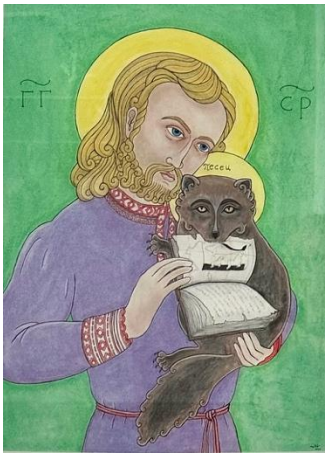
# Artist's concepts for selected pieces

# De Bestiis Insularum

## Gallery Entrance

**Artist: Meg Gravley**

**Title:** Georg Steller: Patron Saint of Field Naturalists



In November of 1741, Vitus Bering's ship, the *St. Peter*, was returning homeward after sighting Alaska, to conclude the Second Kamchatka Expedition, but was shipwrecked near a previously undiscovered island off the coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula. The ship's physician and naturalist, Georg Wilhelm Steller, first stepped foot on this island (later named Bering Island) only to discover that it was not the Kamchatka Peninsula as the crew had hoped. The damaged ship was evacuated, and Steller spent the next eight months recording and observing the creatures inhabiting the island. While studying the sea cows, he lamented that "…the droves of blue foxes (*isatides*) would spoil everything with their teeth and steal from under my very hands; they carried away my maps, book, and ink when I was studying…" Like many of the other fauna inhabiting the island, this diminutive subspecies of Arctic fox (*Vulpes lagopus* ssp. *beringensis*) had never encountered humans before and, thus, had no fear of them.

# North Gallery

**Artist: Jennifer Moss**

**Title:** The Last Sea Cow

**Title:** Tailored Ecologies

**Artist: Sandra Talbot**

**Title:** Island Invasives Pentaptych

This series of five mixed media collages explores the complex relationship of invasive species, including Arctic foxes, Norway rats, and also humans associated with military activities in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands, and, more recently, invasive plant species. *Blue Foxes and Ox-eye Daisies* incorporates historical imagery of Arctic foxes from the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands, images of and actual herbarium specimens of the invasive ox-eye daisy. Arctic foxes are also called blue foxes to signify their particular winter pelage color, which differs from the more familiar white winter coat morphology.

*The Things Left Behind* and *Broken Glass* incorporate imagery of abandoned infrastructure related to military presence in the Aleutians following World War II and throughout the Cold War, based on photographic images from various places on Adak Island.

*Letters From Adak* shows a facimile of a letter from Dashiell Hammett, author of *The Maltese Falcon*, who was stationed on Umnak Island then Adak Island during World War II, to a friend, Prudence Whitfield . As well, that piece highlights a faded vintage image of two Service (Army) personnel stationed on Adak during 1947, and a drawing of a wren, a species that inhabits some of the abandoned buildings on the island. This piece, and *Broken Glass*, incorporates fragments of discarded herbarium specimens of native ferns, meant to signify the impact of military activities and infrastructure on native vegetation.

*Rats and Other Invasives* incorporates copies of historical (late 1800s) etchings of Norway Rats and more recent invasive plant species that occupy island habitats in Alaska, including the Ox-eye daisy and Hawksweed, represented by photographic imagery as well as actual, discarded herbarium specimens collected from Adak in 2019.

**Artist: Steve Ebbert**

**Title:** Island Beasts

**Island Beasts**

At least a dozen non-native mammal species were released on Alaska islands since Vitus Bering's 1741 cruise. Many of these islands are entirely or partly now managed by Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge has been actively eradicating some of these species since 1949 to protect native migratory birds, seabirds, native plants and their habitats. The refuge, with their partners, has successfully eradicated introduced Arctic and red foxes, Norway rats, European rabbits, hoary marmots, reindeer, and feral abandoned cattle from more than 50 islands. Invasive mammals still remain on other Refuge islands.

