



February in the Chugach

By Jeremy Pataky

Awesome glaciers, plentiful wildlife, bountiful fish and serious weather are all summoned up by that most laden of place names, *Alaska*. For those who live there, the so-called Great Land can also mean pricey vegetables, volatile politics, a vague sense of not *quite* living in the U.S., a pathological aversion to mosquitoes, and enough out-of-state visitors to tempt one into hanging a Bed and Breakfast sign out front, or so we had been warned. What almost all of those visiting friends and relatives have in common is their urge to come in *summer*. From Ketchikan on up to the Arctic plain, summer up in the 49th state is certainly something to see. But winter is an amazing and often-overlooked time to visit Alaska, particularly for snowshoers and other lovers of winter sports.

My girlfriend and I were impressed when her sister, Kati, decided to brave early February and come on up, our lone visitor during the cold months that year. We knew exactly what trip

would give our guest a sense of the Alaskan winter's grandeur without having to range too far from home or spend much money: a three-day snowshoe trip at Eklutna Lake, the largest body of water in Chugach State Park.

Kati had never used snowshoes before, but in her twenty-some years she had walked a great deal, and Alyssa and I assured her that was all the practice she would need: "If you can walk, you can snowshoe," I said. Before we set out for three days, though, we drove south along Turnagain Arm, a shallow branch of Cook Inlet poking inland from the Gulf of Alaska. Our wonderful day of seeing the sights included spotting an unusually



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large group of six cow moose in the flats at the southern end of the Arm. We took a side trip out to the old gold rush town of Hope, home to maybe three hundred souls. On the other side of town the road terminates at a campground and trailhead, and from there we traded the Jeep for snowshoes, marching through the gloomy woods along the shoreline of the glacial fjord, reading moose, mouse, and hare tracks in the snow and watching the swift, slushy tides roil the seawater beside us, slate gray with glacial silt. We got back to the Jeep around five and drove home in the dark, fulfilled by a great day and a satisfying introductory snowshoe outing.

Our plan was to snowshoe to Yuditnu Creek in Chugach State Park, north of Anchorage. A one-room public-use cabin squats where the creek flows into Eklutna Lake, and we had reserved the cabin for two nights. With the hut as our base, we could snowshoe further and enjoy the quiet of the snow-draped Alaskan landscape.



The Chugach is truly the backyard wilderness of Anchorage. Chugach State Park is the second-largest state park in the nation at 774 square miles, or about a half million acres, and it abuts Chugach National Forest, America's second largest national forest. From nearly anywhere in Anchorage the modest city skyline foregrounds the awesome backdrop of the Chugach Range, which stretches off for two hundred miles, all the way to Canada. Although Chugach State Park abuts the largest metropolitan area in Alaska and begins less than ten miles from a major airport, it shares the wild character of more remote Alaskan terrain.

The state park was established in 1970, and since then nineteen official trailheads have been opened to provide access into the stunning backcountry. The Chugach ranges from sea level along Turnagain Arm up through the forested flanks of the mountains into alpine tundra and beyond to the icecap formed by Eklutna, Whiteout and Eagle Glaciers, as well as dozens of smaller glaciers—sixty exist within fifty miles of Anchorage. The mountains provide a home to

