

by David B. Allen

A Land of Superlatives



At 586,000 square miles (1.5 million square kilometers), Alaska is one-fifth the size of the lower 48 States. Superimposed on a U.S. map, Alaska would stretch from Florida to Minnesota to California. Geographically, our State covers four time zones, but for practical reasons only two are used throughout most of the state. The westernmost Aleutian Islands are actually in the Eastern Hemisphere. There are 33,904 miles (54,550 km) of coastline, twice that in the lower 48. Alaska also boasts more than 3 million lakes larger than 20 acres (8 hectares), more than 3,000 rivers, 63 percent of the Nation's wetlands, 39 mountain ranges, 17 of the 20 highest peaks in North America, 1,800 islands; and 100,000 glaciers.

Transportation in Alaska presents unique challenges, since less than three percent of the state is accessible by road. Aircraft are a lifeline to many villages and bush communities throughout the state. But severe winter weather and high costs can make travel within the state complicated; it often costs more to fly from Anchorage to Barrow than it does to fly from Anchorage to Washington, D.C.

Over 85 percent of the National Wildlife Refuge System (nearly 77 million acres, or 32 million ha) is in Alaska, and more than 42,000 river miles (67,600 km) are within refuge system boundaries. Arctic NWR alone is the size of South Carolina. Alaskan climates also can vary widely. Temperatures range from -80 degrees F (-37 degrees C) in winter to 100 degrees F (38 degrees C) in summer.

Contrast Alaska's sheer size with its small human population (621,000) and you get a rough average of one person per square mile. However, more than 75 percent of Alaska's population resides in the larger towns and cities. Numerous Alaska native villages are scattered throughout the State, and physical isolation has produced a cultural diversity here that is probably unmatched. There are 226 Federally-

recognized tribes with 15 different language groups, and 16 percent of the State's population is Alaska Native. Learn more by reading "An Alaska Native's Perspective" in this issue. Alaska has the longest international border of any state, and is located in a unique international "neighborhood"—seven other nations share the circumpolar region encompassing the Arctic Ocean and Beaufort Sea. These nations include Russia, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Greenland (Denmark). Our International Program is described in this issue.

Only 23 species federally listed as endangered or threatened occur in Alaska. Seventeen of these are managed by the National Marine Fisheries Service, with the other six managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Although Alaska has relatively few listed species, the challenges associated with recovering them are daunting. All but one of the listed species managed by FWS (the Aleutian shield-fern, *Polystichum aleuticum*) are migratory, wintering in very different ecosystems than they breed, and their extensive ranges make international cooperation in management necessary. Much of remote Alaska is still unsurveyed for wildlife and plants, and there is comparatively little knowledge available on arctic and subarctic species. Some species are found in very isolated areas, and it can be hard to track their problems and progress. (Read about these challenges in this issue.) Because some species are so wide-ranging, the average area covered in formal Endangered Species Act (section 7) consultations in Alaska exceeds 100 million acres (40 million ha). Finally, a strong subsistence culture thrives in Alaska. The FWS works side-by-side with Alaskan natives to manage listed species so that both recovery and cultural needs may be met.

Recent successes for endangered and threatened species in Alaska include recovery of the Arctic peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), proposed delisting

of the Aleutian Canada goose (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*), a partnership with the fishing industry for conservation of the short-tailed albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*), and a Spectacled Eider Management Plan for the Yukon Delta.

The FWS takes an ecosystem management approach to its stewardship of Alaska's threatened and endangered species, and we recognize two key factors: (1) the various components of an environment are interrelated, and (2) success in fish and wildlife management issues begins by involving State agencies and a broad spectrum of publics. I hope you enjoy this issue, which is devoted to Alaskan ecosystems and issues.

David B. Allen is the FWS Alaska Regional Director.