

Afognak ELK

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The hills and mountains of southwest Afognak and Raspberry islands provide stunning visuals, but to hunters they strike a daunting appearance. The heights are good overlooks when the work of climbing is done; however, since everyone starts at the beach, the misery of each day is clear to the experienced. Intuition tells you to prepare for days of hard work.

This is the story of an Alaska elk hunt immersed in those highlands. My three companions and I were prepared for being wet, cold and cramped each day of our week's hunt. We knew there would be plenty of opportunity to lay out payment in pain for our elk, but at Kodiak Raspberry Island Remote Lodge we also learned there could be a slightly different twist to it.

Imagine a place where you can experience the rawness of remote wilderness while being supported with simple hospitality and the anticipation of any need. Imagine fishing and hunting in a place where you are greeted upon your return from the field each day by the energetic kids of a family that makes you part of theirs. Imagine a warm bed, luxurious cabin and sauna or hot tub every evening after a gourmet meal, with wine and beer available. This was our base, a mere 15-minute boat ride from multiple walk-ups to the elk valleys and hillsides of Raspberry and Afognak islands.


My friend Rick had gotten a draw permit for elk. Three of us had put-in, but he got the selection and sensibly wanted help in the harvesting. We had talked about options and expenses at length, because he is a researcher. After going through the details and considering the late-October realities of weather in Alaska, he felt it would be safer and more reliable to stay at a lodge.

We found two additional partners, Ben and Curt, who were very enthusiastic about the Roosevelt elk of Afognak and Raspberry islands. Big-bodied but with less antler-trophy potential than their Rocky Mountain cousins, these elk were transplanted from Washington to the Kodiak archipelago in the 1920s. They have flourished there ever since due to the similarities in temperature and forest density. Legend is that they swam over to Raspberry Island from their first releases on Afognak. Numbers from ADF&G vary, but estimates are that 200- to 300 animals live on Raspberry and 1,000- to 1500 elk on Afognak. We had an Afognak permit and would focus our pursuits there.

Rick made contact; we selected dates that worked and the lodge reserved space for us. The lodge consists of five cabins, with a hot tub, sauna and a 37-foot catamaran propelled by twin 300 HP outboards. There was a good gear suggestion list and a website with phenomenal pictures of elk herds to aid in our preparations.

The new owner/operators are a young family. Birch Robbins and his wife Tiffany bought the lodge from his parents, Lee and Cilla, in 2008. He has a degree in hospitality from UAF and Tiffany has a constant smile, gourmet kitchen skills and a Midwestern attitude that makes you feel at home in five minutes. Birch grew up in the Raspberry Island lifestyle, and Tiffany loved it after her first visit.

We flew into Kodiak from Anchorage on a commercial flight. Birch arrived with a van to take us to the small-boat harbor. We lunched, helped Birch load supplies and headed into the wild ocean that surrounds Kodiak. In my prior trip, a floatplane had taken us to Raspberry Island. Birch was moving us and the groceries by boat. The transit was time well-spent. Whale-viewing started with the city of Kodiak still off our bow. The swells on the outer rock reef make you glad that Birch is a skilled captain. He grew up on these waters as a commercial fisherman, his family having started the lodge in 1983 when he was 6 years old. The mountains of the passage are covered in brown meadows or grass with Salmonberry bushes and gray alder patches, as if wearing a fleece vest. The green Sitka spruce adds a corduroy texture to the hillsides. Everything rises abruptly from the sea. Birch, in two hours, showed us one of the most rugged, remote commutes to a worksite imaginable. It was about 45 miles at a bit over 20 knots.



Rick Birch glasses in Afognak's characteristic thick country.



We were met at the beach by Tiffany, along with Fisher and Sage (ages 10 and 8 respectively). All the gear and groceries went in 4-wheeler loads and we were directed toward two cabins with bunk beds, heaters and full private baths. Before dinner we took time to sight-in our rifles and one bow at the lodge's 100-yard target range. Birch's dad Lee established test-firing as a gentle but firm rule of the place. If your gun is not on the paper, then wounded animals, disappointment and sometimes dangerous conditions are possible. It's a good rule and the four of us were on target.

Our group spent the rest of the evening prepping for the next day's hunt. We planned to have shore gear ready (tent, bags, food) for an emergency stay-over, if necessary. We also discussed landing sites. We picked a central location with good high-country overlook potential.

