

by Greg Balogh

Wild Goose Chase Helps Save Wild Goose



**An armful of Aleutian Canada geese
in the high grass of Buldir Island**

USFWS photo

**Opposite page: Relocating geese,
Buldir Island**

USFWS photo

Through 25-foot swells, the small boat crept along on its 200-mile journey. Below decks in the engine room, John Martin fought back waves of nausea brought on by diesel fumes and the heaving sea. His job: to keep four dozen endangered goose eggs close enough to the engine to stay warm, but not so close that they would cook.

Until his recent retirement, John was Manager of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, the most expansive refuge in the nation. Twenty years after his stint as a sometimes queasy caretaker of endangered eggs, he no longer needs Dramamine as a dietary supplement. Also retired is the office chair from which he helped direct one of the most dramatic endangered species success stories to date: the recovery of the Aleutian Canada goose (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*).

This goose is not the same resident critter that defiles soccer fields and cemeteries across the U.S. Instead, it nests in the Aleutian Islands, an archipelago that extends from southeastern Alaska hundreds of miles into the Pacific. In fact, the Aleutian Canada goose is the only subspecies of Canada goose that nests exclusively on islands, and the only one with a range that reaches into Asia. However, despite its remote breeding territory and wide range, this bird very nearly disappeared.

By the late 1800's, the fur trade came close to driving the Aleutian Canada goose into extinction. On almost every island where this goose bred, fox farmers released arctic and red foxes (*Alopex lagopus* and *Vulpes vulpes*, respectively), leaving these non-native predators to fend for themselves. The

trappers returned when the foxes were in thick winter pelage. During spring and summer, the foxes feasted upon the geese. Eggs, incubating adults, flightless molting birds, and young—the foxes ate them all. Other island nesting birds, such as puffins and petrels, also were hit hard, but none as badly as the Aleutian Canada goose.

By 1936, foxes had been introduced to an astounding 190 islands within the breeding range of the Aleutian Canada goose. For a time, biologists thought this unique bird had become extinct. But there was one place they hadn't looked.

At the far end of the Aleutian chain sits a steep-sided volcano, Buldir Island. Surrounded by crashing surf, there is no place on its perimeter to land a boat. This presented a serious challenge to biologists wanting to survey the island for remnant geese. But the island's inhospitable coast was actually the goose's greatest salvation; what kept biologists out apparently kept fox farmers out, too. This fox-free habitat turned out to be the goose's last refuge. A 1963 expedition to Buldir found 200-300 geese.

Early recovery efforts focused on raising captive flocks from wild eggs (hence John Martin's egg-sitting job). After several months, the young birds were released on small fox-free islands.

Unfortunately, the survival rate for pen-reared, parentless birds was not good. Field crews decided to try something else. They began trying to capture entire family groups of wild geese, which often required the biologists to sprint up and down 30 degree slopes in chest-high soaking wet grass, trying to herd the geese into groups. The molting adults, with their young, were then hauled down the steep volcanic slopes to small inflatable boats. After an often harrowing launch in crashing surf, the boat carrying the penned geese rendezvoused with a larger ship offshore. Several days later, biologists carefully released the birds onto a fox-free island. They hoped that the young geese, when they reached breeding age, would return to the place they learned to fly. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. For the next 20 years, field crews repeated this wild goose chase with astounding success, and the transplanted family groups thrived.

Come winter, the heartiest of the field crews were dropped off on the most remote islands imaginable, much the way the old time fox farmers had dropped off their foxes. But the job of this elite field corps was not to foster fox populations. Quite the opposite; they methodically removed all of the introduced mammalian predators that they encountered. Each island cleared of non-native foxes meant additional nesting habitat for the geese and other seabird species. So far, 35 islands have been cleared.

Meanwhile, banding operations on Buldir taught us where the birds spent winter. Armed with this knowledge, federal and state officials were able to enact hunting closures in strategic portions of California's Central Valley and southern Oregon. Soon, landowners were pitching in to do their part in helping the goose recover. The Gallo's, famous vintners, set aside 2,000 acres (810 hectares) of grassland where wintering geese could graze and roost in peace. Some especially important parcels of land were purchased outright

and added to the San Joaquin River NWR. Other goose habitat parcels are being managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the state of California, various local governments in California and Oregon, and even a local utility company. Also important to the geese are the private dairy farms near Colusa, California, where the geese and cattle must compete for grass.

A wide array of interests can be proud of their hard work to recover the Aleutian Canada goose, from federal

and state biologists to the fox trappers who cleared the way for geese and the dairy farmers, wine makers, and utility who share their land with the birds. The more than 35,000 Aleutian Canada geese alive today owe these people a debt of gratitude for reversing the mistakes of the past.

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