



# Alaska



The author with one of his hunting buddies, Jens Krogh, atop one of the incredible peaks of Afognak Island.

## Renewing My Appreciation For Conservation & Nature

By **Joe Betar**, HSCF Executive Director

Recently I was blessed to make a pilgrimage to Alaska for the first time. At the request of Tim Richardson, I was finally able to put this trip on my calendar.

Tim and I had been in discussions about this trip for the past two years but could never seem to synchronize our calendars. Tim is a unique fellow. He is a Washington, D.C. transplant from Texas. During this trip, I observed him crossing treacherous mountain terrain, for miles each day, lugging a large waterproof backpack (not even a backpack really, more so a waterproof gear bag), wearing worn hiking boots, lugging a rifle. Our group affectionately nicknamed him “The Goat.”

Tim is a Government Affairs Consultant and a published author many times over. He has 30 years of experience related

to the Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS) restoration project. Prior to working in the EVOS spill region, he was special assistant to former U.S. Senator Lloyd Bentsen (D-TX) and administrative assistant to U.S. Representative Greg Laughlin (then D-TX). Tim was founding editor of the *Quorum Report*, a contributing editor to *Texas Business* magazine, *Houston Business Journal*, *Dallas Fort Worth Business Journal*, *Dallas Times Herald*, and the Austin correspondent for *Platt’s Oilgram News*. From 1990 to 1996, he published *The Busby Papers* for Lyndon Johnson’s longest serving aide, Horace W. Busby. In 2000, he published a book providing a 10-year retrospective of the Alaska spill, *Kodiak Bears and the Exxon Valdez*, and has lectured about the Exxon Valdez spill and its aftermath at the National Conservation Training Center, the



**Above:** (L to R) HSCF President JD Burrows, the author, HSCF Board Member Ross Melinchuk, and Jens Krogh, with the days catch of fresh halibut. **Below:** The crew arrives by float plane trip on Afognak Island.





**Above:** Jens with his new record book Afognak Island Sitka Black-tailed deer.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program, Yale University and the Pinchot Institute. He has authored congressional testimony on BP Deepwater Horizon restoration and has written about or been quoted in recent articles about the BP spill in *The New York Times*, *CQ Roll Call*, *New Orleans Times Picayune*, and *The Horinko Group Newsletter*. Tim has also been intimately involved in the Deepwater Horizon spill recovery efforts in coastal Texas. To say the least, he is a true conservationist. Tim has left his mark on multiple conservation and preservation projects around our country, working tirelessly to protect wildlife and habitat for future generations of hunters and fishermen.

I was invited by Tim to see the results of the Exxon Valdez recovery project on Kodiak Island, Alaska. While there, we would also try our hand at hunting Sitka Black-tailed deer and hopefully catching a salmon run for some legendary Alaskan fishing. We planned our trip for late August. Accompanying me was HSCF President, JD Burrows; HSCF Director Ross Melinchuk; and Jens Krogh, VP of Marketing, Blaser USA.

We met in Kodiak on a Friday evening to make final preparations and grab a few last-minute supplies (the most important being bear spray) before embarking to our destination the next day—Afognak Island on the far northwest corner of Kodiak Island.

Kodiak was charming. We rented an Airbnb on the water for the night, sampled local fresh sushi and made our way around Kodiak, viewing its various sights, local sea lions and the harbor. Kodiak is also home to the Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox

Cathedral, a wooden reliquary which hosts the remains of a Russian orthodox monk who came to the Island in 1794. The monk, Herman, was canonized as a Saint in March 1867.

The next morning, we made our way to breakfast at the local gathering place with our Airbnb host (who, it just so happens, had been the local Harbor Master for many years). Beside us sat many veterans of foreign wars (Kodiak is home to the largest Coast Guard base in the world and has an often forgotten role as battlefield, lend-lease transfer station, and North Pacific stronghold during World War II) in addition to some seasoned fishermen you may have seen on television's "Deadliest Catch."