**Invasive Large Herbivores**

**Cattle Grazing Kelp, Chirikof Island**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

**Cattle and Horses, Sanak Island Group**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Cattle were first brought to Russian-Alaska in the late 1700's to provide their colonies with meat and milk. Later Americans stocked cattle on some islands for ranching. Horses were brought to some islands to help manage the cattle. Today, feral cattle persist on two islands completely within refuge boundaries, and six other islands partly administered by the Refuge.

**Island Bull, Wosnesenski Island**

Size: 5x5 in

**Caribou**

Size: 5x5 in

Beginning in 1896, reindeer (a domestic variety of caribou) were purchased from Russia and shipped from Siberia to Alaska islands and mainland for reindeer herding. Introduced reindeer

persist today on 7 Alaska islands, including 3 islands in the Aleutians. Reindeer were eliminated from Hagemeister Island, an entirely refuge-owned island off the southwestern mainland.

Caribou are one of Alaska's most abundant and widely distributed big game animal but are absent in modern times in the Aleutian chain except on Adak Island. In 1958, caribou were stocked for recreational hunting on Adak Island, a military base since World War II, the population quickly increased during the 1960's. More recently, Adak caribou have crossed the narrow strait between Adak and Kagalaska islands raising concern about their impacts on Kagalaska and other nearby ungulate-free islands. The issue resulted in 2 caribou control efforts on Kagalaska but halted in 2016. Island reindeer and caribou grazing have severe impact on native plant communities, especially the depletion of lichens.

**Invasive small herbivores**

European rabbits were stocked on two islands near Akun Island in the eastern Aleutian Islands during the 1940's. At that time, the islands were used for subsistence egg collecting. On Poa Island, now a part of Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, grazing and burrowing by introduced rabbits were interfering with the nesting colony. Tufted puffins (see below) prefer nesting on grassy slopes in burrows they make in tall vegetation. The eradication of rabbits on Poa Island was successful, but in some ways more difficult than eradicating invasive foxes on other islands.

**European Rabbit, Tangik Island**

Size: 5x5 in

**Hoary Marmot, Sud Island**

Size: 5x5 in

At one time, Hoary Marmots were valuable as fur-bearing animal. The goal of the Alaska Game Commission stock wildlife across “natural barriers” to promote economic stimulus to nearby Alaska communities during the Depression. In 1930, with the objective of establishing a harvestable fur resource an unknown number of marmots from unknown stock was released on Sud Island in the Barren Islands near Kodiak. In the 1980’s, a breeding seabird colony of rhinoceros auklets on the island had declined. Rhino auklets nest in shallow burrows. Hoary marmots were eradicated on Sud Island in 2011.

**Invasive Predators**

**Arctic Fox in Snow**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Arctic Fox were first released on Attu Island in 1750, and many other islands later, for fur production. Foxes found abundant seabirds, eggs, and chicks to prey upon and survived on caches and coastal resources during the winter. At one time, the Aleutian enterprise was very successful. However, foxes died out on some islands as nesting birds declined, or were over-harvested by trappers. The refuge began eradicating non-native foxes as preparation for reintroducing the endangered Aleutian Goose, but the program also benefitted seabirds and migratory birds. The program was successful and continued island by island to 2017.

**Arctic Fox Curled, Sanak Island**

Size: 5x5 in

**Red Fox, Akun Island**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Red foxes were (and still are) native to some Alaska islands that were connected to the mainland by land or sea ice during the lowest ocean levels as the last ice age ended. Other islands, especially the central and western Aleutians, never had foxes until introduced for fur farming. Red foxes were brought west from Russian Kamchatka Peninsula and east from the Alaska Peninsula to stock on islands without foxes. Arctic foxes could not survive on islands with red foxes, and the refuge eradicated introduced arctic foxes from two islands by releasing sterilized red foxes that later died without reproducing.

