



# Through a Snowy Wood

Climb aboard  
the sleigh as hosts  
Jack and Jan Matthias  
present a winter's eve  
of wildlife viewing and  
hearty Northwoods fare.

BY JEFF SMITH  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN CONFER

We've all settled into our seats on the horse-drawn sled, spreading blankets on laps, pulling hats snug. The chatter runs quiet but excited here at the Thunder Bay Golf Resort, in Hillman, 25 minutes west of Alpena.

I don't usually put golf, elk and good food together in my mind, but tonight, that's exactly what I'm doing. Why? From our meeting place in the golf course parking lot, we're about to be hauled through a snowy forest to view the resort's fenced elk field. Afterwards, I'll be towed onward to enjoy a tasty five-course meal—with crown roast of pork as the main dish—in the resort's log lodge.

We're packed in, 22 to a sled, with three sleds rigged and ready to glide. In a minute, Alan, the horse-team driver, will call a signal and his two Belgian draft horses—George and Jake—will lurch forward, beginning the 20-minute trip to the elk herd.

The 2,000-pound draft horses shift their feet. Clouds of steam rise from their sides and broad backs. The mist evaporates into the frosty clearness of a January late afternoon.



Clockwise from far left: Rein man and horse-team owner Alan Scheen. The Belgians weigh about a ton, the elk about half that. Elk antlers are often asymmetrical, so correct lingo for an elk with, say, four points on the right and five on the left is to call him a "four-by-five." The sleighs feel more cozy than crowded. Alan says his horses are like his kids: "The first time I tell them to do something, they look at me like, 'do you really mean that?'"

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"A lady once asked me if the horses were on fire," Alan says. His bushy eyebrows arch with the last word.

I study him for a moment. "You're making that up," I say. "Well, only sort of," he says. "A lady did say that to a friend of mine giving carriage rides in Montreal." He laughs again, as delighted to have been caught in the fib as to tell it.

Jack Matthias, resort owner, stands at the rear of our sled. "Who is here for the first time?" he asks. We raise our hands. "All first timers," he says. "Welcome!"

Alan yells, "git, git, git," jostles the reins, and we're off. I'll admit it: I'm expecting a TV-perfect woosh of runner gliding on snow. But thin snow turns that into a silly notion. The weight of sled and tourists pushes the runners to the gravel, producing more of a grinding drag. We talk above it no problem. I come to appreciate the honesty of the sound—and the strength of the Belgians. The horses' frizzy tails sway with each slow, powerful stride. I watch as with the lift of each hoof, snow catches in the arc of the horses' shoes and then drops back to the ground.

We drag down the two-track, cross a bridge and trace hills covered in those Northern Michigan forest soldiers: white pine, spruce, poplar and birch. The thick scent of horse drifts back, and the slurry jangle of bells accents the winter wonderland. We see no elk in this part of the forest, and Jack explains why.

The previous fall he had allowed his bulls to roam the area we now traverse. "I was in the Explorer one day, and one was standing in the middle of the road, appearing as if he was about to attack. I honked, but he wouldn't move." Jack rolled down his window and aimed a .45-caliber pistol at a tree next to the elk's head. He fired. The elk stood his ground and pawed the earth. Jack took out a canister of hot pepper spray. "I nailed him right in the face and he just shook his head and took about three steps into the trees," Jack says. A bull elk can weigh 1,000 pounds or more and can punch his antlers—each weighing about 20 pounds—through a car door. We're relieved to know that a fence holds the elk secure in the field, and we see them as we round the next turn.

Alan reins the Belgians to a halt at the viewing field and 66 people clamber from the sleds. A man in a cowboy hat and handlebar mustache pokes a telephoto lens through the fence. A lady from Rochester Hills clicks her camera and the autowind whirs. Sure, the fence dulls the wild flavor, but somehow the elk still maintain a certain majesty. One difference between elk and horses: no steam rises from the elk because their fur insulates so thoroughly. That's why you see pictures of snow on elk's backs—it doesn't melt because the heat of the animal barely escapes.

