

2019 Annual Mountaineering Summary



NPS Photo (Melis Coady)

2019 Statistical Year in Review

Each season's [mountaineering route statistics](#), including total attempts and total summits for Denali and Foraker, are now compiled into one spreadsheet spanning from 1979 to the current year. The [Denali Dispatches](#) blog can provide a more detailed perspective of the 2019 season, including daily statistics, weather, conditions reports, photos, and random climbing news. Thank you to the 40 [mountaineering Volunteers-in-Parks](#) (VIP's) who teamed up with Denali rangers to staff the mountain camps in 2019. Read about the efforts of the 2019 recipients of the [Mislow-Swanson Denali Pro Award](#).

Quick Facts - Denali

- **Climbers from the USA: 732 (60% of total)**

Climbers hailed from 43 of the 50 states, in addition to the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. As per usual, the largest percentage of US climbers came from Colorado, which is home to 131 of this season's climbers. Alaska followed close behind with 108 climbers. There were 87 climbers from Washington and 75 from California. The only states not represented in 2019 were Arkansas, Delaware, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and South Dakota.

- **International climbers: 494 (40% of total)**

In all, 50 foreign nations were represented on Denali in 2019. The largest number of international climbers (47) originated just over the border in neighboring Canada. Poland produced 41 climbers this season, Japan was close behind them with 38 climbers. An additional 29 climbers came from the United Kingdom, and 28 came from Russia.

- **Average trip length**

The average trip length on Denali was 17 days, same as last year; independent teams again averaged one day less (16 days), while guided teams averaged one day more (18 days). The average Muldrow Glacier climb (both up and down on the Muldrow Glacier) took twice as long, at 34 days, while the Muldrow Glacier Traverse (up the Muldrow, down the West Buttress with a flight out from Basecamp) averaged 29 days.

- **Average age**

We are all getting a little older...the average age of male climbers in 2019 was 39 years old. Women averaged 37 years of age. The youngest climber to attempt Denali this year was a 17-year-old male, while the oldest climber was a 75-year-old woman.

- **Women climbers**

Women comprised 16% of climbers on Denali, or a total of 191 individuals. A majority of 52% of women reached the summit of Denali. Four women attempted Mount Foraker, with no summits recorded.

- **Summits by month**

- May: 153
- June: 500
- July: 73

- **Busiest summit days**

- May 29: 97 summits
- June 21: 52 summits
- June 7: 46 summits
- June 13: 41 summits

2019 Search and Rescue Summary

Stranded Party West Buttress

(March 11) A private climbing team ran out of food and fuel during a winter expedition on Denali's West Buttress. Nearing the completion of their 26-day climbing trip, a large weather system moved over the mountain range and the climbers depleted their 5-day base camp cache of supplies waiting for a flight. These two climbers notified their local air service of their depleted supplies and requested assistance. The NPS prepared multiple contingencies to rescue these climbers by both air and ground during the ensuing days. A predicted break in the weather on day 8 of the storm allowed the air service to retrieve the team and negate the need for any further NPS involvement.

Fall While Snowboarding Windy Corner

(May 8) A male climber fell while descending Windy Corner on a snowboard at approximately 13,500 feet. The climber lost an edge and was unable to arrest his fall before sliding into an open crevasse. The climber fractured multiple ribs when he landed at the bottom of the crevasse. He was unable to self-rescue due to significant pain from his injuries. This climbing team alerted the NPS rangers in Talkeetna of this incident and were in regular contact during the remainder of this extended rescue. Due to adverse weather and winds at the accident location, the climber and his partner sheltered in place for 5 days until NPS ground personnel were able to reach them and ultimately rescue them via helicopter short-haul.

Fall While Climbing West Buttress

(May 10) A male climber injured both of his knees during a fall on Denali's West Buttress at 15,200 feet. This solo climber was able to crawl back down to 14,200-foot camp and notified NPS personnel lower on the mountain by radio of his need for a rescue. This climber also developed frostbite injuries to his fingers while crawling back to camp. Another climbing team in camp was able to assist this injured climber until he could be flown off the mountain three days later when the weather cleared.

Fall While Skiing Above 14,200-foot Camp

(May 20) A male climber fell while skiing above 14,200-foot camp. This climber was assessed and treated for a suspected dislocated right hip by NPS rescuers. The patient was transported by NPS personnel in a rescue toboggan back to camp.

After further assessment and with consultation with medical direction, NPS rangers determined that this climber should be flown to definitive care for dislocation reduction.