**Rat on Rope, Rat (Hawadax) Island**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Invasive rats first reached Alaska in during the 1780's, escaping from a shipwrecked Japanese vessel onto what later came to be called Rat Island in the western Aleutians (renamed Hawadax Island after the successful rat eradication there in 2008). Rats are non-native predators on native birds, especially Alaskan seabirds. The "rat spill" changed Rat Island from a sanctuary for

ground-nesting seabirds into a death trap. Since then rats have invaded more than a dozen large islands, some from accidental releases during World War II. Risk of new islands being invaded by rats from shipwrecks and human activities is an ongoing concern.

**Rat and Beach Kelp, Rat (Hawadax) Island**

Size: 5x5 in

**Avian Species Impacted by Invasive Herbivores and Predators**

**Evermann's Rock Ptarmigan and Runway Matting, Attu Island**

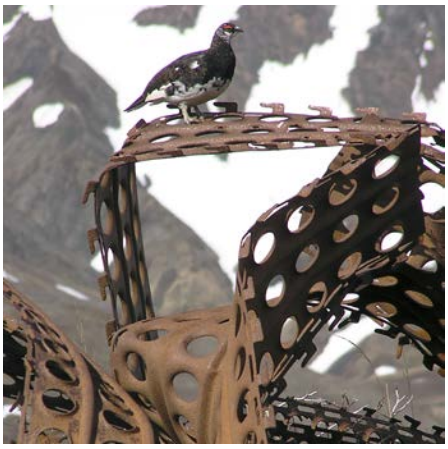
Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Evermann’s rock ptarmigan is a rare subspecies of rock ptarmigan known only from the Near Islands in the Aleutian Islands. By 1936, Evermann’s rock ptarmigan disappeared from the island group except for on Attu Island. Reported on Agattu island in 1886, apparently ptarmigan did not survive the release of introduced foxes there. After fox eradication was successful on both islands, Evermann’s rock ptarmigan were live-captured on Attu Island and released on Agattu Island 27 nautical miles away where they quickly began nesting and rearing chicks. To this day, the subspecies only exists on Attu and Agattu islands.

**Evermann's Rock Ptarmigan on WWII Plumbing, Attu Island**

Size: 11.5x17.25 in

Evermann's rock Ptarmigan survived intentional release of non-native foxes, and accidental invasion of Norway rats on Attu Island. During World War II, the island was occupied by Japanese and Allied forces. Remains of the structures built during the war, now abandoned, are common on the island. Ptarmigan capture teams focused on roads, abandoned airport runways, and derelict equipment. During nesting and breeding season, ptarmigan preferred roosting on old mossed-over runways and the elevated perches of rolled-up runway matting to defend their territories.



**Evermann's Rock Ptarmigan Perched on Runway Matting, Attu island**

Size: 5x5 in

**Black Oystercatcher, Sanak Island Group**

Size: 11.5x17.25

Introduced foxes and rats can completely eliminate nesting of native Black Oystercatchers on Alaska islands. Oystercatchers lay their eggs on sandy or gravelly "scrapes" on beaches and forage in inter-tidal areas. They have responded well to invasive predator eradications.

**Tufted Puffins, Tangik Island**

Size: 11.5x17.25

Tufted puffins prefer nesting on grassy slopes in burrows they make in tall vegetation, and so are impacted by herbivores such as European Rabbits, which were introduced to certain eastern Aleutian islands.

