



WWF for a living planet

The Bering Sea Ecoregion

CHUKOTKA'S NATURAL HERITAGE AT A GLANCE



The Bering Strait coast.



Polar bears, Wrangel Island.

Photo: Peter Grigorovich



Rough-legged Hawk.

Chukotka, officially the Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, forms Russia's north-eastern frontier. About half of the region's 737,700 square kilometers lies above the Arctic Circle.

The region's landscape is dominated by alpine and arctic tundra, although small larch, pine, birch, poplar, and willow trees can grow in the valleys of larger rivers. More than 900 species

of plants grow in Chukotka, including 400 species of moss and lichen.

Thirty fresh-water fish species inhabit Chukotka's inland lakes and streams. There are 220

bird species in the region. The chilly waters washing the region's shores provide important habitat for numerous marine mammals, while species such as brown bear, sable, lynx, ermine, mountain hare, and mink can be found in terrestrial habitats. Numerous rare and endangered species inhabit the Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug. Among those listed in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation are the polar bear, bighorn sheep, narwhal, humpback whale, finback whale, grey whale, blue whale, razor back, and 24 bird species.

Photo: Dennis Litovka



Photo: Gennady Smirnov

Photo: Arne Naevra, www.naturbilder.no

Walrus, Wrangel Island.

Photo: Gennady Smirnov



Native hunting party.

Photo: Gennady Smirnov



Siberian dwarf pine.

