

Refuge Biologist Wins National Science Honor



Jeff Williams, of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, in a March ceremony in Atlanta received the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's highest award for Science Leadership. Williams out competed scientists from 500 National Wildlife Refuges throughout the country as well as numerous other USFWS offices because of his, "exceptional scientific accomplishments that have a lasting influence on the management of fish and wildlife resources". In addition to the honor of the award, Williams will bring back to the refuge \$50,000 that will be used to maintain a field study for the summer and other biological work.

Williams, the unit biologist for refuge lands on the 1000 mile long Aleutian Islands Archipelago was noted for his work as chief scientist aboard the largest research vessel for the USFWS, the *M/V Tiglax*, and for spearheading the development of scientific study of the recovery of Kasatochi Island after its near annihilation in a 2008 volcanic eruption. As chief scientist aboard the *M/V Tiglax*, Williams is responsible for coordinating a program of international research supported by the ship and involving a diverse group of agencies, universities and USFWS scientists. In any given summer, the *M/V Tiglax* travels 15,000 nautical miles and hosts 160 scientists.

When long dormant Kasatochi Volcano, just east of Adak, erupted violently in 2008 burying the entire island and all life on it with thick ash, Williams recognized the rare opportunity the eruption presented to study how life returns to a seemingly sterile volcanic landscape. Williams had more than a decade of pre-eruption data on plant, insect and animal life as Kasatochi had been a refuge biological monitoring site for more than a dozen years. Every summer, refuge biologists working for Williams, lived on the island in an old fox farmer's cabin studying the hundreds of thousands of seabirds that nested on Kasatochi. This pre-eruption data would allow scientists to compare life after the eruption with life before and be able to judge recovery rates to "normal". Post eruption, Williams and partners pulled together a diverse team of researchers to study the island's recovery documenting the return of plants, arthropods, marine mammals and breeding birds. This initial phase of science culminated in publication of 10 papers about the Kasatochi eruption in a special edition of the journal, *Arctic, Antarctic and Alpine Research*.

After graduating from Colorado State, Williams bought a one way ticket to Alaska landing a seasonal biological job which took him to remote Aggatut Island in the far western Aleutians. Williams said he was pretty much dumped off on Aggatut for the summer with another new biologist and had to sink or swim in the rugged Aleutian environment of the uninhabited island. Williams lived on Adak for more than a dozen years before moving into the Alaska Maritime Refuge headquarters at Islands & Ocean Visitor Center in Homer. Williams credits his 22 years of work in the Aleutians with providing him with endless challenge and adventure and even a wife, refuge biologist Brie Drummond.

The \$50,000 Williams won for the refuge comes at a time of dire budget cuts that threatened to close two field camps where scientific research had gone on for decades. The extra funds will keep one of those camps open this year and allow for additional special studies on Kasatochi Island as well as St. Matthew Island which is considered the most remote place in America.