**Recent Human Activities**

**Gas Masks,** Attu Island

Size: 5x5 in

**Spent Ammo, Attu Island**

Size: 5x5 in

During World War II, the Aleutian Islands were attacked and occupied by Japanese forces. In response, the US and its allies built up coastal defenses, airfields, naval and army bases. Islands occupied by Japanese soldiers for more than a year were Attu and Kiska Islands. Both islands were retaken by American allies. The derelict remains of those battles remain on these two islands and elsewhere. For example, gas masks were stockpiled on Attu Island for use in invasion of Japan, but abandoned on the island after Japan surrendered. Live and spent ammunition, and unexploded bombs and mark the scenes of battles. Overgrown airplane runways, airplane parts, barracks, fox holes, ammo caches, and even fire hydrants mark areas where forces of either side dug in for the duration of the war, replacing the ancient house pits once occupied by Aleuts. While eradicating non-native foxes that were first stocked on Attu in 1750 and capturing rare ptarmigan there for translocation back to re-establish on another nearby island, these artifacts provided a touchstone to an island's past documented by Steller's *De Bestiis Marinas.*

**Beach Cow, Sanak Island**

17.25 x 22 in

Archival ink on Strathmore Bristol paper

**Artists: Sandra Talbot, Andrew Hope, Amberlie Perkin and George K. Sage**
Wee Beasties (diptych)

**Title:** Night Hunting
This image of the common Little Brown Bat references patterns observed in bats suffering from White-nose Syndrome, a fungal disease not currently known in Alaska but expected in the future as the disease has been observed in lower latitudes in the Pacific Northwest. Little Brown Bats are common in Alaska, including islands such as Kodiak Island, islands of the Prince William Sound and the Alexander Archipelago. Landfall (a nautical term that indicates the sighting of land from a sea-going vessel) was made in all three regions during the Bering Expedition, either by the St. Peter (Bering) or the St. Paul (Chirikof). Bats were not noted during the Bering Expedition.

**Title:** The Many Faces of Sorex pribilofensis Specimen NK305143

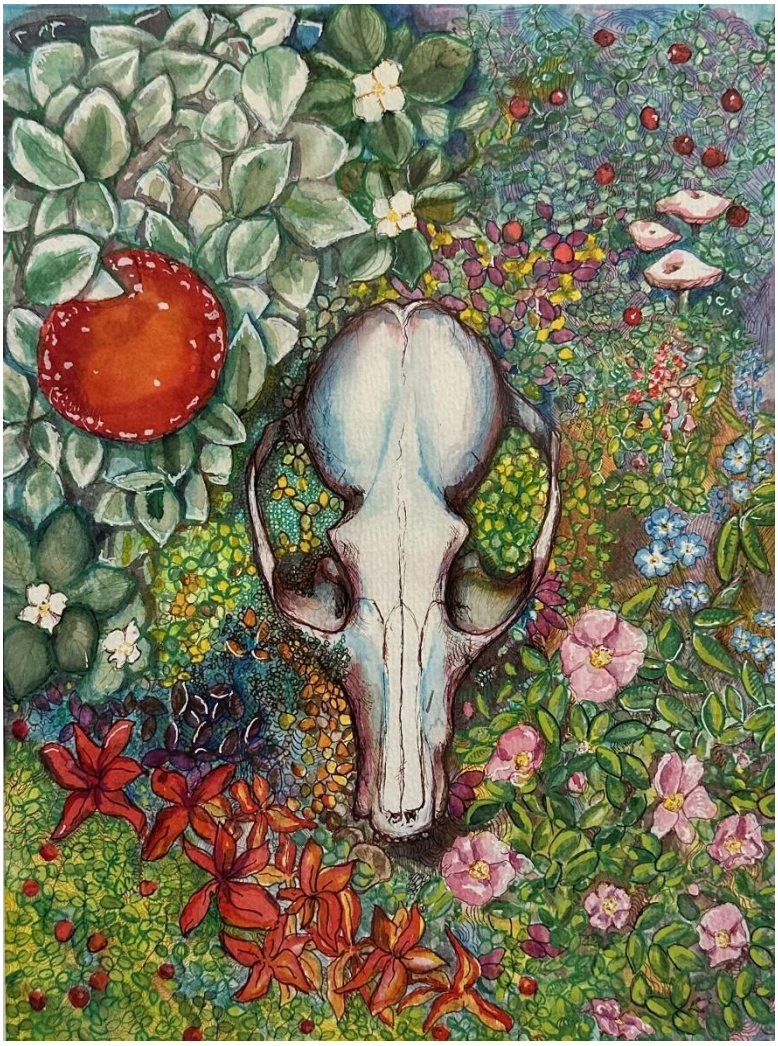
This image incorporates copies of photographs of a single specimen of the endemic Pribilof Island Shrew (*Sorex pribilofensis*). This piece has multiple artists, as it was a collaborative effort: Sandra Talbot imagined the piece, coordinated the construction and assembly of the components; Andrew Hope photographed the specimen, Amberlie Perkin transferred imagery to the apothecary bottles, and George K. Sage constructed the shadow box and assisted in wax sealing of the bottles. Credit is given to all artists in a way similar to how scientists give credit to authors who have played a significant role in conducting scientific research and writing scientific papers. We note that *Sorex pribilofensis*, which was described and named in 1895 by C. Hart

