

K.U. Zoologists Explore The Arctic

THE LAND above the Arctic Circle is not eternally covered with ice and snow, nor is it the bleak, barren area most of us imagine.

For three months out of the year the ice and snow melt and the ground thaws out a bit. But even with the sun shining 24-hours a day the ground thaws only six to eight inches deep. This is enough to allow grasses and mosses to grow and the tundra blooms under the warm midnight sun. Under this thin carpet of vegetation the ground is frozen solid to a depth of hundreds of feet.

Unexplored Country

Into the unexplored country of northern Alaska for the past two summers, parties from the K.U. Museum of Natural History have penetrated the flat, lake-dotted region to collect specimens of the native wildlife and to observe the habits of animals from mice to moose.

The two expeditions were headed by James M. Bee, assistant instructor in Zoology. In the summer of 1951, J. Knox Jones, Jr., another graduate student, was an assistant and last summer Edward G. Campbell, a senior in Zoology, assisted.

During the two summers, Bee and his two companions covered an area 1,000 miles long and 200 miles wide. In this region, more than twice the size of the State of Kansas, the K.U. men observed and trapped some 2,000 mammals.

The object of the expedition was to gather facts on animal life to be written up in a manual for the government. Because K.U.'s mammalogy department has an outstanding record in research on animal life, it was entrusted with the work in northern Alaska.

Flown Into Interior

The main base was the Arctic Research Laboratory of the United States Navy at Point Barrow. From there Bee and his companions were flown into the interior by planes equipped with pontoons. The zoology instructor explained that nearly sixty per cent of the coastal plain is water. Rivers and lakes abound, and since there are no roads, flying is about the only way you can get around in summer.

A bush plane would drop the K.U. men down on a convenient lake and pick them up again in a week. From these lakeside camps they could work the surrounding country, trapping animals and observing their habits. When the tundra is covered with mosses and grasses it is as soft as a Persian rug, Bee said. The vegetation is dense during the summer months, and the weather can be warm and pleasant. The temperature sometimes rises as high as 90 degrees F.

The Arctic Slope of Alaska lies north of the timber line. The trees which do grow are rarely more than a foot high.

The average height is six to eight inches. Bee remarked that he did see even one tree that was knee high near Point Barrow.

Animals in remote parts of the region are unafraid of man. Bee said he once saw seven grizzly bears at one time, and they all just stood there looking at him wondering what kind of "two-legged caribou" he could be.

An Arctic wolf trotted up to the campsite one day and stood looking at Campbell. The wolf was so unafraid that when Campbell fired a rifle at him and missed, the wolf just backed off a little. The wolf's curiosity was the death of him. Campbell had time to shoot twice more. The skin and skeleton will eventually make a valuable study specimen in the research collection.

Bring Back Lemmings

Perhaps the best known animal the explorers brought back is the lemming. This small Arctic rodent is related to the common meadow mouse of the United States and weighs approximately a quarter of a pound. In addition to many dead specimens, the zoologists brought back seven live lemmings.

Because the lemmings are unaccustomed to the heat of temperate latitudes, their cages were packed with ice to keep the animals alive en route to Lawrence. Dr. E. Raymond Hall, Director of the Museum who joined the expedition for the last three weeks of the summer, said this was the first time live lemmings have been brought this far south.

The lemmings were brought back alive so that Richard Phillip Grossenheider, the noted animal artist, could draw them from life. Mr. Grossenheider's pictures will be used to illustrate the manual being written by Dr. Hall and Mr. Bee. Two of the lemmings have since died, two have been given to the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., and the remaining three are still at K.U.

Explode Legend

Contrary to popular legend the lemmings do not habitually jump into the Arctic Ocean and swim out of sight of land and drown. There are migrations of lemmings to be sure, but these are made when their food and protective cover is exhausted. Then the lemmings migrate, as often as not away from the sea as toward it. The lemming population increases and declines in regular cycles. Right now the lemming population is at a high point, and Jim Bee predicts that it will take a sharp drop next year. This prediction is based on known factors. When the lemming population



A LAND OF RIVERS AND LAKES, the area in Northern Alaska above the Arctic Circle, shakes off its coat of ice and snow when the sun shines 24 hours a day. Seen above is a portion of the Brooks Range which forms the great divide of Alaska. The almost treeless tundra is covered with a thick carpet of mosses and grasses which supports a surprisingly large animal population. In the background are snow capped mountains with rivers of ice sliding down their sides. Jim Bee, K.U. zoologist and leader of the two-man expedition, named several mountains after his wife and children.