

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

ALEUTIAN CANADA GOOSE

Recovery of the Aleutian Canada goose is a remarkable story of cooperative conservation efforts under the Endangered Species Act. Recovery succeeded only with coordination of state and federal wildlife agencies, international partners, conservation groups, and private landowners.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

The Aleutian goose gets its name from the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska where it breeds. Historically, there were no mammals on these islands, leaving nests and young birds relatively safe from predators. However, beginning in the 1750s, trappers and fur-farmers began releasing non-native arctic foxes onto more than 190 islands where the birds nest. With no natural defenses from these predators, the goose population was decimated. Hunting by humans on both their breeding and wintering grounds also diminished the population. With no geese sighted between 1938 and 1962, scientists began to fear the species was extinct.

In 1962, Robert Jones, a dedicated wildlife biologist, rowed a wooden dory to remote, rocky, wind-battered Buldir Island near the end of the Aleutian chain and discovered a small population of about 200 to 300 Aleutian geese. Buldir was one of few remaining islands with no foxes and a remnant goose population. So serious was the plight of the subspecies that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) placed the Aleutian Canada goose on its very first list of endangered species in 1967.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

In 1973, the Aleutian Canada goose received protections under the newly-passed Endangered Species Act. That year, the federal government banned all hunting of the species. Federal biologists removed foxes from the islands and reintroduced geese to fox-free islands. All of the nesting islands were protected in the

Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

Biologists banded birds at the islands to identify important migration and wintering grounds in the lower 48 states, finding populations in California and Oregon. Much of this habitat has been protected in National Wildlife Refuges. State and federal officials have also worked to keep Aleutian geese from being shot on their wintering grounds during waterfowl hunting season.



By 1990, the species had improved to the point that it was reclassified from endangered to threatened. In 2001, the Aleutian Canada

goose was declared fully recovered and removed from the list of threatened and endangered species.

CONSERVATION TODAY

Many private landowners on the California coast and in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys manage their lands to provide wintering habitat for the geese. Wheat and corn fields, short-grass pastures, and scattered wetlands attract the geese to farmland. The FWS has partnered with local landowners to protect and manage wintering habitat on private land with a combination of voluntary programs, conservation easements and title acquisition.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

All ecosystems are a delicate balance. The decline of the Aleutian Canada goose demonstrates that non-native species can devastate an entire ecosystem.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

The continued recovery of the Aleutian Canada goose will depend on the concern of the American people for the species and the continued commitment of wildlife agencies, conservation organizations and private landowners to protect its habitat. Although much of the breeding, migration and wintering areas have been protected, several key areas are threatened. Development of wetlands and farms could lead to the loss of the feeding grounds and food sources for the geese.

Hunting of Aleutian Canada geese could be re-opened. The Pacific Flyway Council and the Fish and Wildlife Service will evaluate plans to hunt the species if requested by a state, except in breeding and wintering grounds.