Merriam, was not noted during subsequent 19th and early 20th century expeditions to the Pribilof Island, such as the Harriman Expedition of 1899.

## Center Gallery

**Artist: Christy Haughey**

**Title:** Arctic Fox, 2023



**Artist: Brianna Reagan**
**Title:** Drift

**Title:** Graze

**Artist: Barbara Pierson and Sandra Talbot**

**Title:** Stowaways: Rats and their Tapeworms, 2023

Fabric and glass

In 1950, Everett L. Schiller studied the helminth (parasitic worm) fauna of rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) on Adak Island. It was unknown when rats were first introduced onto Adak Island,

but according to the Army's Annual Sanitary Report for the Adak Sector, written in 1944, rodents had not yet been observed on the island. Thus, the introduction of rats to Adak apparently happened between 1944 and 1950. Because rats are known to transmit various diseases to man, knowledge about the rat parasite fauna on Adak was considered fundamental. Among the helminth species uncovered by Schiller's research, which was published in 1952, was a tapeworm identified as *Hymenolepis fraterna*. The tapeworm was the most common parasite found in Adak rats, occurring in 42% of the 224 rats examined. *H. fraterna* is now considered a variety of *H. nana*, the dwarf tapeworm. The dwarf tapeworm, along with the closely related *H. diminuta* (the rat tapeworm) causes an intestinal infection, hymenolepiasis, in humans.

In this quilt, we included historical imagery of the rat, which arrived on Adak presumably as a stowaway on marine vessels, and contemporary imagery of closeup of eggs of *H. nana*, obtained from the CDC website (https://www.cdc.gov/dpdx/hymenolepiasis/index.html). The tapeworms are 'stowaways' in the rats, and in the quilt the tapeworm egg imagery can be seen through a transparent cabochon.

This was a collaborative piece. We enjoyed the idea of designing and creating a 'quilt' that depicts tapeworms and rats, when quilts are often thought of as depicting more traditional, often homey, imagery. The blocks were designed and printed on fabric by Sandra Talbot; the quilt was designed and assembled by Bobbi Pierson. Delaney Pierson helped apply the cabochons.

Schiller, E. L. 1952. Studies on the helminth fauna of Alaska.V. Notes on Adak rats (*Rattus norvegicus* Berkenhout) with special reference to helminth parasites. American Society of Mammalogists 33: 38–49.

**Artist: Sandra Talbot**

Title: *Memento Domine Luter Mare*, 2020.

Digital imagery UV printed on glass

21.6 x 28.6 x 0.5 inches.

This imagery derives from archived imagery taken of sea otter skulls collected by federal scientists from beaches along the Alaskan coast during the 20th and 21st centuries, being prepared for archival into the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Original imagery: Sandra Talbot, U. S. Geological Survey, public domain: https://www.usgs.gov/media/images/sea-otter-skulls-being-prepared-archival

**Artists: Mike Conti, Sean Farley and Sandra Talbot**
**Title:** The Crossing, 2023
Video

Anchorage black bears were collared with a camera as part of a larger study of urban bear activity. The video documents bear #16 crossing from Kincaid Park to Fire Island and its interactions with a brown bear in 2012.

