The Aleutian Islands Unit

is part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge established to protect migratory birds, marine mammals, and their habitats. The unit comprises some 200 islands that extend over a thousand miles.

ALEUTIAN ISLANDS - THE CHAIN OF LIFE

A bridge between two continents, these islands are some of the most forbidding and scenic places in the world. Plush green tundra, brilliant wildflowers, soaring eagles, and spawning salmon are common. Breathtaking landscapes, fantastic mammal and bird colonies, earthquakes, and unpredictable weather are part of the uniqueness of these wonderful islands.

The Aleutians are actually the peaks of a submarine mountain range. Most of the islands are mountainous with numerous lakes, ponds, and streams. Fifty-seven volcanoes (13 over 5,000 feet high) are visible in the chain and many are active.

A HOME FOR WILDLIFE

The islands and coastal waters are home to marine mammals, seabirds, waterfowl, land mammals, and other wildlife. Sea lions and harbor seals inhabit the shorelines. Sea otters are abundant, especially from Adak to Kiska. They were once nearly eliminated because of their valuable fur but are now protected. Whales and porpoises are found in coastal waters. Introduced mammals include the caribou/reindeer and arctic fox.

The refuge is an important resting and feeding stop for many migratory birds. Over 250 species of birds have been observed along the chain and new species from Asia are added to the list almost annually.

The flora is rich and diverse, a wonderful mix of plants from both North America and Asia. Grasses, sedges, lichens, mosses, and heath plants carpet the landscape. Bountiful and colorful wildflowers include chocolate lily, monkshood, lupine, buttercup, iris, fireweed, and several species of orchid. Large beds of kelp are found along the shorelines and wildrye grows near the beaches. The islands are treeless except for a few introduced spruce.

Few oceans are as productive as those surrounding the Aleutians. The cold, turbulent waters provide a fisheries resource important to foreign and domestic fleets, sport anglers, subsistence users, and wildlife. Pollack, herring, sole, cod, halibut, shellfish, and salmon are plentiful. Dolly Varden and salmon spawn in streams throughout the chain. Pink salmon are the most abundant but chum, coho, and sockeye salmon are also found.

THE FIRST INHABITANTS

The people native to the Aleutians are known as Aleuts. They refer to themselves as UNANGAN which means "people." The rich flora and fauna of the islands once supported between 15,000 and 25,000 Aleuts. They built villages along the seacoasts and lived on the abundant marine mammals, fish, seabirds, marine invertebrates, and seaweed. Evidence of these villages still exists on nearly every island. The Russians arrived around 1745 bringing violence, slavery, and disease to these proud and resourceful people. By 1831 the Aleut population had dwindled to less than a thousand persons. Today villages exist only on Atka, Umnak, Unalaska, Akutan, and Unimak islands.

PARADISE FOR BIRDS

Brightly colored puffins, swarming flocks of auklets, noisy murre colonies, thousands of flapping gulls; together they represent the vast marine resource for which the Aleutians are known. The islands provide nesting habitat for some 10 million seabirds. The world's largest known colony of crested and least auklets is found on Kiska and nearly a million northern fulmars nest on Chagulak. Tiny Kaligagan supports Alaska's largest colony of tufted puffins, over 100,000 individuals. Seabirds spend most of their life at sea but return to the islands each spring to raise their young.

The islands offer opportunities to see birdlife not found elsewhere in North America. Whooper swans, tufted ducks, Siberian rubythroats, wood sandpipers, far eastern curlews, and common black-headed gulls are a few of the more regular Asiatic visitors. Common terrestrial birds include the bald eagle, raven, rock ptarmigan, peregrine falcon, snow bunting, song sparrow, lapland longspur, winter wren, and rosy finch. All except the lapland longspur are year-round residents. Rock sandpipers and black oystercatchers are found on the beaches and shoreline rocks. Terns, puffins, cormorants, and guillemots can often be seen on nearshore ocean waters, harbors, and bays.

