

Of Alaska seabirds—

Unlocking mysteries

(From Wildlife Update)

Since its seabird survey began early in 1975, the Office of Biological Services-Coastal Ecosystems has accumulated more information on the seasonal occurrence, diversity, and distribution of marine birds in Alaskan waters than has ever been gathered before. By the end of the calendar year staff members had logged more than 11,000 nautical miles of aerial surveys and conducted a total of 2,484 transect counts from shipboard.

All the information will be keypunched for computer storage and retrieval. Basic resource information on seabird colonies and populations is already in use. The Bureau of Land Management incorporated some of the data in its final environment statement for a proposed oil and gas lease sale in the Gulf of Alaska. Alaska Department of Fish and Game is using seabird colony information in mapping coastal fish and wildlife habitats as part of the state's coastal management program.

Project biologists and technicians have been flying aerial transects using a P2V Neptune, multi-engine, World War II vintage aircraft of the Interior Department's Office of Aircraft Services.

Cruising at about 120 knots, 100 feet above the water surface along predetermined transects the survey crews count all birds within a 100-meter-wide strip from their vantage point behind a plexiglass bubble in the aircraft's nose. A sophisticated global navigation system

(GNS 500) aboard the aircraft enables the flight crew to keep the wildlife biologists within 1/10-mile of any given position on the trackless ocean.

For shipboard surveys, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists join oceanographic cruises of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) vessels in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. U.S. Coast Guard icebreakers also serve as observation platforms for the seagoing biologists. Survey cruises will begin again in February.

In addition, later this season the project will have its own charter vessel to conduct specialized studies to augment the other cruises and to furnish logistical support to research field camps as well.