



## Yukon Muskox – Where Did They Come From?

Muskox were found on the Yukon and Alaskan North Slope until the middle of the 1800s when they disappeared. Though these wide, woolly animals have survived in the Arctic since the last ice age, the last reports of muskox in Alaska came from the late 1800s. The combination of demands for meat and hides, together with the introduction of guns, had led to serious declines in muskox populations in many other parts of Arctic North America as well.

Yet today there is a large healthy population of muskox in Alaska and several hundred live on the Yukon North Slope. All of those shaggy, curly-horned animals came from one small group of muskox that survived an incredible journey in the 1930s.

The dropping muskox numbers in the early 1900s led to concern about a complete extinction of the muskox worldwide. The American Government decided to restore a population of muskox to Alaska. In 1930, the U.S. Congress gave the U.S. Biological Survey \$40,000 to buy a herd of muskox to transplant to Alaska. Thirty-four muskox from Greenland were to be moved, by boat, train and barge nearly 13 000 kilometers to Nunivak Island. The muskox journey would last six months.



### **Muskox Journey from Greenland to Alaska**

In the summer of 1930, Norwegian sailors captured 19 female and 15 male muskox from Greenland. The sailors shot adult bulls in order to rope calves and yearlings without being crushed. The muskox were brought to Norway and loaded in crates aboard a steamship. The ship arrived in New York in September 1930. The muskox waited in quarantine (isolation to prevent the spread of disease) in New Jersey for a month, enduring the hot fall weather. The Arctic animals were given salt licks and lots of water, and all 34 survived the quarantine.

The muskox then crossed the continent by train to Seattle and boarded a steamship for a seven-day voyage to Seward, Alaska. The captain opened the hatches of the ship to make the lower deck cooler for the muskox. From Seward, a train transported the muskox to Fairbanks. In early November, 1930, all 34

muskox arrived at what is now the University of Alaska. The muskox were released from the crates to roam a large clearing surrounded by boreal forest.

The muskox remained in Fairbanks for several years, and several calves were born but the experiment proved expensive, in part because of the cost of fencing to keep the muskox in and black bears out. The leader of the experiment, L.J. Palmer, decided to move the muskox from Fairbanks to Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea.

### **Muskox Moved to an Arctic Island**

The muskox were once again crated, moved to Nenana, and loaded on a steamship. The hairy cargo was transported down the Tanana and Yukon Rivers to the mouth of the Yukon River. The muskox then crossed 480 km of open ocean in an old barge towed by a motor boat. The journey was rough, and waves began to pour through a seam into the barge. Men travelling with the muskox used hand pumps to keep the barge from sinking until it made it to Nunivak Island.

Once again, the hardy muskox showed their stamina. The 31 muskox transplanted from Fairbanks in 1935 and 1936 thrived in Nunivak, expanding in size to over 700 animals by the late 1960s. The muskox from Nunivak Island were intended to be provide stock for relocating muskox to other parts of their former range. In the late 1960s and 1970s, biologists transplanted muskox from this herd to the mainland east of Nunivak Island, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Seward Peninsula, and northwest Alaska. Most of the transplanted animals quickly adapted to their new habitat and began to increase. Some began to disperse on their own, including a population that moved onto the Yukon North Slope.

### **Muskox Move into the Yukon**

Lone bull muskox or small bull groups began to appear on the Yukon North Slope very soon after being transplanted to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but it was not until the mid 1980s that repeated sightings of cow muskox were reported on the Yukon side. In 1987, observations of mixed-sex groups with young calves indicated that a breeding population of muskox was being established in the Yukon. Today there are estimated to be over 800 muskox in this population, ranging across the Yukon and Alaskan North Slopes and in adjacent areas. There are approximately 500 muskox on the Alaska North Slope, 190 on the Yukon North Slope, 110 in the NWT west of the Mackenzie River and an additional 30 muskox in the Yukon south towards Old Crow.

\*Info on the muskox relocation is from an Alaska Science Forum article by Ned Rozell.

*Photo by Ken Madsen*

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For more information, visit the Wildlife Management Advisory Council (North Slope) web site on muskox of the Yukon and Alaska North Slope at [www.taiga.net/wmac/species/muskox](http://www.taiga.net/wmac/species/muskox).