**Artist: Sandra Talbot and Jason Fristensky**
**Title: *Homo invasor* Series**

This series depicts selected images of abandoned human infrastructure and machinery left behind on the Alaskan islands of Adak and Chirikof islands. These five images were selected from a larger suite of images exhibited at the IGCA in 2016, an exhibition (*Situs Relictus*) that depicted the remains and fate of things we leave behind once we deem a geography no longer suits our needs.

Artist: Sandra Talbot

Title: *Wunderkammer: Steller's Curse,* 2020.

Charcoal, gesso, conte pencil and acrylic.

In a 2000 article in the *Seattle Times*, Chris Carrel and Lance Morgan pointed out that Steller's 'single-handed' saving of the Bering Expedition "set into motion a torrent of exploitation that would overshadow [his] scientific accomplishments and drive his most notable discoveries to extinction in mere decades." According to Carrel and Morgan, Steller's life seemed cursed by bad luck in the form of the misfortunes of exploration, the lonely way he died, and his almost-forgotten legacy, and that legacy lives on in the animals named for him: the extinct Steller's sea cow and the Steller's spectacled cormorant (now called Pallas' spectacled cormorant, formally described by Pallas from Steller's descriptions), and the endangered Steller's eider, Steller sea lion, and Steller's sea eagle. Only the raucous Steller's Jay seems to have escaped Steller's Curse. As well, a large number of other species Steller discovered and described are also declining, including the sea otter and the northern fur sea.

In a rebuttal, the late historian and educator Orcutt Frost called the article by Carrel and Morgan 'misleading' for multiple (valid) reasons: Steller was accomplished although he died young, he did not 'single-handedly' save the Bering expedition, and he did not write "textbook descriptions" as suggested by Carrel and Morgan. Nevertheless, many of my colleagues still refer to the phenomenon as Steller's Curse.

Several images in this exhibition depict the sea otter (Brianna Regan, *Drift,* Center Gallery; Sabrina Kessakorn, *Before: Material Abundance*, North Gallery; Sandra Talbot, *Memento*

*Domine Luter Mare*, Center Gallery). While the sea otter is not included in the suite of species typically included in Steller Curse (since Steller did not first describe the species), the sea otter is also marked by its near-extinction that resulted in the fur trade that began within a year of Steller's return to Kamchatka and lasted until the early 20th century (Reidman and Estes). While population numbers of sea otters have slowly recovered, overall, the number is still well below the species' ancestral size and the species' current distribution is a fraction of its pre-18th century range and it is thought that the sea otters of the Aleutian Island Archipelago survived only due to translocations in the 1960s and 1970s.

Carrel, Chris, and Lance Morgan. 'The Mystery of Steller's Curse." *The Seattle Times*, June 4, 2000.

Frost, Orcutt. "Steller's Curse." *The Seattle Times*, June 11, 2000.

