

Flapper the hooded seal saved by pipeline workers

ANCHORAGE—Flapper got his Christmas present a little early, and it was the best there is. It was his life.

Hopelessly lost and facing certain death from predators or freezing on the icy wastes of the North Slope, he was spotted and rescued by oil workers when his time was fast running out.

This was no ordinary character but one of a very special breed of Arctic wanderers—a seal. But not just any old seal; it is one which has raised the eyebrows of marine biologists.

It is a North Atlantic hooded seal, which must have swam across the top of the world to end up marooned at Prudhoe, at least 300 miles from the nearest open water.

His salvation came because of the quick eyes of John ("J.C.") Holtan, supervisor of BP Alaska's Construction Camp Number One. Holtan was driving

back from the Deadhorse Airport with Tom Yeager, another BP camp supervisor, when he noticed a shape about 30 or 40 feet off the road, about a quarter mile south of Alyeska's pump station Number One.

He stopped the truck to investigate and found the seal covered in snow. It was lying on its belly keeping its flippers off the ice.

"The first thing I saw were its eyes; they were big brown ones, the size of coffee cups," said Holtan. "As we got near, it moved itself and let out kind of a roar. It was very much alive but I don't know how long it would have remained so."

Holtan called Slim Gilchrist, BP's deputy field coordinator, who subsequently organized a rescue party comprising general helpers Leslie Itta of Barrow and Don Saville, Chris Boskofski, Martin Dickey and the

general helpers' lead man, Wendal Wilson.

Dennis Ames, who was born and raised on a ranch in Oklahoma and is now a truck foreman for Kodiak Oil Field Haulers, was also with the party.

By this time Tom Graham, senior materials expeditor, had dug up a suitable crate from the warehouse into which they had decided to load the animal, which became known as Flapper, the unflappable.

Then the fun started. Flapper did not like all the noise and showed his displeasure by snapping. The rescue team treated him with great respect. Ames, using his old ranch-hand expertise, stood five feet behind and neatly lassooed Flapper round the neck and then slipped the rope over his tail.

Then they eased him into the crate and took him to BP's old warehouse near the Mukluk Camp.

While they were deciding what to do next, Holtan got some fresh salmon from the camp kitchen to tempt Flapper to eat; but he was not interested in food.

Slim Gilchrist called Charlie Wark, BP's Prudhoe Bay field coordinator in Anchorage, to check on the next step. And Charlie got in touch with the State Fish and Game Department in Fairbanks.

Flapper was shipped down to John Burns, a marine mammals biologist, on a Hercules aircraft

which had just offloaded at Prudhoe.

And then the surprise... Flapper was no ordinary bearded, ringed or spotted seal whose natural habitat was the Beaufort and Bering Seas, but a lost North Atlantic hooded seal.

Burns said: "The only explanation for his presence at Prudhoe would seem to be that he had wandered from his normal range in the northern North Atlantic and reached Prudhoe either through the Northwest Passage or along the coast of Siberia.

He may then have gone up a river and got trapped when the ice came in behind him; He was doomed and would not have lasted long there on the frozen tundra, being subjected to freezing and all kinds of predators.

He was just a wandering lost soul." Burns added that seals herd up mostly during the breeding season and the rest of the time "are sort of solitary." According to him, Flapper appears to be a young sub-adult male, say between two and three years old, roughly six feet long and between 250 and 300 pounds in weight.

"We don't know exactly because we haven't been able to get near enough to find out, but we are going to tranquilize him and take his weight and measurements as well as blood samples. For the moment he is feeding voraciously; in fact he's

eating everybody out of house and home."

Burns said that from the standpoint of the work being done at the university "to have such an unusual representative from a different species and from a vastly different geographical area is exceptionally good fortune.

"The people I am associated with here had never seen a live hooded seal—nor had I—and for a biologist seeing one for the first time is like a botanist with his first iris comparing it to a rose; it is a very fortunate experience."

The university has a mammals colony of 14 seals (fur, ringed, spotted and harbor) and Flapper will join that community until his future is decided.

He is now biding his time in a tank at the university's Institute of Arctic Biology.