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Reports from Rat Island Reflect Successes and Concerns

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Region 7 - Alaska
1011 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99503
(907)786-3309 (TDD Available)

News

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Contacts: (USFWS) Bruce Woods 907-786-3695

(The Nature Conservancy) Randy Hagenstein 907-244-1256
rhagenstein@tnc.org

(Island Conservation) Bill Waldman 831-359-4787 X111

Reports from Rat Island Reflect Successes and Concerns

After more than two weeks of intensive field monitoring on Alaska's remote Rat Island, part of Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, which was treated last year in an effort to eliminate invasive rats and restore seabird populations and other parts of the native ecosystem, biologists have found no sign of the invasive rats that have decimated native bird populations for more than 200 years. The same studies have documented that several bird species, including Aleutian cackling geese, ptarmigan, peregrine falcons, and black oystercatchers are nesting on the ten-square-mile island.

The survey team also collected a higher-than-expected number of carcasses of two non-target species. Biologists have found 157 juvenile and 29 adult glaucous-winged gull carcasses and a total of 41 bald eagle carcasses that appear to have died in recent months. Seventy-five percent of the eagle carcasses appear to be juvenile birds.

The cause of death of these birds is currently unknown. Many of the carcasses were in advanced stages of decomposition, but some were relatively fresh. Several of the gull carcasses found initially are now at the National Wildlife Health Center's laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, and it is estimated that information on the cause of death will be available by late June. Eagle carcasses and tissue samples were picked up from Rat Island by the refuge ship Tiglax on June 10 and will be shipped to the Wildlife Health lab after the ship makes port at Adak on June 11.

While some level of winter die-off of these species is not unusual on islands in the Aleutians, and avian die-offs are not uncommon in Alaska, these numbers are cause for concern and further investigation. The Service is very concerned by these levels of mortality and is doing everything possible to expeditiously determine the cause of death.

Field personnel are in the process of collecting additional tissue samples for study before destroying any remaining bird carcasses to eliminate any possibility of ongoing risk. Reports from the camp indicate that all bird species on the island except eagles are present in equal or greater numbers than were counted during pre-treatment surveys. Although adult and juvenile eagles are still present on the island, numbers of sub-adult eagles are lower than pre-treatment totals.

There is no evidence of any ongoing mortality at this time. Results of the testing being performed by the National Wildlife Health Center laboratory will be released as soon as they are available.

While the Service regards any unnecessary loss of wildlife as a matter of utmost importance, these mortalities will not significantly impact either the Aleutian or the Alaskan bald eagle populations. The former is estimated at 2,500 birds and the latter at approximately 50,000 eagles, and both are considered to be healthy populations.

The Rat Island Restoration Project, a partnership among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy, and Island Conservation, began operations in 2008 after a two-year planning process. This included an environmental analysis by federal regulators, who issued a Finding of No Significant Impact on April 15, 2008. Components of the Rat Island Restoration Project were reviewed and issued the necessary permits by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Introduced and non-native Norway rats are the most significant threat to seabird populations in the Aleutians. Rat spills can be far worse than oil spills. Oil degrades over time while rats multiply and continue to prey on native ground nesting birds that have no other land-based predators.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit ***www.fws.gov****.*

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