# South Gallery

**Artist: Sabrina Kessakorn**

**Title:** Before: Material Abundance

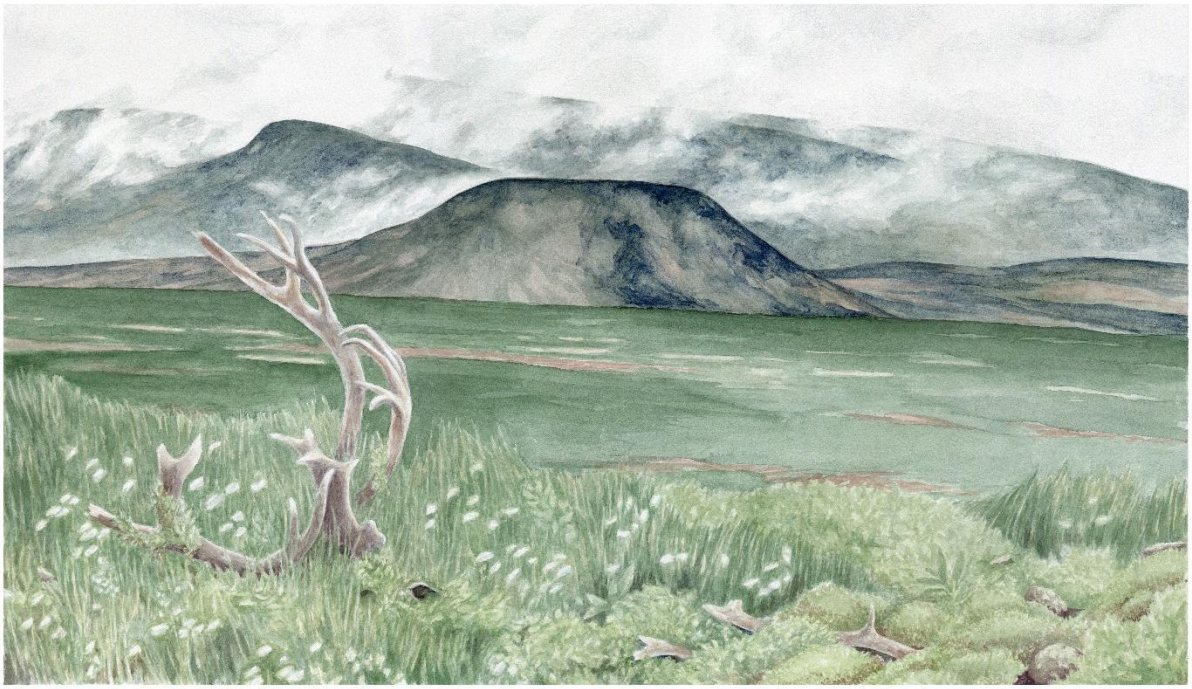
Clusters of sea otters gawk at the viewer as they play amongst objectified elements of their natural environment. Fabricated mountains and plastic forests of seaweed allude to fur traders that historically transformed the region's abundant life into commodified materials for distant markets.

**Title:** After: Hostile Takeover

Otters and kelp forests disappearing with the rise of the ocean and urchins. Damaged and discolored coral-like algae seem to peel from the canvas, reflecting its vulnerable state to just disappear from the Pacific Ocean. What can be done to save them?

**Artist: Sarah Gilman**

**Title:** Island Ghost



(the following text is adapted directly from my 2020 essay: https://hakaimagazine.com/features/the-island-humans-cant-conquer/)

St. Matthew Island is said to be the most remote place in Alaska. Marooned in the Bering Sea halfway to Siberia, it is well over 300 kilometers and a 24-hour ship ride from the nearest human settlements. The US Coast Guard established a long-range navigation site on the island's southwestern coast in 1943, part of a network that helped fighter planes and warships orient on the Pacific with the help of regular pulses of radio waves. Worried how the men stationed on the island would fare if they were cut off from resupply, the agency also introduced a herd of 29 reindeer as a food stock. But World War II ended, and the men left. The reindeer population, without predators, exploded. By 1963, there were 6,000 devouring the island's lichens and shifting the ecosystem balance to vascular plants like sedges, grasses, and dwarf willow. By 1964, though, nearly all the reindeer were dead. A single severe winter had taken them. The last lone, lame female, disappeared in the 1980s. For a long time, reindeer skulls salted the island. When I visited St. Matthew in 2019, most I saw were buried to their antler tips, as if submerged in rising green water, as if the physical memory of their presence would soon be lost forever.

