

NUNIVAK MUSKOX HUNT

First in Alaska

By Robert A. Hinman
Regional Supervisor
Game Division
Fairbanks



Robert Hinman began work with the department in 1965 as game biologist. He became regional supervisor in 1967. He holds a B.S. degree in wildlife management from University of Alaska and an M.S. degree in wildlife management from Utah State University.

IN APRIL, 1968, the Alaska Board of Fish and Game established a sport hunting season for muskoxen on Nunivak Island. Seven and a half years later in September, 1975, the first sport hunter set foot on Nunivak Island in quest of the shaggy beast the Eskimos know as oominguk, "the bearded one." The intervening years had been filled with controversy over the proposed hunts, and they were not held because of opposition from various sources.

Muskoxen were once present along Alaska's arctic coast but were extirpated in the middle 19th century. They were then reintroduced to the state by transplants from Greenland in 1934. Animals were held at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks for several years and then transported down the Yukon River and out to Nunivak Island.

The muskoxen flourished on Nunivak and reached a peak population of about 750 animals in the late 1960s. However, by this time it was apparent to both state and federal biologists that the herd was in trouble. Not only were there too many animals for the available winter range, but the sex ratio was highly distorted toward bulls. Calf production and survival also were declining.

Nunivak Island is far south of normal muskox range. As animals of the high arctic, muskoxen are usually found only where snowfall is extremely light. However, Nunivak is good muskox range. High winds produce windswept sand dune areas along the south side. While most of the island is good summer range,

only about 4,000 acres is good winter range and this area is being abused by the high population of muskoxen.

The management program proposed in the past by state and federal biologists included transplant of young and female animals to suitable sites on the Alaska mainland, donation of animals to qualified zoos and museums and the sport hunting of surplus old male muskoxen.

Transplants to five locations in Alaska removed a total of 160 animals in a four-year program. Proposed hunts for trophy bulls on the island were blocked by opposition from several political sources, including the Secretary of the Interior whose concurrence was necessary since Nunivak is a National Wildlife Refuge.

The preparation of an environmental impact assessment in 1975 paved the way for federal approval and the first hunt was scheduled for last September. The special regulations for the muskox hunt were designed to provide a hunt of the maximum sporting quality and to maximize the involvement of the natives of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island.

Federal regulations banned the use of motorized vehicles, except boats, within one mile of the shoreline and within one mile of muskoxen. State regulations provided for hunting by permit only and required hunters to make arrangements with natives of Mekoryuk for food, lodging and transportation. A great deal of time was spent working with natives of Mekoryuk to prepare them for the job of accommodating the sport hunters.

Eighty-two persons applied for the hunt, 54 of them Alaskan residents. Ten permittees and four alternates were drawn by lottery. Eight permittees and one alternate were Alaskan residents. Two Alaskan permittees elected not to use their permits and these were issued to the first two alternates.

Hunters arrived at Nunivak by air which is the only feasible means of access to the island. While in the village, they usually stayed with a native family, often the native who had been assigned to assist the hunter. Hunters must use boats at this time of year and must travel from Mekoryuk around the coast of the island until a suitable animal is found.

While in the village, most of the hunters visited native families, observed native handicrafts such as the making of Nunivak masks and ivory carvings and participated in outdoor activities including waterfowl hunting, fishing and clam digging.

In the earlier contacts with the natives of Mekoryuk to prepare them for the new experience of providing for the needs of sport hunters, it was stressed that the quality of the hunters' total experience was more important than the actual killing of a muskoxen. Accommodations in native homes, involvement with village activities and travel with native hunters in small boats on the open sea contributed to this experience.

In a period of about one month, all 10 hunters were successful in taking a trophy bull in hunts

ranging from one to four days. The oft-repeated allegation that hunting muskox would not be sporting because the animals would assume their defensive ring proved to be unfounded. Several hunters reported having difficulty stalking to within 150 yards of the animals. Some animals, particularly lone bulls, exhibited aggressive behavior when approached by hunters. All of the hunters reported that the hunt was satisfactorily sporting.

The hunters salvaged all the meat from each of the animals taken. Some hunters donated meat to the local villagers, but most of them, particularly the Alaskans, returned home with all or most of their meat. Hunters were surprised to find that the meat of the muskox, even old bulls, is palatable and resembles beef or bison. Naturally, the trophy portions of the animals were also salvaged and Eskimos assisted the hunters in preparing skins and heads for taxidermy.

The muskox hunt was important, not only to the hunter who was allowed to pursue this unique species for the first time in modern history, but also to the residents of Nunivak Island. In return for their assistance and support of the hunters during the hunt, the village earned nearly \$20,000, which was an extremely important contribution to their economy.

The outlook for future hunts is good. There is a need to remove several hundred surplus bulls from the island. Hunts will be tightly controlled to maintain the highest possible quality of the hunting experience, and, for this reason, it is not considered possible nor desirable to try to remove all available animals in one hunt. Plans are being made for another hunt in the early spring of 1976 when snowmachines will be the chief method of access. ■

HUNT SUCCESS—Ken Krasselt, Anchorage, right, with musk ox he shot in first hunt on Nunivak Island. Peter Smith, left, of Mekoryuk, Nunivak Island, aided in hunt.

Photo by Joe LaRocca



Alaska

FISH *tales* **& GAME** *trails*

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1976

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

