



WOLVES IN DENALI

DENALI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

“Those unable to decipher the hidden meaning know nevertheless that it is there, for it is felt in all wolf country, and distinguishes that country from all other land. It tingles the spine of all who hear wolves by night, or who scan their tracks by day.”

— Aldo Leopold
A Sand County Almanac

Glowing eyes through the willow brush, a silhouette loping along a distant tundra ridge, or the haunting chorus of the pack – to see or hear a wolf, even in Alaska, is a rare treat. The animal that once roamed America from the tropics to the tundra now survives only in isolated pockets in the contiguous 48 states. In the North however, wolves haunt the same braided river valleys and rocky ridges as their long-ago ancestors. Between 7,000 and 10,000 wolves inhabit Alaska, approximately 100 of them within Denali National Park and Preserve.

NATURE OF THE WOLF

Between 12 and 18 wolf packs roam Denali in territories that range from 200 to 800 square miles. These packs are a strong social unit whose core is the alpha male and female wolf and their offspring. The wolf pack works as a team to hunt, to protect, and to raise the spring's pups. Such cooperation and sharing of food is rare in the animal world. While eight to ten wolves is an average

pack size, one Denali pack was recorded with 27 members and three litters of pups.

Unlike the bear or the mountain lion, during pup rearing both male and female wolves produce the hormone prolactin, known as the “nurturing hormone.”

Hungry mouths abound when the wolf pups are born. The pack hunts night and day to feed the mother wolf and her pups. Keen vision and a sense of smell one

hundred times better than ours does not assure success in the hunt however. A wolf may travel ten hours a day to find the daily five to ten pounds of meat it needs. While a meal is anything from a mouse to a moose, the most common prey in Denali is caribou, Dall sheep, moose, beaver, and ground squirrels.

Wolves, like humans, communicate in many ways. How a wolf carries its tail reveals its mood and its rank within the pack. Howling announces a wolf's presence, allows pack members to keep track of each other, and announces a kill site. Howling and scent marking may reduce conflicts between packs, acting like a fence to mark property.

With a brain nearly twice the size of the domestic dog and a highly developed social organization, the wolf still faces many challenges. Some young wolves leave their family pack, traveling hundreds of miles in search of empty territory and mates. These loners are vulnerable and many die. The leading cause of natural death is wolves killing each other, often over territory disputes. Starvation, disease, and accidents also take their toll. The average life expectancy of a wolf is only three to four years.

The largest wolf captured in Denali weighed 135 pounds. Adult wolves in Denali average 85 pounds for females and 105 pounds for males.

Wolves are generally shy and wary. There are no accounts of wolves attacking people in Denali, and few accounts in North America. In Denali the wolf is but another animal engaged in the daily struggle for life in the sub-arctic North.



A PLACE OF REFUGE

The wolf population of Alaska is healthy but not free from human pressures. Development reduces habitat. Hunting, trapping, and predator control programs take several hundred wolves each year. Denali National Park and Preserve offers wolves a place where human impacts are minimized.

A PLACE OF STUDY

Denali also offers an outstanding opportunity for comparative studies with wildlife populations that are more heavily hunted or trapped. Between 1939 and 1941, Dr. Adolph Murie conducted one of the first formal studies of wolves anywhere, here at Denali. By dog team and on foot, Murie spent thousands of hours observing wolves and their prey. There are now 60 years of research and observation on the East Fork pack that Murie first observed. Today, research on wolves throughout the park continues with the use of aircraft, radio telemetry, molecular genetics, and biochemistry.

“Denali is important because it is as close to an entire naturally functioning ecosystem as we can come in the North. Wolves are a part of this story.”

*– Layne Adams
Wildlife Biologist*

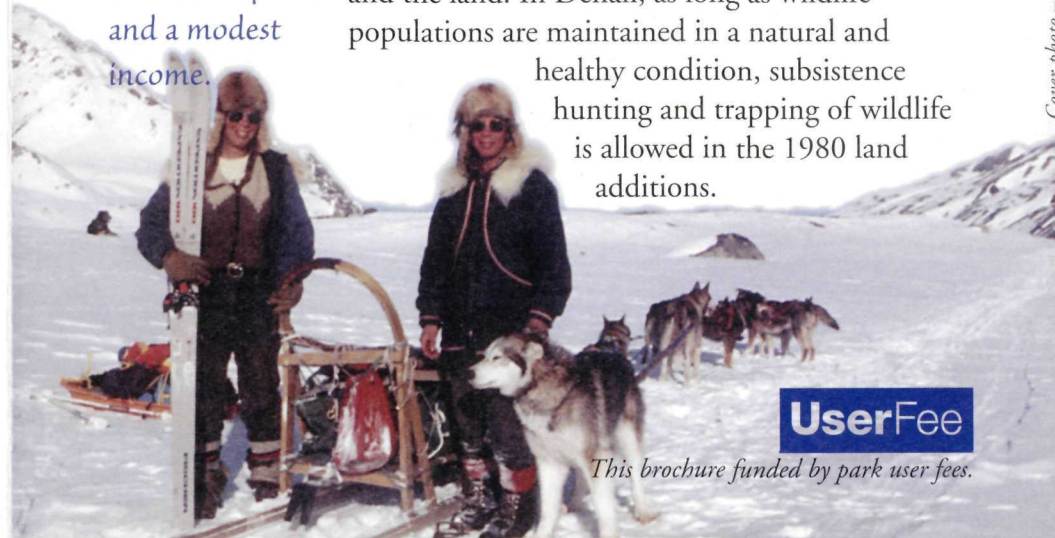
ALASKA IS DIFFERENT

Twin sisters Miki and Julie Collins grew up in “the Bush” northwest of Mt. McKinley. Their traditional lifestyle is busy with gardening, hunting, and a five-month winter trapping season. Furs provide warm clothing for mushing their 80-mile trapline, and a modest income.

In an increasingly urban world, many Alaskans still depend on a cycle of the seasons – spring waterfowl hunting, summer runs of salmon, berry picking, fall moose and caribou hunting, and the income from winter fur trapping. For rural residents these natural resources ensure more than survival, they sustain a traditional subsistence way of life.

In 1980, an unprecedented bill was signed into law. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) set aside approximately 100 million acres of this state’s land and resources for enduring protection. It tripled the size of Mt. McKinley National Park, and renamed the area “Denali National Park and Preserve.”

Included in this legislation was a recognition of the importance of the connection between people and the land. In Denali, as long as wildlife populations are maintained in a natural and healthy condition, subsistence hunting and trapping of wildlife is allowed in the 1980 land additions.



UserFee

This brochure funded by park user fees.

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*Cover photo – Craig Brandt
Back photo – Miki and Julie Collins*

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