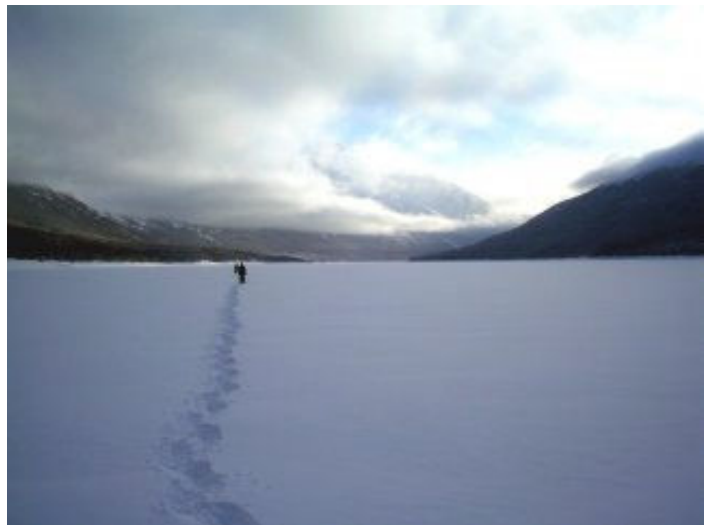


Dall sheep, mountain goats, moose, hoary marmots, lynx, wolverine, beaver, muskrat, fox, hare, ptarmigan, grouse, owls, eagles and many other small mammals, birds and fish. There are also, of course, a healthy helping of brown and black bears, which we were almost certain not to encounter since it was hibernation season—a winter perk for the bear-wary.

I had made two pulks out of plastic snow sleds to haul gear with; one of us would still wear a large pack on the hike in, and two would tow gear with the pulks. We had three days' worth of food, wood for the cabin stove, sleeping bags and pads, cards and some books, wine, and the desire to experience only one another's company for a few days.

Eklutna Valley is a typical U-shaped drainage carved by glaciers during the last ice age. In the bottom of the smooth-walled valley is Eklutna Lake, still fed in large part by Eklutna Glacier. It's a cold, beautiful lake of clean water with just enough glacial silt to give it a bright turquoise tint but not enough to muddy it up. Most of Anchorage's water, some of the cleanest tap water on the continent, is actually piped from the lake. Hiking upwards a couple thousand feet in summer and looking down on the narrow, seven-mile lake gives one the impression of seeing a puddle of pure, bright paint—the color is thick and brilliant.

Our arrival that sunny Wednesday morning in early February, though, was anything but colorful. The frozen and snowy world we saw was cast in a palette of whites, with sweeps of brown and evergreen protruding from the snow on the surrounding slopes. The brilliantly colored lake stretching up the



valley was hidden by a thick hide of ice frosted with just a skim of snow. Strong winds had clearly raged through recently, scouring the unprotected lake of accumulated snow. Among the shelter of the trees, in contrast, the shoreline trail bore deep snow. The trip into the cabin is a relatively short three miles along the shore, but winter and deep snow can have a way of magnifying distances, and we knew three winter miles could feel considerably farther than three summer miles. Besides that, the otherworldly expanse of gorgeous frozen lake had a definite appeal, tempting us to beeline across the ice. Kati and I each clipped a pulk to the small backpacks we wore, which really just amounted to harnesses for our gear sleds, and Alyssa hefted the larger pack onto her back. We could see a few tracks from snowmachiners who had ridden onto the lake without breaking through, and we decided to follow suit.

By bypassing the longer, deep-snowed land route to walk across the lake, we simply didn't need our snowshoes. It was an unexpected beginning to our snowshoeing adventure, but we would certainly get plenty of use out of the shoes by the time we

returned to the trailhead in three days, totally relying on them to return.

It was a perfect day, a few clouds in the mostly-bright sky, and the air was 25 degrees Fahrenheit—cool enough to keep the snow and ice nice and dry, warm enough that a bit of physical activity would keep us feeling very comfortable without mummifying ourselves with layers. The trip was the maiden voyage for the pulks, and they worked quite well, a nice alternative to carrying a heavy pack. Having one pack in the group gave us a chance to compare



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carrying methods, and now whenever terrain and conditions will allow, I try to use a homemade pulk in the winter instead of a cumbersome pack.

The hike out to the cabin was pleasant. The sweep of terrain kept our eyes busy as we tried to take it all in. The ridges framing the valley seemed high and rugged, 4,000 feet higher than the lake, which itself lies just 868 feet above sea level. The long stretch of lake, the sparseness of color and the looming mountains around us tweaked our sense of scale, and we had difficulty trying to gauge distances. Some patches of snow that had started moving on one of the cliff faces to the north side of the lake turned out to be several Dall Sheep. We watched them through a monocular, amazed by their ability to effortlessly navigate the precipitous heights and thrive in the rugged, high-altitude mountains in winter.