After a meal of reindeer sausage, eggs, hash browns and much needed coffee, I dropped JD and Jens off at Andrew Airways float plane terminal. We offloaded our gear and I headed out to the Kodiak airport to gather Ross, who was unable to rendezvous with us the night before. We all joined up at the float plane terminal and loaded into a DHC-2 De Havilland Turbo Beaver for our journey to Afognak. The flight was smooth as our pilot pointed out the various logging and commercial fishing operations beneath us. Unfortunately, due to unseasonably warm waters, we did not see any whales on our journey. Surprisingly, we had no bear encounters either during our trip. We did see multiple dens, fresh tracks and scat, though.

We were greeted on the banks of Bluefox Bay by our hosts, Jerry and Colleen, and their two dogs. Jerry and Colleen have lived at Bluefox for over 25 years. They were incredible hosts,

conservationists, poets and storytellers.

Our home for the next week, Afognak Island, is the second largest island in the Kodiak Archipelago in the Gulf of Alaska. Along with a few volunteers, Jerry and Colleen have removed over 32,000 pounds of ocean debris (nets, lines, foam, drinking bottles, caps, food packaging, and many household and personal items) since 2012. Once our gear was stored, we set out on one of Jerry's skiffs for a small outer island in pursuit of deer. The afternoon was spent walking the small island and setting up observational positions for glassing. The deer had not yet fully moved to the lower areas and beaches in that the first snowfall was yet to reach the area. Not seeing any bucks, we knew higher elevations were in our near future. We headed back to camp for an evening of storytelling and good food. Colleen is a master gardener and we enjoyed local game, fish, vegetables and forest mushrooms daily.

As you can imagine, with the sun not setting until after 10 p.m., there were a lot of stories to tell. One evening, Jerry entertained us with recitals, from memory, of the collected poems of Robert Service. It was amazing! Conversations also often led to discussions around the Valdez Recovery Project, The Pebble Mine issue (a potentially pending mineral mining project of porphyry copper, gold, and molybdenum mineral deposit in the Bristol Bay region of Southwest Alaska which would most certainly damage one of the largest salmon fisheries in the world), the damage inflicted on Alaska's oceans by commercial fishing "dragers," and of course bear stories about local Kodiak bears that had decided to make Jerry and Colleen's property their own vacation home (free dog food in the work shop kids!). Jerry and Colleen were successfully reliant upon themselves, having constructed cabins, a sawmill, workshop and drying shed to round out their compound. Outhouses were the order of the day when a man or woman needed to make their constitution. But I have to say, there are no better views out of the half-door of an outhouse than those I witnessed. On occasion, old or new friends arrived into Bluefox Bay on their boats or skiffs to say hello. One couple from Germany, who had been touring the world on their sailboat, spotted Jerry and Colleen's cabin from the water and stopped by. They were soon invited in for dinner and conversation. That is the kind of place Bluefox Bay is—few visitors, but no strangers.

On day two, we arose for our journey to one of the other area islands. Access to electricity, running water and technology was limited—and we loved it! Each morning we had a short time to charge phones or radios from the generator, enjoyed one of Colleen's home-cooked breakfasts complete with flapjacks the size of your head, with wild berry preserves, would store up rainwater and sandwiches in our daypacks and plan the day.

This day we would head to higher elevations. Even though the elevation was only 2,100 feet above sea level, we covered over 15 miles through steep rain forest to a saddle and then up into various ridges and canyons. We did see a few does and younger deer but no bucks. Stopping only to glass and plan our next course, we eventually ended up in the farthest canyon of the island. As we prepared to set up and glass, the side of the hill erupted when a shooter buck and several does bolted across the valley, startling us only a few yards from our position. They never looked back as they traversed the hilly terrain with ease.

Frustrated, we decided to stay in that location as we had noted several deer trails in and out of the canyon. No more than 20 minutes later, we spotted a buck on the far end of the canyon about 350 yards away. He stepped from the shadows of the towering walls, with only his chest, shoulders and head illuminated by the



**Above:** JD with one of the many spawning silver salmon making their annual journey from the ocean.

**Below:** The group with a great catch of silvers.



afternoon sun easing from the sky behind him. Even from that distance, we could tell he was a shooter—the broad chest and the mature antlers told us so immediately. He faced us head on, almost to say, “I am the master of all that I survey. How dare you trespass into my valley.”

