

Marmot Island — Nailiraq

NAILIRAMEN QAYARCIQUA. – I WILL KAYAK TO MARMOT ISLAND.



Photo: View of Marmot Bay looking toward Marmot Island.

The hoary marmot (*Marmota caligata*) is the largest member of the North American squirrel family. These chubby rodents live in rocky areas throughout much of southcentral Alaska, but they have never been indigenous to the Kodiak region. So, why does the Kodiak Archipelago have a place called Marmot Island? This name is the result of a translation error. Members of the 1790 Billing Expedition identified the island as Yevrashka, a Russian word meaning ground squirrel. Later, English speakers mistakenly interpreted this word as marmot.

Long before it was mistakenly dubbed Marmot Island, Alutiiq people called this place Nailriq. The island lies just three miles east of southern Afognak Island and was part of the traditional harvesting territory of Little Afognak, a community located in Selezen Bay. However, Nailriq was not an easy place to visit. The island is just six miles long and formed by one large, steep-sided mountain. Its rocky shores include precipitous cliffs and heavy surf makes it difficult to land on the few beaches. Alutiiq people were probably drawn to Nailriq by opportunities to hunt both ground squirrels and Steller sea lions. Before about 1970, Nailriq was home to one of

the largest sea lion rookeries in Alaska. On the southeastern coast of the island, tens of thousands of sea lions gave birth to their pups in July and August.