

Chevak Bird and Culture Tours

In 2005, Ulric Ulroan wrote a business plan for Chevak Bird and Culture Tours. The goal of the business was to bring visitors to Chevak to watch birds and experience Cup'ik culture and hospitality. He submitted this plan to the Alaska Marketplace competition, and won an award of \$26,000 for startup expenses for his innovative tour business.

Community

Chevak lies on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in southwest Alaska, near the Bering Sea coast. It is 17 miles east of Hooper Bay and about 250 miles west of Bethel, the regional center. Chevak is a traditional Cup'ik Eskimo village, with a local economy based on commercial fishing and subsistence activities. Seal, salmon, walrus, clams, and waterfowl are harvested throughout the year.

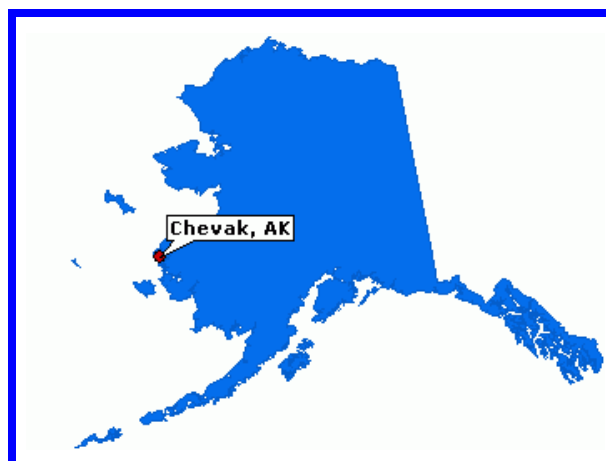
Chevak is surrounded by the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. The largest refuge in the United States, it offers prime ecotourism opportunities.

Business History

Ulroan offers bird viewing tours at his campsite, a 45-minute river boat ride from Chevak. There visitors can observe vast numbers of rare birds, such as emperor geese, spectacle eiders, and Sabine's gulls. Visitors can book three to five day tours to view birds and wildlife

and relax in a comfortable tent camp. Meals are prepared by a local staff, and visitors are encouraged to sample traditional Cup'ik food, such as freshly caught salmon, beluga, walrus, and seal meat. In the evenings, Ulroan and his uncle share stories of Cup'ik history and culture. Upon their return to Chevak, visitors have the opportunity to see and purchase local arts and crafts and to meet local artists, who explain the origins and symbolism of traditional products. The business launched in 2006 with two groups of six visitors. The following year, the business hosted four groups totaling 16 guests.

Early familiarization visits by well-known birders helped put the business on the birding map. In May 2006, and again in June 2007, Alaska Department of Fish and Game coordinator Karla Hart, UAF Marine Advisory Program Manager Terry Reeve, and Alaska Office of Tourism Development representative Odin Brodie coordinated a birding



Chevak, Alaska

Population:	908
Major Employers:	Commercial fishing, subsistence
Location:	Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, near coast
Ethnicity:	96% Cup'ik Eskimo
Median Income:	\$26,875

assessment trip to Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta communities, including Chevak, by five teams of statewide and nationally-known birders. These experts traveled to participating communities, hired local guides to take them around, and compiled a list of birds sighted. They also developed an assessment of the birding opportunities, the infrastructure requirements, and the business needs for the area.

The 2007 assessment team that visited Chevak Bird and Culture Tours included members from the American Birding Association, Wings Inc., and Smithsonian Institute. Also participating was Bob Dittrick, a private operator who owns and guides for Wilderness Birding (www.wildernessbirding.com). Impressed by the birds and the professionalism of the Ulroans, Dittrick plans to book two 2008 tours with Chevak. It is anticipated that the professional birding writers participated in the same trip will publish articles about the new destination this winter, creating further interest in this birding destination.

Economic and Community Impact

Chevak Bird and Culture Tours purchases its food from Anchorage and a local store. Family members supply Native foods. During the 2007 season, the company employed two people to transport guests and supplies and to guide the second boat of visitors along the river to the camp. These employees also prepared food and participated in the sharing of Cup'ik stories in the evening. They received \$100 a day for their services.

Chevak Bird and Culture Tours	
Employment:	Owner, 2 part-time
Percent Local:	100%
Percent Native:	100%
Ownership:	Ulric Ulroan
Legal Status:	Sole proprietorship
Years in Operation:	2 years

The business buys its gasoline and fuel in Chevak. It also provides opportunities for local artists to show and sell their artwork to visitors. Summer 2007 sales brought in more than \$2,000 to local crafts people.

Bookkeeping services are provided by Ulric's wife, Mary, using QuickBooks. An accountant in Chevak assists the business with its tax preparation. Guide and outfitters' liability insurance was acquired in Anchorage.

