON ST. MATTHEW ISLAND IN BERING SEA

With the assignment of two wildlife biologists to St. Matthew Island in Bering Sea, the Fish and Wildlife Service has begun its recently acquired responsibility of managing the reindeer herds in certain specified Alaska areas, it was announced today by the Department of the Interior.

Management of the Alaska reindeer is within the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the herds have been considered the exclusive property of the native population and the Government. However, that Bureau is not in a position to carry out management practices in instances where reindeer revert to the status of big game.

It is pointed out that since the passage of the Reindeer Act in 1937, substantial benefits in building up "domesticated" herds has been accomplished, but in places, particularly on St. Matthew, Umnak and Atka Islands, the reindeer have increased until critical over-population conditions exist. St. Matthew Island is part of the Bering Sea National Wildlife Refuge.

Under an agreement between the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Land Management, all in the Department of the Interior, the responsibility for the management of reindeer in those areas now rests with the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife.

The situation seems most critical on St. Matthew Island and for that reason the biologists have been sent there to make a study of conditions. Indications are that there are about 800 reindeer on the island and that the food supply will not sustain that many animals for any length of time. The program for the management of the herd will be worked out after the biologists report their findings.

The St. Matthew reindeer herd was started in 1944 when the Coast Guard brought in 29 of the animals to assure an emergency food supply during the war

period. Because there are virtually no natives on the island to harvest the herd and because there are relatively few predators, the herd has increased rapidly until it has exceeded the sustained carrying capacity of the range and will eventually destroy the range and itself too.

The agreement specifies that "reindeer herds which have resulted from transplants of obscure origin and have not been introduced into animal husbandry herds maintained by and for the natives as specified by the Reindeer Act and have maintained themselves and increased in a wild state, shall be classified as big game animals, subject to the control of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife" of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

St. Matthew Island is more than 200 miles from the nearest Alaska coast. It is 22 miles long and about 2 miles wide. Atka and Umnak are in the Aleutian chain.

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