The field we survey holds only bulls. This time of year, the dominant bull stays with all of the cows in a separate area. As Jack talks, the bugle of the dominant bull drifts through the snowy wood.

The bulls appear docile, like they're all pals. But don't be deceived, Jack says. They can attack people and do attack each other. Competition for dominance runs





From top: At dinner's center stage: crown roast of pork. An elk-antler chandelier builds on the day's theme. Dinner and warmth await inside the lodge.

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fierce—even though the truly dominant bull already won the cows. "See the round spots on their fur?" Jack says. "Those are from being gored by antlers." In a moment, we see sparring in action. An elk that broke off an antler during autumn sparring tries to eat from a hay pile. Another elk charges him, antlers aimed as weapons. The broken antler guy scampers to the periphery.

Jack tells another tale of power struggle. Once he had to tranquilize the most dominant bull in the field. "The moment he went down, four bulls circled to gore him," Jack says. "He tried to recover, regain his balance, but the bulls went after him." Jack saved the drugged bull and came away with a new respect for the fleeting nature of elk ruling tenure.

In the wild, bulls rarely dominate for two consecutive years because they become so worn from the job. The dangerous work of sparring to win cows is just the beginning of the dominant bull's work. After that, he maintains constant vigilance. Literally around the clock the bull defends his harem against challengers and takes care of the mating responsibility. A dominant bull barely has time to eat. By the end of the season, taking care of 25 or 30 cows has withered him to an emaciated shell of his once victorious self. Starting out at 1,000 pounds, he might end up at 750 pounds. No way has he recovered by the following rut, which begins about late August.

Jack gives the signal and we herd ourselves back to the sleds. No prodding is needed: we know a tasty dinner awaits at the end of the next 15 minute tour of rolling forest and snow. On the way, dusk settles, and the weak January

light grows even weaker. In no time, we see the twinkling strings of white lights on the log lodge beside the river.

Inside, the scents of woodstove and roasting pork meld for a perfect invitation. Jack's wife Jan cooks on two wood-fired cookstoves, each from the early 1900s. They shine like new, and their names—Detroit Jewel and Garland—shine with pride in the log hall. Jan learned the art of woodstove cooking as a child. She grew up a few miles down the road from Hillman in a family of 13 kids with a wood-fired cookstove in the basement. For her, putting out roast pork and all the rest for 66 people tonight comes second nature.

Besides, the lodge—just two years old—is a modern marvel compared to what the Matthiases worked in for the first seven years. Originally they operated a rustic

lodge 20 miles away in the Thunder Bay state forest. The place had no running water (read outhouses), no electricity, and woodstove for heat. "It was back-breaking work pumping the water and heating it to do dishes for all those people," Jan says. "And there was never a man in sight to help."

But it was deer tuberculosis, not hard work that convinced the Matthiases to move closer to their golf resort. "The only way we could be reasonably sure we'd see elk was to feed them with bait piles," Jack says. "So when the DNR banned bait piles to prevent the spread of TB in the deer herd, we knew we'd have to do something else."

We hang our coats, settle at our tables, and servers bring appetizers—pear and apple crepes and shrimp for all. Our waiter Mike leans close, "I've got some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that the temperature is dropping fast and a strong wind is kicking up. The good news is we have plenty of this stuff." He holds up two magnum bottles of wine. We laugh. He swings by the next table and I hear him tell the same joke. They laugh too.

Conversation warms at our table of eight. It turns out our dinner companions grew up in Livonia, like me. We talk of Six Mile Road, Five Mile Road and Bates' burgers. While we eat, Jack's son-in-law, Joe Libby, gives a 15-minute talk on elk. He comes around with an antler. I heft it and caress its serpentine smoothness.

Meanwhile, we make our way through the courses. The hearty chicken noodle soup. The tasty Thunder Bay Sweet Salad. The crown roast of pork with redskin potatoes and marvelous gravy. The white-chocolate mousse with raspberry-chocolate topping. By the time we bundle up for the final trip, a most cozy feeling shields us from the chill. We ride back in quiet—well, except for the sound of the dragging runners. Above, the stars shine with improbable purity in the transparent January night.