After an hour or more we thought we could identify the spot on the far shoreline where the cabin is located, though the building itself would remain invisible in the trees until we were quite close. Our little trio strung over a couple hundred yards, Kati lagging back to take photographs, Alyssa plowing ahead, and for a time we each walked in solitude.

The cabin, when we spotted it, was terribly inviting, a quaint affair in the trees, inconspicuous in the sweep of scenery, and probably a good hundred yards or so from Yuditnu Creek, which shares a name in the Den'aina native tongue with the Golden Eagle. The cabin is a one-room building with a small outhouse nearby, a small covered porch, and a chimneystack. Inside we found a wooden table, a wood stove, wooden sleeping shelves, an axe and a bow



saw. People had even left some firewood and matches, perhaps enough that we could have gone without hauling more in. With no reason to expect to find wood, though, failure to bring one's own is asking for a cold stay. Someone had even left a puzzle on the little countertop, and a journal lay on the table, full of entries from previous inhabitants. Reading the community journal, we learned that we had been preceded by a fellow who came out with just his dog when his friends cancelled on him last minute. He described the joy of quiet and good weather he experienced during his stay there, as well as his efforts to bolster the wood-pile, and he wrote about how happy his dog was to share a spaghetti dinner.

We started a fire, unpacked the pulks, ate lunch and read for a bit before donning our coats again and heading out to play. The unburdened pulks were now mere sleds with long PVC-pipe tow-tongues, which rotated upwards out of the way, allowing us to slide

down the slope out onto the lake, pipes protruding into the air like strange insect antennae.

On the lake, I walked over to the creek to take a closer look, since we had passed it at quite a distance on the way to the cabin. It was mostly frozen over, though some open water was flowing and spilling into the lake under an open patch at the ice edge—not safe to approach. Without snowshoes, I clambered up onto shore for a closer look and promptly sank up to my knees, getting snow in my boots. I spent a few minutes looking at the fascinating layers of ice built up on the edge of the creek anyway before heading to the cabin to get the snow out of my boots. With dry cabin shoes on, I sat on the porch alternately reading my book in the chill air and

appreciating the view while Alyssa and Kati roamed off down the lake, two dark figures moving against a white background.

After a dinner of Pad Thai, we looked at the map and sipped some Bailey's hot cocoa, deciding to snowshoe up the trail along shore in the morning and ascend the Bold Peak Trail. Late that night we walked out onto the lake, the sky clear and starry, the moon one night shy of full. The sky glimmered faintly with pale green auroral lights to the north, an understated and easy-too-miss northern lights sample that was faint but exciting.

The relatively great weather we had had on our walk in and the clarity of the night sky set us up for considerable surprise when we woke in the morning to find several inches of fresh, fluffy snow on the ground. While we made oatmeal and coffee, snow started falling again, reducing visibility until we could no longer see the far shore of the lake. With a lunch packed, we strapped on our snowshoes and hit the trail as planned, our sights set on the Bold Peak trail.

The world had been transformed overnight by snow. The sweeping vistas were curtained off by the weather, and the trail and trees were draped with fresh, thick white. Our own tracks from traipsing around the cabin the day before were almost totally erased, and with the snow still falling, we figured they probably wouldn't last long.

The snow was deep and dry, and I enjoyed the silence of my snowshoes. My plastic MSR's can make quite a racket on crusty snow, but they floated me along silently in the powdery stuff. Alyssa also was having good luck with her Sherpa Climbers, which tend to accumulate large snow boulders in the claws in moister conditions. The dry fluff that had moved into the Chugach, though, was very user-friendly.

After noticing dozens of tracks made by our kindred creature, the snowshoe hare, we finally saw one, white-furred and alert in the bushes near the trail. As we approached, he



bounded away, leaving his distinctive tracks and, of course, managing to float perfectly atop the snow. Even under the new snowfall it was apparent that the main trail had seen traffic that winter, though none since the new snow had been falling. But when we reached the side trail up the Bold Peak Trail it looked as if not a soul had used it all winter. The snow was deep and undisturbed, and we set out, breaking trail and admiring the beauty of the woods.

