

ANIMAL LIFE OF DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

Denali National Park and Preserve is widely known for the wildlife that inhabits the area. Inhabiting the foothills and plains of the north slope of the Alaska Range, Denali's fauna includes 37 species of mammals, 155 of birds, and one amphibian. This amount of diversity is not great, considering the 5,695,000 million acres that comprise the park, but is typical of northern regions that are ecologically similar.

Most animal species are associated with specific vegetation types. They tend not to distribute themselves randomly over the land. Thus lynx and snowshoe hares usually inhabit boreal forests while Dall sheep and golden eagles live among mountainous wind-swept ridges. Moose prefer spruce forests, willow thickets, and interfaces between the two. Grizzly bears, at certain seasons, populate the glacial river bars which grow pea vine (*Hedysarium alpinum*), the roots of which highly prefer. No animals are confined to one habitat type; they roam freely and at times seem far from their ideal homes. However, each Denali animal has a type of topography and vegetation to which it is best adapted. These associations of plants and animals that are often found together are known as biotic communities.

CARIBOU

Among American national parks, caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) are unique to Alaska's parks. Caribou are generally found in tundra regions and feed on a variety of willows, grasses, sedges, and lichens. They are migratory and have established rough patterns of movement through the park that have been repeated year after year, with some alterations for centuries.

In some years, caribou have moved southward in small bands along major rivers in the spring until they consolidate their numbers on the south side of the Alaska Range in June and early July. In July they move northward, back over the Range in herds of up to 400 animals. They veer west, roughly paralleling the park road in the Polychrome and Toklat area and then drop down onto the expansive Thorofare and McKinley River bars where their mass movements lose inertia. The herd breaks up and individuals continue west back to the northeast, and the winter is spent in a slow, intermittent migration in this direction.

Caribou were, in decades past, quite numerous in the Denali area. As recently as 1940 they numbered between 20,000 and 30,000 in their summer movements. They dwindled to approximately 1500 in the early 1970's but are now up to 2700.

MOOSE

Moose (*Alces alces*) are common at lower elevations in the park. They are large animals, bulls sometimes weigh 1200- 1500 pounds, and require large quantities of willow browse daily. In addition to willows, they feed on alder, birch, grasses, and a few smaller plants. Their winter diet is almost entirely willow leaves and stems.

Moose are well suited to the deep snow and still coldness of spruce forests and willow thickets. Long legs allow them to stand and walk gracefully through snows that are waist deep on a human. Their coarse brown fur attains a thickness of 4 to 5 inches by February forming a highly effective insulation barrier.

Moose live singly or in small family groups for most of the year. They become more gregarious in the fall and form herds of 10 - 15 animals for short periods. The rust brown calves are born in late May and remain with the cow for a full year. Ungainly and unattractive to some human observers, moose are nonetheless superbly suited to life in the subarctic taiga.

DALL SHEEP

The animal most closely tied to mountainous tundra areas is the Dall sheep (*Ovis dalli*) which is a close relative of the Rocky Mountain Bighorn. Dall sheep are white in color and the males have heavy spiraled horns. Females have short spiked horns and with their lambs, segregate themselves from rams through most of the year.

Sheep feed on a variety of grasses, shrubs, and small alpine plants. During winter they will seek areas blown free of snow, where food plants are exposed. This often means ascending to barren ridges where winter winds are at their harshest. They are also tied in their lifestyles to steep rock slides and rock outcroppings, where they are safe from predators. Sheep are not swift runners on flat ground or in deep snow. It is only on steep rock that they can utilize their climbing skills to evade wolves and bears. Sheep can usually be seen in the summer months as white spots clinging to steep green and brown mountainsides. Their presence adds animation and charm to the rugged hills.

WOLF

The timber wolf (*Canis lupus*), one of the largest member of the canid family which includes foxes and coyotes, roam freely throughout the Denali park-lands. A male wolf can weigh as much as 125 pounds, and color can vary from white to coal black. During the summer, wolves frequently travel singly or in pairs, but form packs of 7 to 18 individuals in the winter. There are several distinct packs within the park and they occupy several home ranges.

The social structure of the wolf pack is based on a dominant pair, usually the only pair within the pack to mate. When the pups are born in the spring, the pack provides food for the young and the mother who remains with the pups. Hunting procedure is left largely to chance so their diet depends upon season, area, and long-term wildlife fluctuations. Their major food sources are small rodents, moose, and caribou. Although it is not impossible for a wolf pack to take a healthy animal such as a moose, it occurs less frequently since a bull moose could easily injure or kill wolves who are not cautious.

Wolves are one of the most important predators in Denali National park and Preserve. Their lives touch the lives of all other large animals; they lie truly at the hub of many lines of ecological interaction.

GRIZZLY BEAR

Another of Denali's predators, but not nearly so specialized or effective, is the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*). Grizzlies are the North American variety of the Eurasian brown bear, and the same species as the Alaska coastal brown bear.

Grizzlies are found in all of Denali's habitats. their tracks have been even seen on glaciers far up on Mount McKinley itself. Generally blond in color, they are true omnivorous and seasonally pursue a wide variety of plant and animal food sources. In summer, they graze at length on grasses, Richardson's saxifrage, crowberries, soapberries, highbush cranberries, and kinnikinnik. Carrion is eaten and ground squirrels, moose, and caribou are caught and killed. Grizzlies are true opportunists.

They are surely the most solitary of the large mammals of Denali, travelling together only when breeding or if females are rearing their young. With these exceptions they avoid others of their kind and even defend spaces vigorously.

OTHERS

Other mammals indigenous to Denali include red fox, coyote, lynx, wolverine, porcupine, black bear, beaver, snowshoe hare, and numerous small species. Voles, lemmings, and shrew are the smallest and most easily overlooked members of the wildlife community, yet they are among the most ecologically important. As a group they eat more vegetation and are preyed upon by more birds and mammals than any other class of mammals. They represent a long and highly branched fiber in Denali's web of life.

BIRDS

Among birds that nest in the park during the summer, only a small fraction of these will remain through the entire year. The rest will migrate to far corners of both hemispheres.

Some birds which remain in the park during winter have special adaptations to the harsh cold. All three species of ptarmigan (willow, rock, and white-tailed) stay in the winter. Each turns pure white to match the snow background. Each has leg feathers all the way to the tips of its toes. Each preserves heat by resting on cold days in chambers beneath the snow.

Summertime bird life is intense and diverse. The frozen ground of northern areas results in lakes and ponds that are preferred nesting areas for waterfowl, shorebirds, and cranes. Summer also brings hordes of insects, which may harass some animals, but provide a staple diet for many small birds.

Bird life in Denali is seasonally sporadic. For three months in the summer, a myriad of species can be found in all habitats, each of them involved in the behavioral bustling of their varied reproductive schemes. For six months in the winter, bird life seems to be totally lacking from the park, the only sign of activity is perhaps a still white ptarmigan against still white snow.

FISH

Although ponds, rivers, and streams abound in Denali National Park, there are few fish and few types of fish. Most of the park's rivers are glacial and silty, and few fish occupy them. There are some grayling in clear streams and lakes. Lake trout, burbot, and northern pike, are found in the larger lakes. Dolly Varden are found in a number of ponds. Different species of salmon are found in specific lowland streams and rivers although not in large numbers.