

FOUR BIRDS, THAT'S ALL

Alaska's Endangered Wildlife

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EARLY IN 1975, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game announced a proposal for reducing the wolf population in a very limited area of the state. To many, this was not an earth-shattering proposal because both department biologists and many informed citizens are aware that trappers and sport hunters had harvested a recorded 4,940 wolves in the state over the preceding five-year period, yet there are probably more wolves in Alaska today than anytime in the last 15 years. Biologists try to keep tabs on trends to see if wolf populations are increasing or decreasing, and do not attempt the impossible task of enumerating total numbers. Nevertheless, biologists believe it is safe to estimate that there is a statewide wolf population of around 10,000 animals.

Citizens in the other 49 states are rarely aware of the true situation in Alaska, and when a distorted and untrue news documentary concerning the hunt was aired over national television, more than 6,000 letters of concern were sent to department offices. These letters ranged from polite requests to stop the program, to abusive obscenities to threats to kill our staff. Yet the letters all had one thing in common — the erroneous belief that the Alaskan wolf is a rare or endangered species! Many letters also alluded to other animals, such as moose, brown or grizzly bear and wolverine, as also being endangered in Alaska. Not one letter, to my knowledge, mentioned even one of the four truly endangered species that occur in our vast state.

Interestingly enough, all four species are birds. The major reasons for their decline have not been hunters or trappers, but have instead been the effects of pesticides in the food chain, or naturally-occurring predation. To reiterate the old saying, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing," a fair portion of the antiwolf hunt letters received state that if the department would quit "interfering" with the animals, "nature's balance" would solve the entire problem in short order. These writers have perhaps never recognized that man is now, and forever, an inseparable part of any ecosystem and his effects directly or

indirectly are one of the major reasons for the decline of a huge number of fishes, reptiles, amphibians, birds, mammals and plants.

As human beings we can no longer afford to sit back and let nature take its course. We must instead seek out and try to understand other human effects and priorities on our wildlife. We must further try to minimize a recognized "imbalance" by scientifically organized manipulative processes; there has never been a true "balance of nature," only a changing, dynamic flow of populations influenced by various events. Let's look at the species which are really endangered:

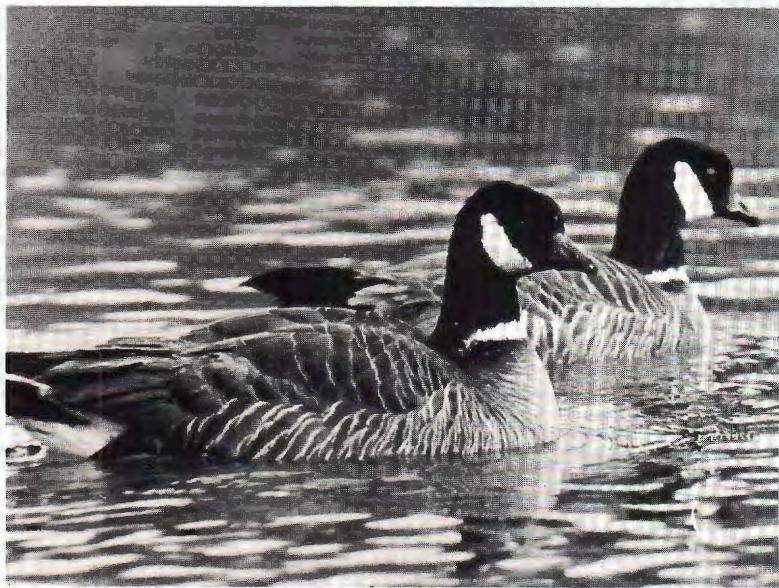
THE ALEUTIAN CANADA GOOSE is a very small race of the Canada goose, only slightly larger than the tiny cackling goose. As far as known, it presently nests only on Buldir Island in the Aleutian Chain. It was formerly found on many Aleutian islands, including Amchitka, Agattu, Attu, Semichi, Atka, Unalaska, Amlia, Adak, Kanaga, Tanaga and Kiska during the summers. In winter the Aleutian Canada goose migrates to Japan and down the Pacific Coast to California.