Waterfowl most easily seen are the green-winged teal, mallard, greater scaup, harlequin duck, and common eider. Emperor geese, which nest on the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, visit the Aleutians during the winter months. The refuge is also the nesting stronghold of the endangered Aleutian Canada goose.

RECREATION

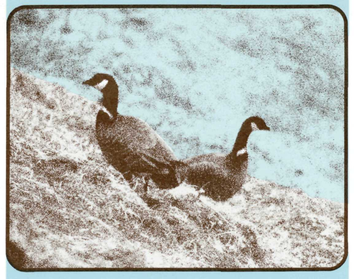
— A visitor center is located on Adak island offering displays and information. In addition, the refuge staff provides interpretive programs and educational assistance to schools and other groups.

— Recreational activities include wildlife observation, photography, hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, trapping, cross-country skiing and beachcombing. Check with the refuge staff prior to a visit to determine which activities are allowed and what regulations apply.

— Motorized vehicles are allowed only on established, hard-surfaced, maintained roads on Attu, Shemya, and Adak islands.

— All trash must be packed out. "Minimum impact" camping techniques are required.

— Destroying, disturbing, digging or removing Native artifacts, World War II debris, and other historical items is prohibited.



PROTECTING SPECIAL WILDLIFE

Aleutian wildlife faces threats from many human activities. These include predation by introduced animals, entanglement in gillnets, overharvest of fish resources, pollution, and disturbance by photographers and hikers. Seabirds are especially vulnerable because most of them nest colonially and lay only one or two eggs each year. Disturbance by aircraft, boats, and humans can cause these birds to abandon their nests. They often panic and the resulting confusion causes eggs and young to be knocked off the cliffs. The remaining young and eggs are exposed to predators. Repeated disturbances can eliminate breeding activities entirely.

Seabirds are a primary reason for the richness of the ocean and a vital link in its nutrient cycle. These birds return thousands of tons of organic matter (droppings) to the ocean. Droppings contain phosphates and nitrates needed to produce phytoplankton, tiny marine plants that are the basis of the marine food chain. Without these nutrients fewer fish and other marine organisms would be produced. It is in the best interest of all of us to protect these special birds.

WEATHER

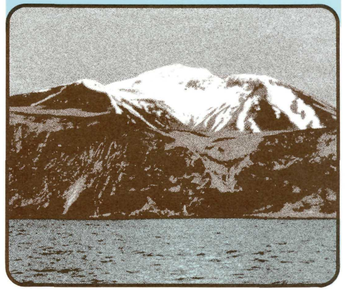
The Aleutian climate is characterized by precipitation, fog, high winds and frequent, often violent cyclonic storms. Clear, sunny days are rare. Weather along the chain is very local. It can change dramatically over a short distance or even within a span of a few minutes at one location. Summer temperatures average only around 50 degrees but winter temperatures average 30 degrees which is relatively mild for Alaska. Warm clothing and rain gear are necessary year-round.

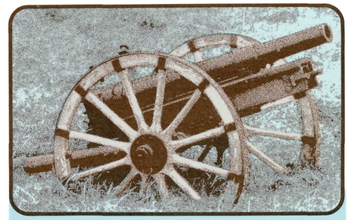
VISITING THE ISLANDS

— It is difficult to visit many islands because of remoteness, rough seas, winds, and rocky shorelines. Some islands have restricted access in order to protect wildlife.

— Permission from the appropriate military command is required to visit Adak (U.S. Navy), Shemya (U.S. Air Force) and Attu (U.S. Coast Guard). Regularly scheduled airlines serve Dutch Harbor, Adak and Shemya from Anchorage. Air travel is often delayed because of the weather. Commercial lodging is available only at Dutch Harbor.

— Portions of several islands are owned by Native corporations. These lands should be respected as private property. Contact the refuge office if you are uncertain about land status.