Up early, Birch motored us across at 20 knots and we were soon storing dry bags with overnight gear in a grove of spruce. Each member of our group had hunted before, but never together in this type of country. The combination of coastal land, mountains and alder/raspberry thickets to transit was a big task. Just off the beach, we started plowing through 4-foot hillside grass, dense and blended with raspberry canes all seeming to lay downhill. It got steep immediately. We lined up single-file to limit the wear and tear, but it was tough.

The deer hunting potential was clear right away and we were distracted a bit by these options. We spotted 6 or 8 animals uphill of us in the first hour and got into stalk mode. Birch had told us it was a good year for deer. We were after elk but had not seen them on our hillside by spotting, so the morning was spent climbing and seeing how close we could get to the deer, even though we chose not to harvest.

By noon, we had reached 1,500 feet and took a break to lunch, recover and spot. All had trained physically, but rehydrating and eating to restore are a continuous project. The available fluids now included fresh snow to cool overheated bodies. The temperature was in the 40- to 50-degree range and the skies were clear, so layering clothes and changing frequently to adjust is crucial. The cool morning chill suggests

dressing warmly, but the work of a 1,500-foot climb promptly warms you up to a sweat, especially when you are pushing back brush with every step. If you don't shed layers steadily you'll be soaked with sweat when you reach the cooler, windy mountain heights. Additionally, the fluid and salt losses of sweating sap your energy. Hiking on Afognak is a continuous process of taking off and adding the outer jacket or insulating shirt and vest layers. Base layers always stay on, but avoiding those becoming soaked is key.

Spotting at 1,500 feet (the area's tallest peaks are 2,000- to 2,500 feet tall) allows visual access to a lot of country. We used a spotting scope to 30X power for detailing but mostly relied on 7X to 10X binoculars. Seeing all the deer gave us confidence that we were not missing any elk. The gray color of the deer makes them challenging to spot, but the light tan of the elk is quite obvious even at distances of a mile or more against the background of gray alder and light brown meadows. By 3 p.m. we knew that there were no huntable elk in this area. Deer were tempting on the descent, with close proximities (30 yards) at times. Each could have taken a deer on this first day, even by bow, but the long downhill trek made us glad that we had not.

By 6 p.m., exhausted, we met Birch at the beach, loaded gear and headed back for showers and a beer before dinner. On prior trips, we would have downloaded tree-stored dried food and cooked dinner, washing dishes and stowing food totes in the trees until 9 or 10 p.m. Instead, on this trip, we sat down at 7:30 to beef fajitas with all the trimmings, followed by rhubarb crisp with homemade ice cream. The sandwich orders for the next day were logged in and we retired to the hot tub to restore sore legs. It was easy to drop off to sleep.

The first day of hunting had impressed us all. Still, the steep climb, the absence of elk and some uncertainty about the herd's location all weighed heavily on our group. We had two hunt options for the following day: One was to hunt a low-lying valley, the second to trek up a steep inlet near Shelikof Strait. It was still dark while the weather report was pending with Birch. I drank

my coffee assuming the lowland approach would win out, given how hard everyone had worked the previous day. But when the weather report came in favorably, my three partners were for putting it to use on the aggressive approach. On the map, this was much farther out, but it accessed more miles of overlook. Birch had confidence that he could get us out and back the same day but explained that we would be beyond VHF contact.

We landed on the beach just after sunrise. The start-up was steep but over good game trails, actively used by deer. A buck and doe maneuvered in tall grass just above us, out of range. Curt got an opportunity with his bow. His camo and stalking, combined with the naivety of a young buck, allowed the silent harvest of the deer at 22 yards. Ben nearly took a larger buck farther up the hillside just before the crest.

We worked together to clean and hang the buck. The country lay out as open meadows with thickets of trees and alder bushes. We could see for miles—no elk, but multiple deer and abundant sign encouraged our hiking. A central ridge over two miles inland gave us a spectacular view. This was where the elk herd had last been seen 10 to 14 days before.

A strong wind out of the west built by mid-afternoon as predicted. Some frozen sleet made it uncomfortable but we glassed thoroughly. I was briefly excited by sighting solo elk bedded down about a mile away. Stronger optics confirmed this to be well-colored bush. The meadows, valleys and hillside held no elk. We retreated off the mountain, dragging the cleaned buck, to beat dusk as Birch arrived to pick us up.

