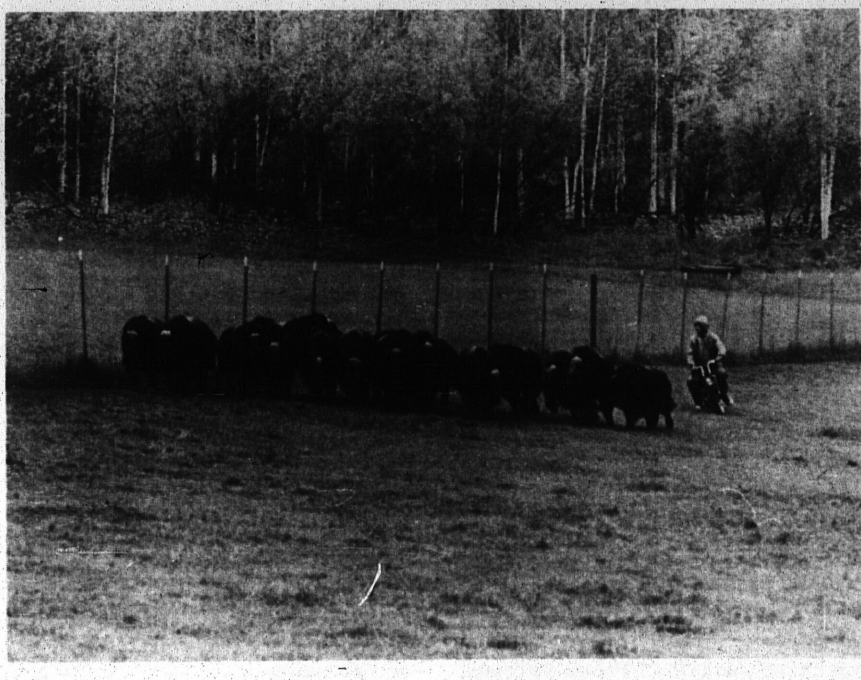

RIDE 'EM COWBOY—In the summer, they use motorbikes. In the winter, snowmobiles. And if the cows look funny its because you're looking at a herd of musk ox being herded into the barn for inspection and weighing. Bruce Baker is the odd looking cowboy on the two wheeler herding the fierce looking oxen from the University of Alaska experimental project.

Photo by RUSS CARTIER

Misunderstood Animal—

Lives of Musk Oxen Watched Carefully

By PAUL WILKINSON

('Oomingmak — the domesticated musk ox, Part 3.)

Life on the breeding farms can best be described in terms of a daily and an annual cycle, which are similar in Alaska, Canada, and Norway. Because these farms are partly experimental stations, the way that they are run differs in some respects from the way in which commercial farms will be run, and this will be described separately.

Each day begins with a period of observation, when the herdsmen check each animal to make sure that it is eating well, behaving normally, and is in good health. Several mornings each week, the animals are herded into a small enclosure adjacent to the barn. In summer, they are herded either by motor bike or on foot; in winter, snow machines are normally used. When the musk oxen are brought to the barn, they know that they must come inside to be weighed, and each one enters voluntarily and stands on the scales. When the herdsman has weighed each animal, he goes round to the front of the scales and spends a few moments talking to the animal, stroking it, and perhaps feeding it some favorite food.

Regular weighing serves several purposes: It provides a reliable indication of each animal's health; it gives useful scientific information; and it also brings every animal into close contact with a human being, thus helping to promote a bond of trust and affection. Once a month in winter, every animal receives a vitamin injection to keep it in excellent health. After weighing, the musk oxen find their own way out of the barn and back to their pastures.

In summer, the musk oxen spend the entire day in large pastures, where they find their own food, mainly grasses and leaves, but in winter they are brought back every night to smaller pastures near the barn. In these night-pens as they are called, the musk oxen have access to as much hay as they want to eat. Hay feeding will, however, probably be much less important on commercial farms, for these will have access to much more land than is available near cities such as Fairbanks. Each large pasture has one or two drinking troughs, but in winter the musk oxen prefer to eat snow. All the pastures and night-pens have salt-blocks, which the musk oxen use frequently.

The daily routine of the musk oxen in summer centers around eating, sleeping, and, for the cows, looking after their babies. During the heat of the day, most of the musk oxen rest, and they do most of their feeding during the cooler night hours. In winter they sometimes become quite playful, since they prefer the cold weather. Because musk oxen are natives of the Arctic, they do not require shelter even in the coldest weather.

It is convenient to begin describing the annual cycle in September, the beginning of the breeding season. For most of the year, the different age and sex groups are kept separate, but in September the bulls chosen for breeding are given from 3-10 cows each, with whom they remain for upto 5 weeks. This is an exhausting period for the bulls, for they take their task very seriously, defending their females against every real or imagined threat. The bulls are sometimes aggressive at this season and must be handled with care, but no-one has ever been injured by one in almost 20 years. The cows do not seem to get very excited about breeding, but practically all of them become pregnant anyway! After the breeding season, life on the farms is very quiet until the following spring.

Musk ox cows carry their babies for about 8 months, so that most calves are born in May or early June. All births take place in the open, and the majority are unassisted, although a herdsman is always present in case of trouble. Musk ox calves weigh on average about 20 lb at birth, and their weight increases by almost 2 lb per day for the first months of life. Most calves stand within 30 minutes of birth and suckle for the first time shortly after this. Very soon, they can walk quite steadily and even run for short distances.

At the same time that the babies are being born, the musk oxen are also losing their qiviut. With the approach of spring, they no longer need the thick coat of underwool to keep them warm, and it works loose from their skin and makes its way slowly through the long guard hairs. After the musk oxen have weighed, they are put into small pens inside the barn, and the herdsman gets in with them and plucks the wool by hand. Pregnant cows shed a little later than other animals, generally after their calves have been born. At College, the cows with calves are not brought to the barn for qiviut-collection, but they are put into a portable wooden pen which can be moved around the pastures.

In summer, the musk oxen concentrate on growing fat in preparation for the coming winter. Early in August the bulls begin to show signs of restlessness, indicating the approach of the rutting season once again. Towards the end of the month the calves are taken away from their mothers, who shortly come into heat and conceive once again.

As soon as they are taken from their mothers, the calves are tamed and taught to drink milk from a can fitted with a nipple. Milk feeding continues until they are about 10 months old, or until they no longer seem to want milk, whichever comes first. Not only does this help to keep them healthy, but milk feeding is alos psychologically important for young animals and helps them to come to trust their herders. Most calves are also halter broken, so that they can be led round on a rope. At the age of 6 months. their horns are cut off. Provided that it is done properly, the horns never grow again. Dehorning is carried out partly to protect the animals from one another and partly to guard against accidental injury to herders.

When the Musk Ox Farm at the University of Alaska began in 1964, it had only 33 animals. As a result of its programme of selective breeding, the farm already has 94 musk oxen. The purpose of the Musk Ox Project is not, however, simply to raise musk oxen on experimental farms, but to initiate commercial musk ox farming throughout suitable areas of Alaska and to use the qiviut collected each year to start an arctic textile industry.

In the next article, I shall describe how the textile industry has already been started, together with some of the economic benefits to be derived from it.