**Title:** Ratspill

(text is adapted directly from my 2019 feature: https://hakaimagazine.com/features/the-rat-spill/)

Alaska is one of the few places on Earth where rats are still rare. Only a handful of mainland communities have established populations, and just a dozen or so of the larger islands off the Alaskan coast are known to have infestations. Rats first showed up in the state around 1780, when they escaped from a Japanese ship that ran aground on a western Aleutian island that the Unangan people had named Hawadax, meaning “those two over there,” after the island’s low hills. A Russian explorer later renamed it Rat Island. As more vessels traveled the Alaskan coastline—Russian and American fur traders translocating Arctic foxes to farm, US and Japanese ships sparring during the Second World War—they inadvertently introduced stowaway rats to other islands. Scientists now call this kind of event a “rat spill.” The animals scampered down mooring lines, found their way from hideaways in cargo to terra firma, even paddled to shore from vessels and wrecks. Rats are famously prolific. With the ability to produce several litters per year of babies that sexually mature quickly, a mated pair quickly multiplies to thousands. Where food is abundant, they’ll dine on the richest parts of what’s available, killing more than they can eat, devouring seeds, plants, fruits, reptiles, bugs, eggs, chicks, adult birds. On Kiska Island, in the Aleutians, researchers have stumbled on rat dens beneath the rocks packed with auklets, including one stash of 148 dead birds. Seabirds, in contrast to rats, produce just a couple of babies each year; many species have just one. And in thin years, these long-lived creatures may not breed at all, a strategy that helps them weather the vagaries of a harsh environment. All of this means that, wherever rats thrive, seabirds tend not to survive—colonies containing thousands to millions of birds crashing or vanishing altogether.

**Artist: Sandra Talbot**

**Title:** The Indifferent Gardener

This piece illustrates a novel finding on Simeonof Island Wilderness of the Shumagin Island group off the coast of the Alaska Peninsula. Simeonof Island is comprised of two islets connected by a sand isthmus. Cattle were removed from Simeonof Island between 1983 and 1985. Subsequent vegetation recovery research conducted during 2014 found that the invasive ox-eye daisy has escaped its initial range in the historical ranchhouse on the south islet and is spreading up old cattle trails into the wilderness, both on the south and north islets. Since ox-eye daisies tend to colonize disturbed areas, we were curious how they were 'marching' down the old cattle trails. We then observed that the only other large terrestrial species, the river otter, regularly used the cattle trails to traverse the island. Thus, the river otters appear to be facilitating the spread of the invasive plant into the wilderness. It is possible that facilitation is amplified by nitrogen inputs from otter feces, but that is yet to be determined.

**Artist: David Joel**

**Title:** Superfluous, 2023
Painted steel, clear epoxy, and urethane resin

This work is designed to impart allegories suggestive of the complex coexistence between the natural world and our engineered environments. At this intersection, with resistance, tension and conflict, are intermittent displays of harmony and cohabitation. These investigations allow me to consider certain physical and psychological dualities: natural vs manmade, balance vs unbalance, independence or interdependence, control and letting go. It becomes a continuum of transformation that keeps me grounded as an individual and conceptually informs my artwork.

The interior species of caribou introduced to the ‘Father’ island Adak by the US Government in 1958-59, were mainly to support the military presence that had existed there first during WWII and again through the Cold War. Without a military presence there, or wild predators to face, and no more long treacherous journeys, the herd has since grown to a sizable force that government has needed to confront on several occasions. Nearby Wildlife refuge lands could be threatened by the presence and continued eating trends of the caribou, mainly the lichen that is being consumed much faster than it can regenerate. This piece and its title invite the viewer to consider the ongoing and interesting dialogue surrounding the state we occupy and one of its most iconic animal species, the caribou.

**Artist: Austin Parkhill**

**Title**: Bluff, 2023

Acrylic on aluminum panel

# Front of Gallery

**Artist: Stephen Gray**
**Title:** Interspecific Competition in an Ecosystem Under Stress, 2023
Mixed media