Photo: Gennady Smirnov

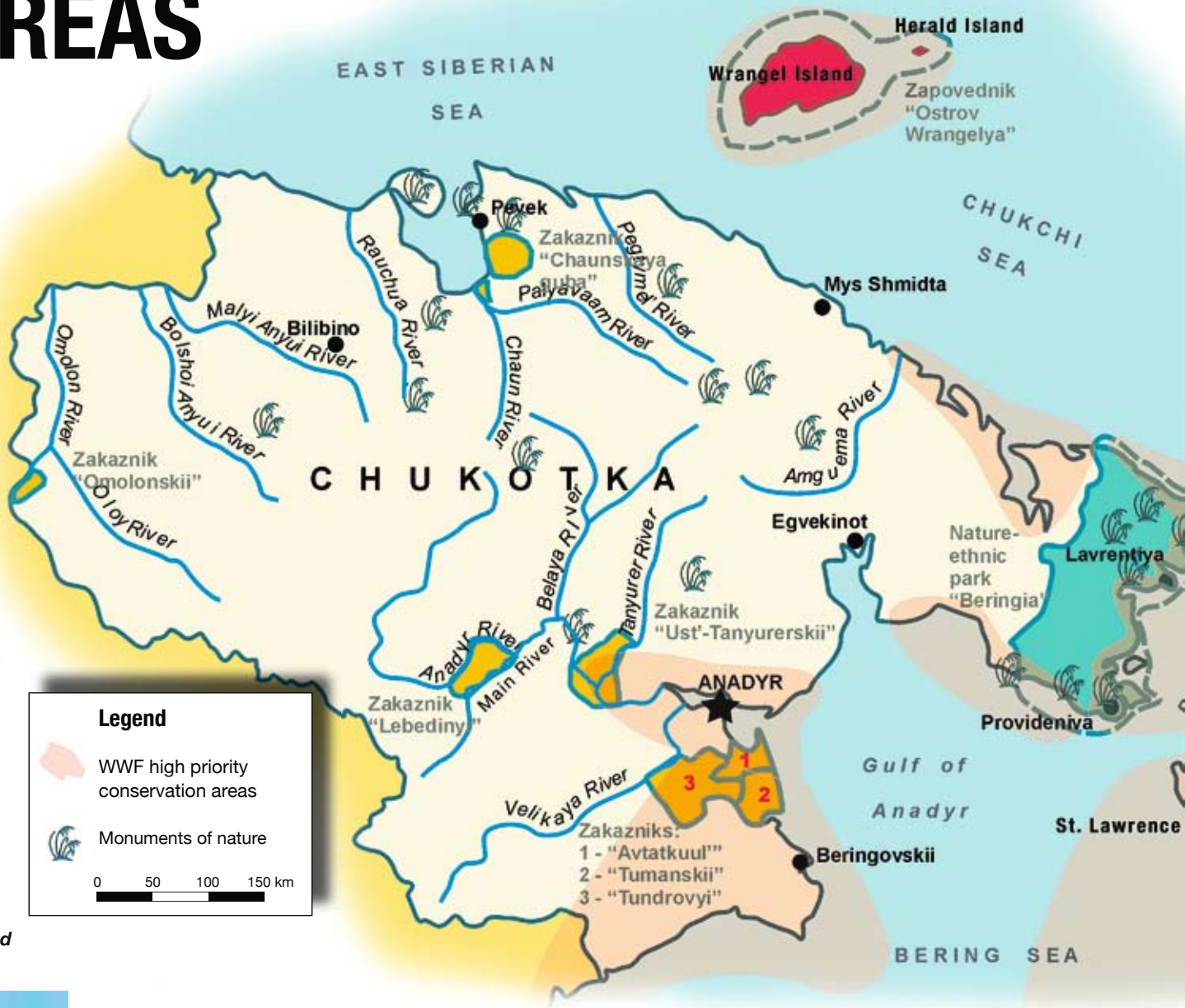


Tumanskaya River.

Photo: Gennady Smirnov



CHUKOTKA'S PROTECTED AREAS



Subadult white-tailed sea eagle.



Lebediny Federal Zoological Wildlife Refuge

The Lebediny Federal Zoological Wildlife Refuge, between the Main and Anadyr Rivers, protects almost 400,000 hectares of wetland habitats, as well as the animal species inhabiting them. The area is home to important plant life, including dwarf Siberian pine shrub tundra, hummocky sedge and cotton-grass tundra, and thickets of shrubby alder and tall-growing willows. Even more spectacular are the Refuge's birds. One of north-eastern Asia's largest nesting grounds for white-fronted goose is lies in in the Refuge. Two thousand pairs nest here. The isolated Anadyr population of whooper swan is the north-eastern outpost of this species. Pacific black brent and snow goose are found during the seasonal migration period. Birds of prey, such as white-tailed sea eagle, peregrine falcon, gyrfalcon, and goshawk are widely distributed throughout the Refuge. Moose, wild reindeer, brown bear and red fox are common among terrestrial fauna, as are wolf and wolverine.

Photo: Peter Grigorevich

Flood plain lake.



Photo: Peter Grigorevich

Contact information: Lebediny Federal Zoological Wildlife Refuge Headquarters, Ulitsa Berezkina 15, Apartment 8, Markovo, Anadyrsky District, Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, Russia 689530. Tel: 3-05 (connection available through the operator).

Chukchi Prim...



Photo: Igor Zagrebni

Wrangel Island Federal Strict Nature Reserve

Two islands off Chukotka's northern coast – Wrangel and Herald – and their surrounding seas out to 12 miles are protected in the Wrangel Island Federal Strict Nature Reserve, or “Ostrov Vrangelya” Zapovednik, as it is known in Russian. The islands are the remains of the mainland, which in ancient times, stretched for hundreds of kilometers to the north of where the present Asian and American continents meet, and formed the so-called Bering Land Bridge.

The Reserve's regime of strict protection allows for conservation and research on this unique arctic island ecosystem, which is home to the highest density of polar bear dens in the world, coastal Pacific walrus

haul-outs, the only nesting population of snow geese in Russia, musk oxen, and many other species of Beringia flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world. In addition, skeletal remains and mammoth tusks are often found on the islands' open terrain.

In 2004, Wrangel Island Federal Strict Nature Reserve was inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List as a site of outstanding importance to the common heritage of humankind. It is the first territory in the Russian Arctic to receive this prestigious recognition.

Contact information: Wrangel Island Strict Nature Reserve Headquarters, Ulitsa Obrucheva 27, Room 63, Pevek, Chaunsky District, Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, Russia 689400. Tel/Fax: +7 (427-37) 2-15-35. Email: wisnr@chrues.chukotka.ru .

Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park

Chukotka's largest and most recently-created protected area is the Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park. Chukotka authorities established this regional protected area in 1993, as a preliminary step in the process of creating the federal-level Beringia National Park. The Nature-Ethnic Park occupies 3,053,300 hectares and was established to preserve the natural ecosystems, historical heritage, and traditional economies of the Chukchi and Eskimo (Siberian Yupik) peoples.

Numerous mineral hot springs with unique flora and fauna, and endemic and relict elements dot the park's landscape. Also found here are spawning areas for valuable commercial fish species, such as Dolly Varden char and Pacific salmon, as well as bird colonies and walrus haul-outs. The park also protects two world renowned ancient indigenous cultural sites: Whalebone Alley, a sacred place for early native whalers on Ittygran Island, where one can wander among the 500-year-old skeletons of giant bowhead whales; and Ekven, an archaeological site dating back to 500 BC, which preserves burial sites and artifacts belonging to early whale hunting cultures.

Contact information: Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park Headquarters, Ulitsa Gorkogo 4, Anadyr, Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, Russia, 689000. Tel: +7 (42722) 2-63-46. Fax: +7 (42722)2-88-71. Email: beringija@chukotnet.ru

rose.



Killer whale.

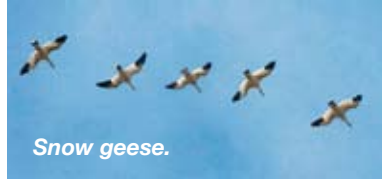


Photo: Gennady Smirnov



Seal pup.

Photo: Vladimir Eneuchev



Snow geese.

Photo: Peter Grigorovich

Chukotka has also three special protected areas for wildlife: the *Avtatkuul*, *Ust-Tanyurersky* and *Chaunskaya Guba Regional Wildlife Refuges*.

Avtatkuul Regional Wildlife Refuge

is 40 kilometers to the south of Anadyr in Beringovsky District, where it covers 250,000 hectares of wetland

habitats important for waterfowl and shorebirds. The Refuge's territory includes extensive marsh meadows and areas of coastal tundra, which form favorable conditions for waterfowl staging during seasonal migration, and during their moulting and nesting periods. In the shallow waters of the Anadyr River Estuary, brent goose, Eurasian widgeon, and pintail gather in particularly large groups during moulting, their numbers often exceeding several thousand birds. Also the white-fronted goose is numerous here, while bean geese are common. Numerous migratory bird species nest in the Refuge. North-eastern Asia's largest nesting colony of brent goose is located on Strela-Kosa Island.



Photo: Pavel Tomkovich

Spoon-billed sandpiper.



Photo: Julli Gubar

Ust-Tanyurersky Regional Wildlife Refuge

occupies 450,000 hectares in the Lower Anadyr geo-botanical district, and thus represents a transitional zone between forest tundra and southern sub-arctic tundra. Sedge-cotton grass tundra, with sphagnum cranberry mires in thermokarst depressions, dominates the landscape. In the valleys of the Anadyr and Tanuirer Rivers, abundant lakes with various stages of vegetative growth, alternate with shrubby meadows. One of Chukotka's largest lakes, Lake Krasnoye, borders the Refuge's territory. Whooper and Bewick's

Siberian caribous.

ALASKA

Bering strait

Island

swans, and various duck, geese, and sandpiper species are numerous in the Refuge in the summer. Sandhill cranes nest here in large numbers. Various birds of prey including white-tailed sea eagle, peregrine falcon, gyrfalcon, and goshawk can be encountered in the Refuge almost year round, and the snowy owl is common in winter. Mammals include brown bear, moose, red fox, arctic fox, and mountain hare, and occasionally wolverine and wolf.

