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Twenty Years with the Gerasimovs

By Julia Phillips

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Behind the heliport, tucked next to a tour agency, in a small city north of Petropavlovsk, there is a two-story wooden building with an unlocked door. This is the site of Nikolai Nikolaevich Gerasimov's project. He and his wife, Alevtina Ivanovna, have dedicated the last two decades to cultivating this space. Step inside. See the carved avian decoys and the curtains printed with birds? Hear the tweeting from upstairs? Spot, out the window, the two murals showing white-chinned fowl? This is the Gerasimovs' captive breeding and release facility for Aleutian Canada geese.

Aleutian Canada geese are native to this part of the world. They nested in the Aleutian, Commander, and Kuril Islands and wintered in Japan until their population was nearly obliterated by Arctic foxes released by fur trappers in the early 20th century. The species was considered extinct until 1962, when biologists discovered a few hundred birds that had survived on remote Buldir Island. When the U.S. Endangered Species Act went into effect 10 years later, the geese were one of the first animals to fall under its protection, and concerted recovery efforts began. As of 2001, the species is no longer considered endangered in the United States, but its numbers are still miniscule in countries where it once flourished.

In 1992, Nikolai Nikolaevich constructed the facility outside Petropavlovsk that would assume sole responsibility for the recovery of the species in Asia. With the help of the federal government, Kamchatka businesses, Alaskan outreach teams and a Japanese zoo, he and his wife raised 500 birds over 18 years. Each fall, they released a new generation onto a fox-free island in the Bering Strait. Now the project is finished, Nikolai Nikolaevich says.

He has white hair and a few gold teeth. Under his jacket, he wears a sweatshirt printed with Aleutian Canada geese and, in English letters, "KAMCHATKA." His wife passed away last year. The long rows of pens are empty now, as the last generation of geese was released on Ekarma Island in September 2010.

If you visit this place tomorrow, or next week, will this little house and its yard of cages still stand? Maybe not. The plot between the heliport and the tour agency is valuable land, and the facility the Gerasimovs built no longer has the funding to occupy it. A few local conservationists hope that the site can be preserved, transformed into a center for rehabilitating wounded birds and training young ornithologists, but Nikolai Nikolaevich says it's over. He's published a book called "20 Years With Wild Geese." It has a picture of his wife on the cover, and its last words are printed in bold: "WE DID IT." It's true, because while the pens here are filling up with snow, more than 90 Aleutian Canada geese are now successfully wintering in Japan.

Those who work in nature protection here sometimes say they are lucky that Kamchatka needs defense, not salvation. They can protect their untouched land rather than go to lengths to restore a blighted system. But from a tiny wooden house filled all day with the noise of helicopters, Nikolai Nikolaevich and Alevtina Ivanovna really did do what no one else could: They restored a species. They finished their project. They became saviors. They did it.

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