Dinner was another great meal, with further reports of the elk of Raspberry from the other hunters in camp. The two regions feature essentially identical terrain and flora, so the other hunters finding the animals near their jumping-off points made sense because they were hunting the north side of the island. We needed to see what potential sites there were for the northern portion of Afognak, near Malina Bay, and that depended on wind and weather.

The terrain near Malina lays out as a central meadowed valley with an accessible central ridge. Two lakes, Upper and Lower



Elk tend to stand out against their Afognak background during this time of year, but one first has to reach the alpine open country for good glassing opportunities.

Malina, lay in the eastern portion. Abrupt mountain terrain surrounds this valley like the walls of a castle. The lowest portion of the valley is accessible to the west but fronts on Shelikof Strait—wide-open, weather-impacted ocean with a well-deserved bad reputation. Westerly or northeasterly wind can easily and unpredictably turn against small craft. Weather reporting is crucial and has to be attended to. Elk like to face into the wind and move in that direction if disturbed. When the ocean threatens, seaside approaches are dangerous. Land-based hunters out of the Malina Lakes have an advantage in tough sea conditions, but we were at the end of our permit hunting period and it was doubtful that any hunters were in those lakes to get the elk moving out of their sanctuary.

Muskomee Bay is the closest access point on south Afognak. It extends into the landmass about a mile and has a gentle rise from the bay all the way to Afognak Lake. Meadows tucked between spruce growths are huntable, as are hillsides along the valley. The only drawback was high-altitude viewing. This area had little access to climb to viewing spots like we had used for glassing in the last two days. We took the risk of this limitation to cover ground fast and hope for a hidden herd, tucked away.

Spruce forests, carpeted in thick moss, make for easy and fast transit. The mileage covered was more than our previous days. Deer and bear sign was found but was not abundant. The side hills were game-free, even though we were quiet. The benchmark of reaching the lake was achieved, despite some large beaver ponds, but still there was no sign of elk. We got back to our late-afternoon pickup realizing that we really just had two more days to find elk.

Finding game can be a challenge on

Afognak, as in most hunting areas. These elk commonly cluster in herds of 50 or more animals. The majesty of 200 animals on a hillside is thrilling and shocking. They watch calmly, with 400 eyes on alert, in large clearings. Without hunting pressure to move such a group, they can find abundant browse on most mountains and they seem to stay put. Like elk society in other regions, smaller herds and solitary individuals or pairs are found, but large groups are the norm because rich feed is available everywhere on Afognak.

We got back to the lodge, reorganized and enjoyed another good meal and fellowship. We studied the map with Birch and gently pressed on the northern Malina option. He explained that while possible, it would come down to weather and wind. The extreme west and northern portion of Malina had rocky exposed shorelines and steep mountain terrain. The morning weather report was going to be the determining factor. As our backup option, we chose another high ridge system to the east along the protected Raspberry Strait waters.

The morning weather report predicted strong winds blowing out of the west. It was the worst possible setting for going ashore any place on the west or northern portions of Malina, Birch confirmed. Fortunately, Raspberry Strait is much more protected water. We discussed options. To get an elk found, harvested and transported back, this hunting day was crucial. We headed toward Waskanareska Bay. It was a longer boat ride (8 miles) but at 20 knots, it was easily doable. We already knew the hunting circumstances.

The bay landing went well. The thought of being able to move over eight miles on the map would have been unthinkable with any other mode of hunting. We started

from the beach by 9 a.m. and had reached 1,000 feet in two hours, where we began spotting for both elk and deer. The weather changed, as predicted, and a strong wind from the west brought frozen sleet. No animals came out, but sign was abundant.

At 1,500 feet, there was a lull in the weather and the sun peeked through. It was briefly warm, pleasant weather and we stopped in a mossy opening to eat lunch. The view was glorious, both of the strait and of the hillside we had climbed. The plan was to finish the crest of the ridge and glass on all sides. We packed and headed up the exposed hilltop above us.

The lull was temporary and the wind came up again with some frozen sleet. For the first hour, glassing went well. We could see to the northwest for a mile or two. At a half-mile below in the valley, we saw our first brown bear, crossing a meadow and moving into alders. It too was probably attentive to weather and stayed in the cover.