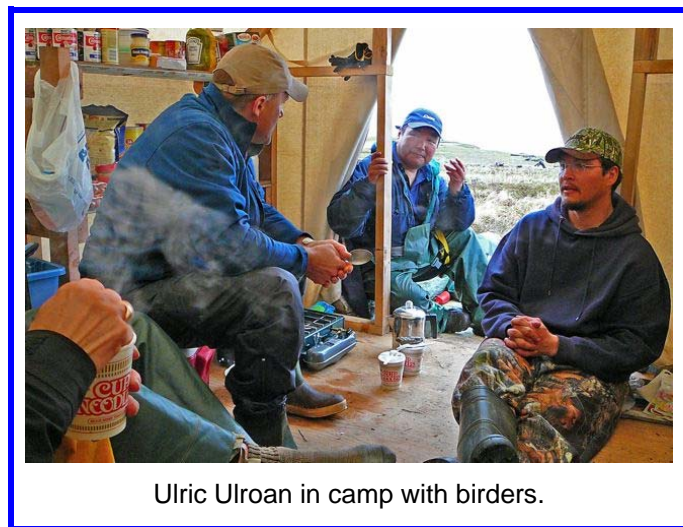
Chevak residents welcomed the birders, offering to show them around the community. The city government sees the potential growth of the visitor industry as a means of providing economic opportunities to elders and young people, due to the increased demand for guides and Native arts and crafts. It hopes that, in the long term, more visitors will create the demand for infrastructure improvements, such as a terminal at the airstrip, a cultural center or museum, a lodging facility, a restaurant, a taxi service, and improved roads. These facilities would serve outside visitors in the summer, regional visitors who come to Chevak for an August dance festival, the December basketball tournaments, and the April winter fest.

Business Management

Ulroan used the \$26,000 Alaska Marketplace award and an additional \$10,000 in savings to purchase an 18 foot aluminum boat with a 90 horsepower motor and to order construction materials for tent platforms at the birding campsite. In spring 2006, he completed the construction of the campsite on his Native land allotment. Family members helped him to haul the materials to the site, construct the platform, and set up camp. In 2007, he bought tents, cots, sleeping mats, a stove, and chairs for the mess tent.

The first two years of development generated a moderate amount of income. The familiarization trips were free, but their marketing value should cover those costs. The business charges \$2,500 for a three-day trip and \$5,500 for a five-day trip – a price structure comparable to other Alaska birding tours. They can accommodate a party of up to six people on a trip. The business plan calls for an expansion to eight groups in 2008.

Marketing. In 2006, Ulroan participated in the annual conference of the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), the statewide trade and marketing association for Alaska's travel industry. He found the gathering useful for meeting other tour operators in Alaska. With other rural delegates, he attended a marketing conference hosted by ATIA that focused on marketing strategies for businesses. Chevak Bird and Culture Tours planned to participate in ATIA meetings again in 2007 to spread the word about the operation to others interested in tourism.



Ulric Ulroan in camp with birders.

As a result of the 2006 familiarization tour, Chevak Bird and Culture Tours will be featured by professional writers in birding magazines. Additionally, Bob Dittrick, an established operator, has committed to bringing two groups in 2008. Future bookings from the lower 48 states are anticipated, as word spreads about the unusually large volume of rare bird species that inhabits Chevak.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The business was fortunate to have the assistance of many people in its formation. The business plan was developed under the guidance of a professor while Ulroan was attending the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. He is grateful to his professor, Miranda Wright, for her review and assistance; to experienced guide Karla Hart of the Department of Fish and Game for her technical assistance; and to Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours.

The business has been assisted by the presence of organizations committed to the expansion of tourism in western Alaska. These include the state's Office of Tourism, the University's Marine Advisory Program, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and

other agencies that coordinated the “Developing Alaska Rural Tourism” (DART) program. This state and federal collaboration generated the “Yukon-Kuskokwim Tourism Initiative,” a program funded by government agencies and intended to create a tourism-friendly destination in the region. It is supported by regional organizations and local communities, including Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, St. Mary’s, Chevak, and Quinhagak.

This regional effort has resulted in the publication in February 2007 of a report, “Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Tourism Development Initiative, an Overview”, that examines opportunities to expand tourism and emphasizes the need for a coordinated, regional marketing strategy (available at <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/YKTourismInitiative.pdf>.)



The single greatest challenge for this business is attracting clients. Chevak is not a well-known destination and is expensive to reach. These conditions, however, also apply to the established Alaska birding destinations of the Pribilof Islands, Gambell, and the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Chevak Bird and Culture Tours must create a website, if the business is going to compete successfully with operators from the Lower 48. Potential clients need to be able to find the service on internet searches. The website should display photographs of the birds and the campsite, quote satisfied customers, and link to other birding sites. A 2006 Alaska Office of Tourism report profiling visitors to western Alaska found that the most significant reasons to travel to this region were to fish and to see wildlife. The business needs to capitalize on this information.

Because weather can delay air travel, the business must be prepared to house and feed clients in Chevak. There is a need for a bed and breakfast, should travel schedules require a layover in the village. The existing apartments owned by the village corporation would be adequate, if they were available.

As the business grows, it will be necessary to train additional guides and to become licensed by the Coast Guard for six-pack boat operations. It is essential that guides are knowledgeable about the birds, know how to set up and use viewing scopes, and are able to interpret bird behavior.

Chevak Bird and Culture Tours is the type of business that can be replicated in other communities where there are natural resources such as birds, wildlife, or sport fishing. Critical issues to address in planning this kind of business include:

1. Provision of safe transportation to the resource;
2. Provision of knowledgeable guides;
3. Provision of comfortable accommodations and good food; and
4. Strategic marketing to targeted clients.