To reserve a spot on the sled, call 517-742-4732. ■

*Jeff Smith is editor of TRAVERSE.  
E-mail [traverse@traversemagazine.com](mailto:traverse@traversemagazine.com)*

## Sleigh Rides Around the North

Boyer Highlands, Harbor Springs: Sleigh rides at special events and by request. Call for details. 800-GO-BOYNE.

Boyer Mountain, Boyer Falls: Sleigh rides at special events and by request. Call for details. 800-GO-BOYNE.

Cedar Valley Farms, Charlevoix: Sleigh ride only. Ride through forest and field. Any day except Sunday. \$5/person, 15-person maximum, with a \$35 minimum charge for groups. Bonfire and hot chocolate available on request. Reservations only. 231-547-7352.

Crystal Mountain, Thompsonville. With dinner: no sleigh/dinner packages, but restaurants are available on site. Sleigh ride only: 35-minute ride leaves from bonfire and goes to lodge. 20 people per sled. \$9 per person. Reservations only. 800-968-7686.



Garland, Lewiston: Zhivago Nights: Sleigh ride, gourmet wild game dinner in rustic lodge, overnight accommodations and breakfast. Call for menu, pricing and reservations. Sleigh ride only: \$7.50 adults, \$5 children, under 11 free. Friday and Saturday nights from December 27 through March 3. Reservations only: 517-786-2211 or 877-4-GARLAND.

Hoxie Farms, Acme: Sleigh ride only. 45-minute ride stops at bonfire for hot chocolate and marshmallows. Reindeer viewing. \$12/person. Take shuttle from Grand Traverse Resort or call to arrange private parties. Up to 12 adults per trip. Saturdays and Sundays, 1-5 p.m., rides leave on the hour. 231-938-2100, ext 3300.

Mission Point Resort, Mackinac Island: Several getaway packages include sleigh rides. Call for details. 906-847-3312.

McGuire's Resort, Cadillac: Selected getaway packages include sleigh rides, dinner and accommodations, call for details. Sleigh ride only: \$5/adult, \$3/under 16, \$12/family of four. 25 minute ride among evergreens and hills. Reservations only. [www.mcguiresresort.com](http://www.mcguiresresort.com). (800) 632-7302.

Ranch Rudolf, Traverse City (12 miles southeast of town): With dinner: Call to arrange catered meals in the banquet room. Sleigh ride only: \$7/person, \$70 minimum to reserve sleigh that holds up to 20 people. Reservations only, one week's notice preferred. 231-947-9529.

Rolling R Farm, Gaylord: With dinner: Ride sleigh to rustic cabin. Designed for intimate parties (10-person maximum) and couples (couples ride in a small cutter sleigh). All homemade food served in antique setting. No liquor but you can bring your own wine. Sleigh ride only: sleigh rides last about an hour and a half and include a stop at a bonfire. Call for pricing, reservations only. 517-732-0909.

Shanty Creek, Mancelona: With dinner: No dinner/sleigh ride packages, but restaurants are available on site. Sleigh ride only: 30 minute ride leaves from Schuss Village. \$5/person. 6-10 p.m. every day except Sunday beginning December 26. No reservations required. 231-533-8621.

The Terrace Inn, Bay View: With dinner: Call for pricing of packages, some of which include accommodations. Sleigh ride only: 20 minute ride through Victorian Bay View. 12 people to a sled. \$9 per person. Saturdays 5-7:30 p.m. beginning after Christmas. Reservations only. 800-530-9898.

Treetops Resort, Gaylord: With dinner: Ride a sled 20 minutes through field and forest to a log lodge in the woods. Menu varies, no liquor but you can bring your own wine. \$55/person, call for dates and times. Sleigh ride only: 30-minute ride, Fridays and Saturdays 6:30-9:30 p.m. \$10/person. Reservations only. 800-444-6711.