

Cattle in Alaska

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History

Cattle Ranching in Alaska began before Alaska was part of the United States. Early settlers attempted to first introduce cattle to Kodiak Island where large bears were amongst predation challenges to overcome. Bear dogs were amongst solutions introduced to aid in facing the challenge with little success.

In 1867 the United States purchased Alaska from Russia and the Alaska Commercial Company established a dairy herd in Kodiak and grazed the animals on a neighboring island, which offered some relief from bear predation. With these dairy animals also came beef cattle, which were grazed on other islands along the Aleutian chain with varying degrees of success. In 1887 the Hatch Act was passed creating agricultural experiment stations in Sitka and Kodiak (followed by Kenai, Rampart, Copper Center, Fairbanks and Matanuska) to aid with cattle production and farming by providing practical and applicable research and results that could be utilized by farmers.

Dr. Charles Georgeson of the U.S. Department of Agriculture opened an experiment station on Kodiak Island in 1906. Georgeson hoped that Galloway cattle, that produced both good meat and good milk, could be successfully raised on the island. The experiment was interrupted by the 1912 Katmai volcanic eruption. The herd was removed to Washington until the pastures were restored. Further hampering the experiment, the Kodiak station closed in 1925.

The Alaska Commercial Company also grazed cattle on Kodiak Island. The cattle fed on native hay and produced excellent milk. A Seattle company was less successful in establishing a beef ranch. Of 200 beef cattle shipped to Kodiak Island, 140 died the first year. Most fell off the island's steep cliffs. Having failed with cattle, the company shipped 9,000 sheep to the island. Nearly 150 fell from cliffs, 500 drowned when they were trapped by an incoming tide, and 8,000 more died from an infestation of scab mites. Other attempts to raise sheep were equally discouraging, in part because bears attacked the flocks. However, one successful sheep ranch was in operation on nearby Raspberry Island in 1914.

Sheep were also introduced in the Aleutian Islands. There were ranches at Chernof ski and at Nikolski on Umnak. The success of these ranches was hampered by the long distances to markets and the high cost of transportation. Although it was impractical to ship meat to market, the sale of wool proved profitable.

In the early 20th century anti predation tactics included shooting bears out of airplanes and building a 9ft high fence to offer a bear free zone for grazing in Kodiak. By 1927 Kodiak and the Aleutian islands counted nearly **1,000** head of grazing beef and dairy cattle. By the mid 1960's formal bear control had ended and a head count of **1,300** animals demonstrated small gains.

The Chirikof Island beef herd was started with an \$875,000 loan from the Alaska Agricultural Loan Board which brought 600 new head to the island and performed from 1925 to 1950 as a successful beef industry. Following owners could not successfully bring carcass to market due to many reasons and even now meat from the island has a reputation of being tough and inedible.

In 1935, a herd of dairy cattle arrived in Southcentral Alaska as part of the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation's Matanuska Valley Colonization project. The government owned cattle were transported into the state by ship, train and then truck to their new home. Along with them came midwestern dairy farmers as President D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs to promote agriculture in Alaska. Breeds such as holstein (milk), hereford (meat) and galloway (milk and meat) also were introduced as good candidates having originated in cold weather climates.

Cattle were also introduced to Sitkinak Island in 1937. Breed include Black Angus, Galloway, Red Angus, Hereford, Charolais, Santa gertrudis, Scottish highlander and Short Horn. A commercial outfitting and guiding operation is presently run out of the island and meat is also harvested for market.

Alaska Agricultural Cattle Statistics

[http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Alaska/Publications/Farm Reporter Releases/frmrpt02.pdf](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Alaska/Publications/Farm_Reporter_Releases/frmrpt02.pdf)

As of January 1 st	2010	2011
All Cattle & Calves	14,500	13,500
Beef Cows Calved	5,400	5,100
Milk Cows Calved	600	500
Heifers (500+lbs)	2,000	2,100
Bulls/ Steers (>500 lbs)	2,600	2,800
Calves (<500lbs)	3,900	3,000

Discussion Points

Why could it be that cattle were first introduced to Kodiak and islands of the Aleutian Chain?

Climate? Vegetation? Accessibility by available modes of transport?

What characteristics were emphasized when importing cattle to Alaska and how did breed selection play such a vital role in the limited beef industry there is and where we are now?

Cherikof herd? Galloways? Feral cattle unfit for consumption across some islands?
Hardy cattle able to turn fiber into protein even in Alaska's harsh environment?

Why are reindeer such a better option than beef cattle and maybe even the only option of livestock on the Seward Peninsula?

References:

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http://www.alaskameat.com/Guided_Activities.php

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chirikof_Island