

# “Sea Otter” and the Geese

by Bruce Woods



**Once thought to be extinct, the Aleutian Canada goose responded well to the work of “Sea Otter” Jones and others. It is now recovered and off the threatened and endangered species list.**

*USFWS photo*

Robert “Sea Otter” Jones first came to the Alaska’s Aleutian Islands while serving as a radar officer in the U.S. Army during World War II. He moved to Kodiak after the war, but turned his attention to the Aleutian archipelago again in 1948 when he joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as manager of the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge (see sidebar).

A skilled dory operator, Jones visited the remote reaches of the islands in his care, often landing on dangerous, surf-battered shorelines in the sturdy little work boats. His nickname dates back to the early 1950s, when Jones was involved in attempts to return northern sea otters (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*), which had been driven nearly to extinction by the fur trade, to their former Aleutian range. Although these early efforts were unsuccessful, Jones’s work, and that of other Fish and Wildlife Service biologists (notably Karl W. Kenyon), set a course that would eventually lead to a strong recovery for the species, although it has since declined again significantly from undetermined causes.

Ironically, although the “Sea Otter” nickname stayed with him, one of the highlights of Jones’s career involved a different species: the Aleutian Canada goose (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*). These birds were also victims of the fur industry, although indirectly. In the mid-1700s, Russian fur traders first introduced nonindigenous foxes onto islands in the Aleutian chain. The predators thrived, feeding on local birds and their eggs, and eventually supported a rich fur industry. By 1936, foxes had been introduced to at least 190 islands in the Aleutians, and to more than 400 others

along Alaska’s coast. All of these islands fell within the sole breeding range of the Aleutian Canada goose. Unfortunately, the birds were particularly vulnerable to predation. For one thing, they are ground nesters, and their eggs and chicks were easy targets for the foxes. Furthermore, the adult birds are flightless during the molting season and, while on shore, are extremely vulnerable to predators during this period.

So hard did these introduced predators hit the Aleutian Canada goose population that not a single bird was observed in the Aleutians between 1938 and 1962. The little goose was thought to be extinct.

But “Sea Otter” Jones never gave up hope. As Vernon Byrd, now Supervisory Wildlife Biologist at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, tells it: “Bob thought there might be geese left somewhere. He understood that the reason the geese had declined was the introduction of foxes on their nesting islands. As a result, Bob started trying to take foxes off one island so, if he ever found geese, he could either restore them or they would come back on their own. That was really sort of the beginning of the recovery program.”

In 1962, Jones forced his dory through the surf and rocks to land on



**Robert "Sea Otter" Jones**

*USFWS photo*

Buldir Island. So hazardous was the approach to this remote piece of rock that it's believed foxes were never introduced to Buldir. It was here that Bob Jones found his Aleutian Canada geese. At the time, he estimated that this remnant population, which may have represented the world's entire population of Aleutian Canada geese, numbered no more than 300 birds. In 1967, the rediscovered goose was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Protection Act of 1966, a precursor of today's Endangered Species Act.

The recovery process began quickly. In the 1970s, Service biologists began moving birds from Buldir to other islands from which, following Jones' plan, foxes had been eliminated. Thus began one of the most spectacular recoveries of a species ever accomplished. Protection of the birds on their California and Oregon wintering grounds, including hunting closures, the establishment of California's San Joaquin

National Wildlife Refuge in 1987, and partnerships with private landowners in the Pacific Northwest, who managed habitat on their own lands for the benefit of the geese, greatly aided the species' dramatic comeback.

By 2001, the estimated population of Aleutian Canada geese reached 37,000, with birds nesting throughout most of the species' former range. With that milestone reached, the goose was declared recovered and removed from the national list of endangered and threatened species.

"Sea Otter" Jones retired from the Service in 1980. He passed away in 1998, leaving, in both furred and feathered forms, a conservation legacy on refuge lands that few have ever equaled.

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**The Aleutian Islands NWR eventually became part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. Today, the Alaska Maritime NWR, which includes territory first placed under protection in 1892, consists of more than 2,400 islands, headlands, rocks, islets, spires, and reefs of the Alaskan coast. It reaches from Cape Lisburne on the Chukchi Sea to the tip of the Aleutians and eastward to Forrester Island on the border of British Columbia. The 4.5 million-acre (1.8 ha) refuge is a spectacular blend of tundra, rain forest, cliffs, volcanoes, beaches, lakes, and streams. Most of the refuge (2.64 million acres; 1.07 million ha ) is wilderness.**