Chaunskaya Guba Regional Wildlife Refuge

is situated on the eastern and south-eastern coasts of Chaunskaya Bay, in the East Siberian Sea. Typical tundra of the coastal zone dominates the landscape. One of the territory's greatest values is the high concentration of nesting, moulting, staging, and feeding habitats that it offers rare waterfowl and shorebirds species before the autumn migration. These species include: Bewick's swan, snow goose, lesser white-fronted goose, greater white-fronted goose, ember goose, arctic (black-throated) loon, three eider species (common, king and Siberian), and Ross's gull. Arctic fox, wild reindeer, ermine, mountain hare, wolf, wolverine and brown bear can also be found in the refuge. Moose are sometimes observed in river valleys, and polar bears may visit the Refuge in the winter. The Chaun Lowlands were included on a list of the Soviet Union's most significant wetlands.

■ In addition to Chukotka's three existing regional wildlife refuges, three additional areas, which had regional wildlife refuge status up until 2002, are



Photo: Gemady Siminov

Moose.

worthy of particular attention. They are: the territory of the **former Tumansky Regional Wildlife Refuge**, which borders the existing Avtatuul Refuge and is an important area for numerous migratory bird species; the territory of the **former Tundrovyy Regional Wildlife Refuge**, which is located in the hilly tundra area between the Nygchekveyem and Velikaya Rivers, where it is bordered by the existing Avtatuul Refuge and by the territory of the former Tumansky Refuge; and the territory of the **former Omolonsky Regional Wildlife Refuge**, which is located in middle flow of the Omolon River and was the only protected nature area in Chukotka in the larch taiga zone.

When the operational periods of these three short-term refuges lapsed in 2002,

regional authorities chose not to renew them, thus effectively dissolving the protected areas. In 2005, however, the Administration of Chukotka decided to re-establish the three regional refuges. They adopted this decision thanks in large part to the public's persistent requests, and based on the recommendations of ecologists and scientists. The re-establishment process was still underway at the time this guide was published.

Contact information for Chukotka's regional wildlife refuges: Directorate of the Federal Service for Oversight in the Sphere of Agriculture (Rosselkhoznadzor) for Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, Ulitsa Otke 33, Anadyr, Chukotsky Autonomous Okrug, Russia, 689000. Tel: +7 (42722) 2-65-38. .

■ In addition to the refuges, **20 natural monuments** have been established by regional authorities. According to The World Conservation Union's (IUCN) system of protected area management categories, natural monuments are protected areas that are managed mainly for conservation of specific natural features. Chukotka's natural monuments include: Chosenia willow-poplar groves in river valleys, ancient settlement sites, habitats of rare animal species and unique animal communities, relict plant communities, and several natural landscapes.

Threats to Chukotka's natural heritage

Large industrial projects present the greatest threat to Chukotka's ecosystems.

Chief amongst them are the exploration and exploitation of natural resource deposits – oil, natural gas, gold, silver, platinum, and tin, among others. Wastes from the Bilibino Nuclear Power Plant and from more than 85 outdated radio-isotopic thermo-electro generators (RITEGs) along Chukotka's coast threaten radioactive pollution.

Tundra fires also pose a serious threat. In recent years, the scale of these fires has significantly grown due to the increasing number of people and different types of transport that are involved in the prospecting, oil, gas, and mining industries.

In addition, climate change is having a noticeable impact on the region. Its effects include diminishing

sea ice cover, changes in the distribution and abundance of fish and other marine species, and an increase in severe weather events that cause coastal erosion and flooding.

Many of the threats pose a direct risk to Chukotka's protected nature areas. The unique ecosystems of Avtatuul Regional Wildlife Refuge, as well as those in two former refuges – Tumansky and Tundrovyy – may be harmed by the unregulated exploration of oil and gas in the Lower Anadyr Lowlands. Ust-Tanyurersky and Chaunskaya Guba Regional Wildlife Refuges are located near gold deposits under development, as is the territory of the former Omolonsky Regional Wildlife Refuge. Consequently, the natural functioning of these territories is threatened by industrial waste pollution and by an increased level of wildlife disturbance.

Why does WWF care about Chukotka?

■ Chukotka is part of the Bering Sea region, an area that is a global priority for WWF's conservation work. WWF is working with communities, government agencies, NGOs, scientists, fishermen, and many residents of Bering Sea communities throughout the ecoregion to address threats to the environment and to better understand and conserve the many complex systems that make up the Bering Sea Ecoregion. Communicating the values at stake is part of this work.



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