

Qik'rtam Lla – KODIAK ENVIRONMENT



Cut by glacial ice and sculpted by persistent wind and rain, Kodiak has a rugged landscape. Mountains up to 4,400 feet tall descend into steep-sided valleys and narrow fjords dotted with rocky islands. The archipelago is large. It has more than 70 islands that cover nearly 5,000 square miles in the central Gulf of Alaska. These islands have a cool, wet maritime environment. Here the average temperature is about 30°F in winter and 52°F in summer. Roughly 140 inches of precipitation fall annually, about half as rain.

The waters surrounding Kodiak are extremely productive. Each spring, sunshine and North Pacific currents deliver nutrients to coastal waters driving marine production. Kodiak's many bays provide protected habitat for resident populations of sea mammals, marine fish and birds, and shellfish. Seasonal visitors include waterfowl, whales, and salmon. All five species of Pacific salmon—red (sockeye), silver (coho), pink (humpy), dog (chum), and king (Chinook)—spawn in Kodiak streams in spectacular quantities.

Kodiak lies at the boundary between the coastal rainforests of Southeast Alaska and the windswept meadows of the Aleutian Islands. Most of the archipelago has a thick cover of grasses and brush, with pockets of cottonwood, alder, and birch trees. Berries, edible roots, and herbs grow widely in coastal meadows. Over the past 500 years, Alaska's coastal spruce forest has spread gradually south. Spruce trees and a blanket of sphagnum moss now cover the northern third of the archipelago, including Shuyak, Afognak, and northeastern Kodiak Islands.

Despite its lush vegetation, Kodiak has just six native land mammals: the brown bear, river otter, red fox, ermine, little brown bat, and tundra vole. These animals colonized Kodiak before people arrived, swimming to the islands or traveling over ice. Archaeologists believe that ground squirrels came to Kodiak at least a thousand years ago, brought either purposefully or accidentally by Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people. Government agencies introduced other wildlife in the 20th century, including beaver, Sitka black-tailed deer, Roosevelt elk, snowshoe hare, marten, mountain goat, muskrat, red squirrel, and reindeer.



Fog lingers over Womens Bay, Kodiak Island. Photo by Patrick Saltonstall.

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The Gulf of Alaska, 1986, by Donald W. Hood and Steven T. Zimmerman (editors). U.S. Printing Office, Washington, D.C.