WAR ON THE REFUGE

Little known to many Americans, an important phase of World War II occurred on refuge lands. Following a carrier attack on Dutch Harbor in June 1942, Japanese forces seized positions on Attu and Kiska islands. U.S. forces responded by establishing bases on Adak and Amchitka. These bases were used for bombing the Japanese and launching an assault that resulted in a hard won U.S. victory at Attu followed by the evacuation of Japanese forces from Kiska. Much of the war's aftermath can still be seen today as quonset huts, old runways, metal dumps, gun posts, and other military debris litter the landscape. Military installations are presently located at Adak, Shemya, and Attu.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge
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FPO Seattle, WA 98791-0009
Telephone: (907) 592-2406/2407

The Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge is part of a nationwide system of wildlife refuges under the administration of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior. As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior is responsible for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. The Department fosters wise use of our land and water resources, protects fish and wildlife, preserves the environment and cultural values of national parks and historical places, and provides for enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation.

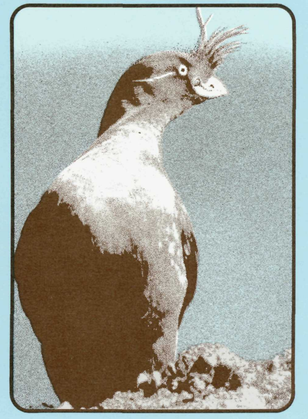
Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

TAKE PRIDE IN AMERICA

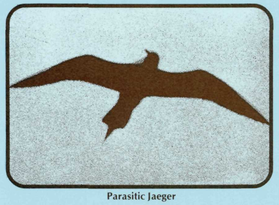
The National Wildlife Refuge System in Alaska comprises 16 units which together cover a wide spectrum of scenic, scientific, cultural, and recreational values. Alaska's lands are a vast but delicate habitat — its protection is essential to wildlife of national and international interests. Be careful your actions do not alter the character of the landscape or disturb biological processes.

Aleutian Islands Unit

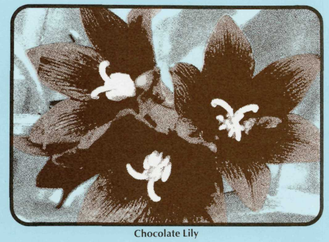
Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge

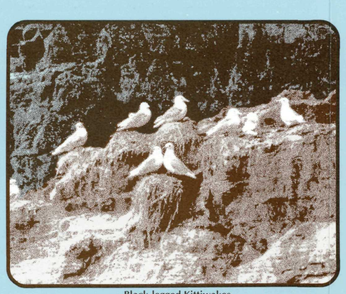


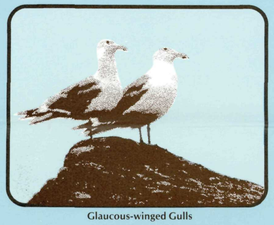
The Aleutian Islands Unit


Parasitic Jaeger

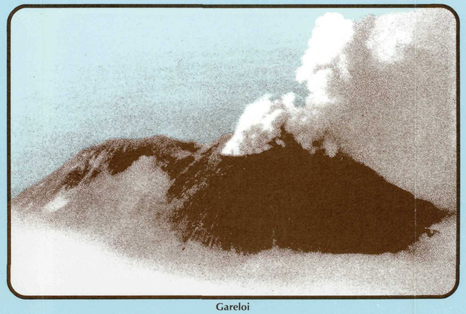
Arctic Fox

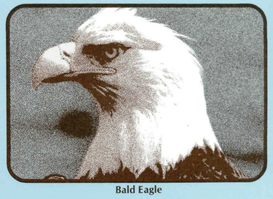

Chocolate Lily

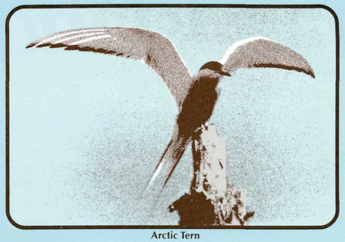

Black-legged Kittiwakes

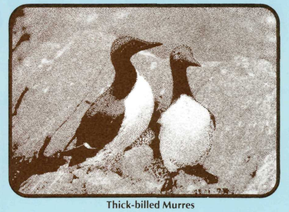

Glaucous-winged Gulls

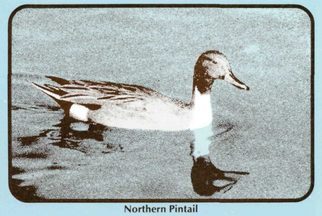
Least Auklet


Gareloi

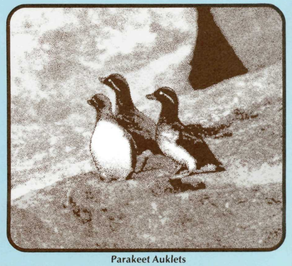

Bald Eagle

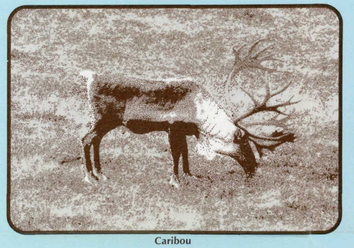

Arctic Tern

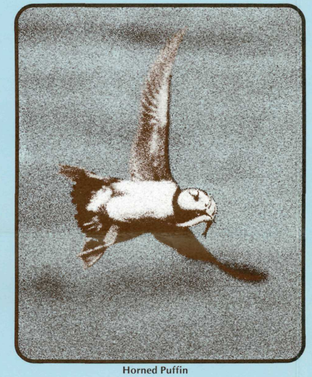

Thick-billed Murres

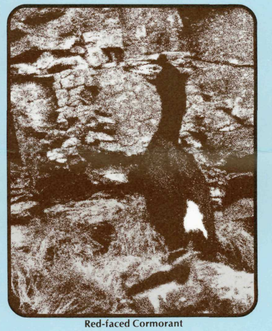

Northern Pintail

Spring Beauty

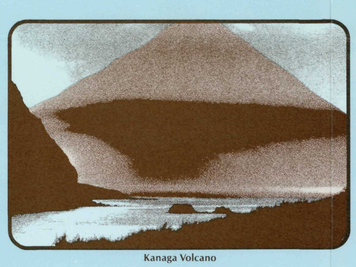

Parakeet Auklets


Caribou

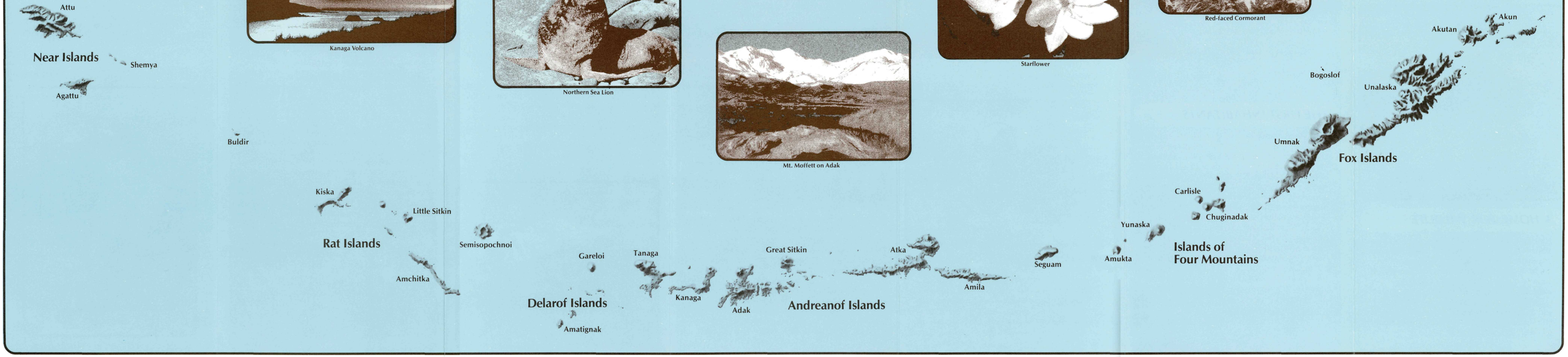

Horned Puffin


Red-faced Cormorant

Chuginadak and Carlisle


Kanaga Volcano

Northern Sea Lion

Starflower

Mt. Moffett on Adak