At about 3 p.m. we spotted our first elk. Two animals came over the westernmost portion of our ridge system and dropped into the valley at probably one and a half to two miles distance. In fall hunting the tan color of the elk stands out dramatically. Though tiny at a distance, the color contrast and their movement gave us a good view. The value of good optics was profound. Rick had a cow permit and with 10X binoculars we could see antlers. The two animals moved downhill like the bear, into an alder thicket and out of view.

We watched to see if these were the leading edge of a herd. No other elk emerged. Late season often leads to bulls separating from the main herd. This was the reason to explore any good terrain, even though we had hunted for four days without finding elk. This was also the rationale behind our avoidance of noisy rifle-hunting deer, even though they were abundant.

The weather steadily closed in. Winds of 20- to 30 mph were blowing down our ridge system, driving the sting of frozen sleet. Ridge tops are great viewing places but very exposed. The low clouds of bad weather started obscuring the view of that distant alder patch. Enthusiasm at the elk sighting was slowly smothered in our conversations about the plan. The ridge was now partially obscured in low clouds. Elk were at least 1 ½ miles distant, lost to view and the afternoon was growing

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late. Under ideal circumstances, we could probably have ridge-transited to the elk in under two hours. They might have still been there. Practical issues started to loom up.

“What ifs” are part of hunting. In our group of four, the diehard wanted to make the trek despite weather and evidence of a tough harvest potential. The cautious one saw the serious risk of bad and worsening weather and an unknown prospect of getting an elk more than a mile farther than we had already come. Two remained neutral. Eventually, part of hunting wisdom comes from getting chilled by the wind and looking at friends who are being put at risk for large uncertainties. We turned back.

The wind remained steady all the way back. Ben, our youngest group member, remained enthusiastic, but the deer were bedded down in the wind, except for one distant sighting out of range. Animals show natural wisdom on windy days, while we hunters continue looking and walking. It was cold enough as we got to the beach to make us glad we could bed down in shelter, just like the elk.

Our last hunting day came with a strong westerly weather report. Sunny Valley is a system I had used in 1999 to harvest two elk. It lay out just on the backside of the hill where we had seen the two elk the previous day. I knew the valley well, having walked it for three days, packing those two animals. We wanted one final opportunity.

The morning started well with an early take-off and we were cross-hilling at 500 feet by 10 a.m., a mile up the valley. We dropped down and still found the valley easy to read. The backside of the elk hill from the day before did not have a herd hiding on it. Ben and Rick were serious about deer, but they too were hiding. We got back to the beach feeling like we had accomplished a lot. In the five days, we had explored most of the available terrain visually or by actual traverse.

It was actually quite tough to pack our gear, say goodbye to the generous family who had opened their home and depart this remote wilderness. As a group, our planning was infused with thoughts of harvest and shaped by needs to transport a large animal. Rick had his first-ever elk permit experience. Ben saw more deer in five hunting days than ever in his life. Both had learned skills that would be the foundations of their hunting futures. Curt had taken a deer at close range in Alaska with a bow, an accomplishment he hadn't considered realistic when starting this adventure.

The benefits of the lodge went way beyond creature comforts; basing our hunt here magnified our ability to cover country

and endure weather. We benefited from the wisdom of locals with years of experience in the terrain, without the cost of a guide. After 20 years of elk hunting Afognak, the new takeaway for me was that it could be comfortable, as well as remote, aggressive and challenging. The elk were there; we had seen them—elusive and well-hidden but fit and thriving.

As the boat took us back along Raspberry Strait to Kodiak, my group wasn't disappointed, but we were reluctant to leave and already eager to return. We had eaten great food without the exhaustion of preparation at the end of a long day's hunting. Brilliant. We

had recovered and rested each night in preparation for the next day. Refreshing. We dried our gear, especially our boots, each evening for the next day's hunting. Unheard of in soggy Afognak. The hunt had been an overwhelming success, because it isn't just about harvest; it's also about the experience, the fellowship and testing yourself in a rich wilderness.



Marc Deede is a family doctor who has practiced in Soldotna, AK, for 34 years and hunted Afognak Island elk for most of them. He also has enjoyed the experience of hunting other Alaska big-game animals.

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