



Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge
Fall 2023
Kodiak/Aleutians Regional Advisory Council Update



Birds:

- We are concerned about common murre populations in Alaska. We have compiled and analyzed data showing a massive mortality event from the 2015 ocean warming (several million murre died). Now, as we visit islands we only get to every 5 or 10 years, we are finding many fewer murre than in previous visits. Karpia Island, off the Alaska Peninsula, supported 250,000 murre in the 1980s. This year, biologists found fewer than 300 murre there.



- Red-faced cormorants are a species of some concern to biologists as they seem to be declining throughout much of their range. They also are notoriously difficult to monitor, as they can move their small breeding colonies from one place to another, so it's hard to know if fewer numbers at any place just means the birds have moved or the population is shrinking. To help address this, the refuge is resurveying nearly the entire shoreline of the Near Islands (Attu, Agattu, Shemya) in 2023, repeating a surveys done 20 and 14 years ago. By covering the entire Near Island geography, we will know if the Near Islands population is really declining or merely shifting around.

- Aleutian terns are a species which breeds only along the coastline of parts of Alaska and the Russian Far East. Biologists suspect a massive decline in Aleutian tern populations in the USA but they are hard to count as the sometimes intermingle with the much more abundant arctic tern and their breeding colonies are small, scattered, and move about from year to year. We were able to use some funds available due to COVID field work cancellations in 2020 to prepare for and now implement the first-ever comprehensive survey of Aleutian terns in Alaska. This is a project which involves not just the Fish and Wildlife Service, but many other organizations and communities. 2023 is the first year of this three-year effort, which involves flying over vast areas of coast, also using local knowledge of people who



live in these areas, and ground counts to confirm the species and population size of potential Aleutian tern colonies.

Invasive Species:

- We continue our planning for possible rat eradication in the Aleutians, focusing first on Great Sitkin Island. We received a feasibility report from Island Conservation, a non-governmental expert group, and they deem eradication feasible but with several important milestones to clear first. As part of that work,



we are awaiting final results from field studies done on Great Sitkin, including stream and fish work, and also awaiting results from a lab study on the effects of the rodenticide brodifacoum on salmon. We hope to begin crafting an environmental impact statement in the coming year. Project participants involved to date include the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association, ADF&G, Alaska DEC, USDA, and Island Conservation. Atka and Adak have also been contacted to keep them informed of our work on this issue.



- European black slug: While conducting routine reconnaissance on Midun Island, not far from King Cove, we were surprised to find an enormous population of European black slugs. These are giant slugs, four or five inches long, black with notable grooves on the body. The only known way for slugs to have reached the island is by human assist, most likely accidental. There is no known way to eradicate the slugs now that they are there. We do not know what the ecological implications are for Midun

Island. Biosecurity (preventing invasive species getting to someplace where they aren't yet present) is so important when people travel from one remote place to another. Rats, mice, seeds, insects, slugs – they can all hitch a ride as we humans move about and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

- Caribou on Adak: While desirable for many people for hunting, business opportunity, and food, caribou are not native to Adak Island. They also are spreading to Kagalaska Island. Nonetheless, we recognize that many people value caribou on Adak and want to retain a viable population. Plans are in



place for ADF&G biologists to conduct an aerial caribou survey on Adak and perhaps Kagalaska Islands this summer. As of this report, the survey had not yet occurred so we can't report any results. The helicopter is available due to Alaska Volcano Observatory work in the area occurring this year. Our employee on Adak, Lisa Spitler, is helping with coordination and the refuge will provide logistical support on Adak, such as housing and vehicle use.

Andrew Lake:

- Andrew Lake is not naturally connected to the ocean annually. Historically, occasional and unpredictable natural blowouts of the dense boulder beach must have occurred to allow a non-ocean-going population of sockeye salmon (kokanee salmon) to become established in the lake. In more recent years, the Department of Defense has blasted through the beach zone to artificially lower the lake level as part of their unexploded ordnance cleanup. This has allowed salmon to out-migrate to the ocean and create a sockeye run. This sockeye run is dependent on artificially lowering the lake level by connecting the lake to the ocean through the rock beach zone. When the DOD relinquishes their reservation, the land will fall under the primary jurisdiction of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. While we support subsistence opportunities on Adak, we have neither the funds, skills, nor interest in perpetually maintaining an artificial connection between Andrew Lake and the ocean. If The Aleut Corporation is



interested, we could consider a possible land exchange to put this land under TAC control. If that happened, any decisions about blasting or excavating to maintain an annual connection between the lake and the ocean and any associated expenses would be the responsibility of TAC and/or ADF&G.

Major Midlife Refurbishment of *Research Vessel Tiġlaġ*:

- *R/V Tiġlaġ* is the primary conveyance for our transportation around the refuge. It is our pickup truck and our bush plane. Commissioned in 1987, the ship has sailed the distance of Earth to the moon and back again. Major systems are at or beyond their expected lifespan. This fall, we are taking the ship to Seattle for a major refurbishment project with new engines, new electrical generators and distribution, new navigation, and much other new and upgraded systems. The work will be completed by April 1. We expect this refurbishment to allow another 30 years of successful sailing for the *R/V Tiġlaġ*.



Science and Culture Camps:



- Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge proudly supports youth camps in the communities of Sand Point, St Paul and Unalaska. This year, the *R/V Tiġlaġ* hosted an open house in the community of Sand Point while dropping off refuge staff and our YCC crew to support culture camp.