To my left, Jens, was in a prone position, with his Blaser R8 Ultimate chambered in 6.5 mm Creedmoor and loaded with Hornady Precision Hunter 134 grain. At 350 yards, Jens found his mark. For what seemed like several minutes, we stared into the canyon and eventually all took a breath, realizing the incredible buck was down. Gathering our gear, we headed across the mountainside. Those 350 yards, in that terrain, was not covered easily. We picked our way carefully along the rocks. Jens and I both lost our footing at different times. Each of us had a spill that resulted in wondering if our slides would stop safely. Mine ended in bloody knuckles and a lost tread on one of my boots as I



**Above:**  
The entire length  
of this peak was  
traversed on day 2.

**Right:**  
Ross refueling  
after a long day in  
the mountains.



# GEAR LIST

## CLOTHING

- 2 sets of clothes (ONCASHELL; ONCATHERM; ONCAELASTIC; ONCARAIN)
- ONCATHERM Neck Gaiter
- ONCATHERM Shirt
- ONCATHERM Beanie
- ONCARAIN Jacket
- ONCARAIN DP Pant
- ONCARAIN DP Jacket
- ONCARAIN Pant
- ONCASHELL Vest
- ONCAELASTIC pant
- ONCARAIN Gaiters
- ONCARAIN Gloves
- ONCATHERM Gloves
- Light waders
- Gore-Tex hiking boots
- Casual clothes
- Lightweight camp shoes

## NUTRITION

- Supplements
- UCan energy powder
- Jerky, Energy Bars

## GEAR

- Fishing rod & reel w/ braided line
- Lures
- Small tackle box
- Lightweight sleeping bag
- Lightweight pillow
- Pistol & ammo
- Rifle & ammo
- Optics Kit
- Portable gun cleaning kit
- Backpack
- GoPro and supplies
- Camera: extra batteries; charger; cloth
- Knife

- Havalon skinning knife and replacement blades
- Hydration reservoir
- Headlamp & AAA batteries
- Flashlight-rechargeable
- Binocular with harness
- Rangefinder & batteries
- First aid kit
- Hygiene kit: toothpaste; toothbrush; unscented field wipes; Alleve; Zyrtec; unscented, alcohol-based gel hand sanitizer; biodegradable soap; quick-dry microfiber pack towel; lip balm
- Ziplock bags
- Game bags
- Pack Cover
- Disposable gloves
- Books
- Insect repellent
- Licenses and tags
- Fish Boxes
- Bear Spray

scrambled to grasp anything that would stop my rapid descent down the mountain. Eventually, we all made it to the buck and were astounded by its massive antlers and body size. He was the king of the mountain.

As Tim took watch for bears, Jens and I quickly went to work dressing the deer and packing it for the climb home. Once we were all loaded with game, we set a course out. Unfortunately, there was no “easy way out” of this area. Over the next hour or so, we rose and fell to any level the mountain would allow us to pass. The terrain was white knuckle treacherous to say the least with several hundred feet sheer drop offs available to any misstep. Later that evening, we each recalled the feeling that we were not sure if we would get out unscathed.

Over the next few days, none of the rest of the party was successful in taking a deer. We probably covered over 35 miles on foot when it was all said and done. It did not matter though. Every step was a beautiful adventure. The last two days were spent fishing in incredible surroundings for silver salmon and halibut. The bays and streams were teeming with pink and silver salmon. We spent the day casting and dropping flies into wave upon wave of fins and jumping silvers. After a shore lunch, we headed to open water for good success with halibut.

On our last day, we waved a sad goodbye to our hosts and Bluefox Bay and headed back to Kodiak for flights home. Due to fog and rain, our flight was cancelled for almost two days. Tim was kind enough to show us some of Kodiak we missed when we arrived. We spent an educational morning with Tim at the



**Above:** Spending time in camp with great friends is really what it's all about!

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Visitor Center. While there we learned about Kodiak wildlife and ecosystems. We were amazed by the complete skeleton of a 36-foot gray whale hanging from the ceiling.

Alaska is one of my new favorite places in the world. We forged new friendships. We saw things we had never seen before—bald eagles in flight, giant ocean otters, Harlequin ducks, Puffins and more. Thanks to Tim, Jerry and Colleen, and their hearts for the land and water, it was even so much more special. ★