The reason for the decline of this species is believed to have been predation on nesting birds by arctic foxes brought to these islands by fox farmers. Introduced rats may also have been a contributing factor. Neither foxes nor rats were introduced to Buldir Island because of its relative inaccessibility, and this is presumed to be the reason for the survival of the estimated 300 individuals which continue to nest there.

Biologists with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service captured 16 goslings from Buldir in 1963, and 75 of their descendants were reintroduced to Amchitka, which theoretically had been rid of foxes in the spring of 1971. These birds had been raised under relatively domestic conditions and disappeared shortly from the release site. Numerous eagles were observed in the area at this time and the island was apparently not yet rid of foxes.

In 1974, another group of geese was flown to the
(continued on page 16)

Endangered Wildlife



Aleutian Canada Goose

island for release, but rumor has it that a fox was observed sitting beside the runway as the plane landed! This species does have an excellent potential for breeding in captivity and eventually we can hope that the foxes will be eliminated and that this unique bird will once again thrive on a multitude of these quiet islands.

THE PEREGRINE FALCON is also on the "endangered" list in Alaska. While the present distribution of the American peregrine (duck hawk) subspecies includes breeding grounds stretching from the nonarctic portions of Alaska and Canada south to Baja California, central Arizona and Mexico, the smaller, paler arctic peregrine breeds in the treeless tundra of arctic Alaska, Canada and western Greenland. This subspecies migrates south through eastern and middle North America to the Gulf Coast and then south as far as Argentina and Chile. The American peregrine has recently been extirpated as a breeding species east of the Rocky Mountains in the United States and in the majority of the eastern Canadian provinces.

It is the migratory habit of these rapid flying, highly effective predators which has partially contributed to their lowered numbers. Laboratory and field evidence all points to the cumulative effects of ingestion of chlorinated pesticides and their breakdown products obtained from their prey. These chemicals, primarily DDT and DDE, have increased adult mortality and reduced production of young, particularly by causing eggs to become thin-shelled or otherwise nonviable. Certainly the major portion of this contamination occurred outside Alaska, as we have few agricultural or pastoral areas where pesticides have been used in abundance. Some habitat

destruction and the past collection of young and adults for falconry purposes have also been factors, particularly with the more southern-living American peregrine.

As the potential for breeding these birds in captivity is presently poor, the most often heard suggestion to protect them is to work toward the elimination of food chain pesticides in the environment. While federal, state and province laws make it illegal to hunt or take these birds, state and federal agencies involved in the regulated use of pesticides need to be fully cognizant of the dangers confronting numerous beneficial predators, if these birds are to survive.

THE ESKIMO CURLEW and THE SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS are the other two species which are on Alaska's formal list of endangered species. This listing is based merely on the fact that both species had been, at some time in the past, observed in Alaska or Alaskan waters.

Eskimo curlews were considered extinct for many years and then a few individuals were seen on wintering grounds in the southern United States. The most recent observations in Alaska date back to the 1800s.

The waters of Alaska are at the edge of the range of the short-tailed albatross and it is rarely seen here. It nests on islands owned by Japan and is virtually extinct because of harassment there.

Only in the past few years has the American public become partially aware of the decline of some of our wildlife. Professionals in the physical and biological sciences have worked for years to perpetuate and increase numerous endangered species throughout the world, but their tentative conclusions and programs have purposefully shied away from emotional hucksterism and have thus remained mostly unnoticed by the general public. Meanwhile, many groups, societies, clubs and business interests have for their own single-minded purposes seized upon the upsurging "ecology" theme, and have deluged the curious, but uninvolved, average citizen with half-truths, whole lies and simplistic answers to complicated problems.

These groups use "Madison Avenue" techniques to sell their points of view (or their outdoor television program which in turn sells their sponsor's products) and in turn thrive on the number of converts drawn into their fold. It is refreshing that so many Americans are finally exhibiting concern for our wildlife, but it is depressing that the information they are receiving is so often purposefully distorted that, when public pressure is brought to bear on a "save the animal" issue, it more often hurts the animal than helps. □

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