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Our goal had been to climb up at least to the tree line where one might expect phenomenal views of the lake on a clear day. Unless the current weather broke, though, our views would be fairly limited. We pressed on, huffing our way uphill. We saw the tracks and scat of several moose, though the actual animals eluded us. Kati provided some comic relief by occasionally keeling over, tripping herself somehow and crumbling with a laugh into the snow. So much for my earlier reassurances about the ease of snowshoeing.

The slope and the depth of snow made the climb tiresome but fulfilling. After gaining perhaps 1500 feet of elevation and ascending into the guts of the snowstorm, we decided to turn around. The lake and valley floor, as well as the mountains opposite the lake, were invisible to us, the whole expanse just a vague splay of dim white.

Once we were down, we ventured out onto the lake again. It was now covered with snow but we couldn't quite see where the cabin was on the shoreline and the wind was blowing in our faces, so we hightailed it back to the trail that offered respite from the wind and a clear route back to the cabin. Our tracks from the morning had already filled with snow and it was still coming down. It was a great joy to wander through a snowstorm with enough clothing to maintain a comfortable temperature and with the snowshoes to make travel through snow possible and pleasant. We did not envy the moose, post-holing their way waist-deep through the woods, as evidenced by their deep tracks.

Back at the cabin, we started a fire and melted some snow for tea, and passed our last evening playing cards, reading, talking and preparing dinner. We had enjoyed a beautiful snowshoe through heavily-laden woods, and we felt like the whole mountain range was ours alone; we hadn't seen another soul, or sign of one, all day.

By morning the snow had quit falling and the sky had cleared considerably. We could discern individual trees on the far shore of the lake, and the sun fell in places on the fresh and undisturbed snow in a spectacular display of light. We leisurely prepared for the walk out. We had significantly less gear to haul, having used up the food and wood. Significantly more snow was on the ground, though. Alyssa took a small harness pack and the pulk, and I took the large pack for the walk out and went first, breaking trail. The snow had continued to fall for most of the night, it appeared, and there was absolutely no sign of any of our earlier tracks.

We set out on the shoreline trail, enjoying the knowledge that absolutely every animal track we saw was fresh, made since sometime in the night when the snow had stopped. The sheer



number of miscellaneous rodent, bird, hare and moose tracks made the forest seem incredibly alive even though we didn't actually see very many creatures.

Halfway to the trailhead, we left the land and walked down onto the lake. It was hard to imagine that just two days earlier we had walked all the way across

it in nothing more than our boots. The snow was very deep and totally undisturbed, and without snowshoes the trip out would have been arduous on an extreme level. We walked back, single file, soaking up the sun whenever it hit us through the splotchy clouds. The mountains themselves looked much whiter than they had on our hike in, two days before. Bold Peak was totally white and the cabin was utterly hidden, though the topography around it clued us in to its approximate location. As we had on the hike in to the cabin, the three of us stretched out in our walk back to the car, walking in silence and enjoying the solitude of the Chugach in winter.

Looking back toward Eklutna Lake when I had almost reached the shore and parking area, I saw Alyssa and her sister a few hundred yards behind me, tiny against the valley, black figures against the bright whiteness of the snowbound lake and mountains, snowshoeing out after a wonderful few days in the Chugach.

IF YOU GO

Driving north from Anchorage, take the Eklutna Lake exit at Mile 26 on the Glenn Highway, and follow park signs ten miles east to Eklutna Lake. Expect to pay a parking fee if you don't have an Alaska State Parks annual parking sticker.

The Yuditnu Cabin can sleep eight people and must be reserved and pre-paid through the Anchorage Public Lands Information Center at (907) 269-8400 or online at www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/cabins/index.htm. Look under Anchorage cabins.



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