

## Elk, a sleigh and fine dining: adventure in the Michigan woods

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HILLMAN, Mich. - Through the woods and over the river, the jingling horse-drawn sleigh has two destinations: the elk herd and the gourmet dining lodge.

It's a toss-up which is more impressive.

Would you rather sit in front of a crackling fire under an antler chandelier, dining on crown roast of pork, apple crepes and merlot, or stand in a field of snow watching gigantic elk posture and tangle?

At Thunder Bay Resort, you can do both.

Its Elk Viewing Sleigh Ride and Gourmet Dinner is designed to lure tourists to this sparsely populated corner of Michigan's lower peninsula when the golfers have gone away.

Several other Michigan resorts offer sleigh rides. A few combine a sleigh ride and dinner. But no others throw in the elk.



Knight Ridder

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***Two male elk roam the Thunder Bay Resort elk range in Hillman, Michigan. The resort's herd of 155 Rocky Mountain elk is a main attraction for tourists. In winter, male elk antlers are at their largest and heaviest, weighing 50 pounds or more.***

And that's the part that leaves visitors awestruck.

Elk are big. They're mean. They make deer look like lapdogs.

Reintroduced in Michigan in 1918 after being wiped out by settlers, about 800 elk roam wild in the forests of the northern lower peninsula. One big population is in Montmorency County, between Alpena and Gaylord.

When Thunder Bay Resort owner Jack Matthias started elk viewing rides in 1992, guests were taken by wagon through the Pigeon River State Forest elk range, where they hoped the animals would show up. To help things along, Matthias learned to "bugle" elk and leave out feed.

But after elk feeding in the area was prohibited by the state five years ago, Matthias and his wife, Jan, made a decision few resort owners would try - to buy their own elk herd.

Although there are about 150 elk ranchers in Michigan, most raise animals for meat, hunting or for their velvety antlers, which are used in health supplements popular in Asia.

The Thunder Bay Resort elk can be shot only with a camera, and their antlers are not for sale.

Matthias' son, Spencer James, manages the 155-head herd of Rocky Mountain elk. His son-in-law, golf pro Joe Libby, helps run the sleigh rides in winter. Jan Matthias is a gourmet chef in charge of the sleigh ride dinner. And daughter Melanie Libby is Thunder Bay Resort's general manager. The resort employs 75.

"If someone told me I would be in the elk ranching business, I wouldn't have believed them," says Matthias, who grew up in Berkley, near Detroit. "But we needed something that was not totally weather dependent."

Thunder Bay Resort, like many northern Michigan resorts, does a brisk golf business in summer and fall, with an 18-hole, par-73 course. But its owners have to be creative to attract winter visitors.

Elk viewing is part of a weekend package that includes two nights' lodging, sleigh ride, elk viewing, two breakfasts and dinner.

Sometimes the resort throws in a murder mystery or a concert. Guests also can cross-country ski, ice skate and snowmobile on a state trail that runs through the property. Mostly, though, guests go out to see the elk. If there is no snow, a horse-drawn wagon takes them 45 minutes into the forest. Female elk run free, but the males are behind a high fence - something Matthias learned was necessary for the ornery 1,000-pound creatures.

In the fall, elk rut and fight a lot. In winter, males' antlers are huge and heavy, and the animals are active and easy to see through the bare trees. In summer, new antlers are velvety, and animals are frisky. This summer will be the first that the resort will offer summer elk viewing.

It's only in April and May that elk are dull, Matthias says. Elk lose their antlers as spring arrives and become docile. No elk viewing is scheduled those months.

Luckily for Thunder Bay Resort, that's when golf season gets going.

This January weekend, guests are fortunate. The cherry red sleighs can be used only with plenty of snow, and 10 inches have fallen. Two big Belgian horses, Ranger and Prince, pull the first sleigh into the woods. They trot up the inclines gamely as snow falls hard. Everything is quiet except the jingling of the harnesses and Matthias' low-key commentary on elk behavior.

The sleigh passes the females, who hide in the woods, and stops near the males. Behind the fence, they stare, graze and lock horns.

After that, chilly visitors are taken by sleigh to the remote dining lodge, Elk Antler Cabin.

Warmth. Fire. Food. There is wine and shrimp, pear and apple crepes, chicken soup, salad, pork cooked in an old Detroit Jewel wood stove, potatoes, white chocolate pizzelle and cherry coffee.

Jack Matthias demonstrates elk bugling, his call sounding like a cross between a sick cat and a trumpet. Jan spins stories about their life with the cranky elk and four grandchildren. Then Jack reveals how powdered velvet elk antler supplements have cured his arthritis and sleep apnea, turning him from a skeptic into a believer.

The patrons listen, sort of. The warmth and food leave them a little drowsy and a whole lot mellow. Later, the sleighs trundle everyone back to where they started, the chill softened by layers of wool blankets, a canopy of snowy pines and lingering elk awe.