Acute Abdomen 14,200-foot Camp

(May 20) A male climber was evacuated by helicopter following a deterioration in his condition. The patient was evaluated multiple times by NPS medical personnel over the course of a day for complaints originating in his abdomen. This patient's nausea and anorexia progressed to bloody vomiting and intense pain. The climber was evacuated by air for further evaluation at a local hospital.

Unresponsive Patient 7,800-foot Camp

(May 22) A female climber unexpectedly collapsed while ascending toward 7,800-foot camp. NPS rescuers assessed, treated and evacuated the patient to base camp via helicopter. Her vitals began to stabilize and the NPS personnel then accompanied the patient via fixed wing aircraft to Talkeetna. Once in town, the patient was transferred to a local ambulance and taken to the hospital for further treatment.

Frostbite Upper West Rib

(May 25) A solo male climber was treated and evacuated for severe frostbite injuries to his fingers and hands. This climber ascended and descended the Upper West Rib over the course of roughly 22 hours. Upon returning to 14,200-foot camp, he noticed that he had injured his hands and sought help. He was assessed and evacuated by air with NPS personnel.

Avalanche, Fall while Skiing Kahiltna Queen

(May 28) A male climber fell 700 meters after triggering an avalanche on Kahiltna Queen. This climber was descending the peak on skis and was caught in a slide that he triggered. Air and ground NPS rescuers assessed and treated this patient on scene. The NPS rangers suspected upper spinal injuries and the patient was flown to Talkeetna for further care. Fractures of two cervical vertebrae were later confirmed by x-ray at the hospital.

Exhaustion Autobahn

(May 29) A male climber left for Denali's summit solo with no food or water and minimal survival equipment. This patient was rescued by a guided party and NPS personnel after falling repeatedly on the Autobahn slope above 17,200-foot

camp. The NPS team assessed and assisted this climber throughout the following night before helping the climber to descend to 14,200-foot camp the next day.

Frostbite Denali Pass

(June 6) A male climber was rescued and evacuated from 17,200-foot camp with deep frostbite to most of his toes and fingers. This patient had to be lowered from Denali Pass due to the severity of his injuries. He was then evacuated from camp by helicopter due to his inability to safely descend on his frostbitten feet.

High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) 14,200-foot Camp

(June 10) A female climber suffering from HAPE was evacuated by air from 14,200-foot camp. NPS ranger assessed and treated the patient until the helicopter to retrieve the patient and transport her for further care at a local hospital.

High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE) 17,200-foot Camp

(June 14) A male climber and his two climbing partners left late in the afternoon for a summit attempt from 17,200-foot camp. When one of the climbers began to exhibit signs of severe altitude sickness, the group split up. During descent, the ill climber became nauseated and had difficulty walking. Another private climbing team helped the patient back to camp. This climbing team was in regular contact with NPS rangers at 14,200-foot camp and took care of the patient for the next 18 hours. Weather prevented NPS rescuers from ascending safely to high camp until late the following evening. Once on scene, NPS rangers evaluated the patient, confirmed the HACE diagnosis and called for a helicopter evacuation given the improving weather trend.

Fall in Camp 11,200-foot Camp

(June 17) A guided female climber injured her right knee after slipping and falling in the group kitchen. This climber had previously injured this knee and assessment by NPS medical providers confirmed an unusable knee injury. Without the possibility of bearing weight, the patient was evacuated to Talkeetna by helicopter from 11,200-foot camp and then taken by ground to a local clinic.

High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) 14,200-foot Camp

(June 17) A guided male climber was evacuated from 14,200-foot camp by helicopter. This climber was treated for HAPE

for two days by NPS personnel without improvement. At that point, it was decided to evacuate this climber when he was unable to spend any time off of supplemental oxygen.

Lost Climbers Hidden Glacier

(June 18) Two male climbers attempting to climb Denali's West Buttress from Anchorage on foot became lost and ran out of food. The climbers were located and rescued after two days of coordinated searching by both local air taxis and NPS rangers near the Hidden Glacier.

Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) 14,200-foot Camp

(June 22) A male climber on a guided expedition began to suffer from acute mountain sickness at 14,200-foot camp. He and his guides requested NPS assistance. After a full night of treatment in the medical tent, the patient failed to improve and could spend minimal time off of oxygen. This patient was flown off the mountain the next day with another patient who was also being evacuated from 17,200-foot camp.

High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE) 19,500-foot Camp

(June 22) A team of five climbers began calling for help over the radio late in the evening. This team had ascended to the Football Field at 19,500 feet when one of their teammates became ill. The team reported that their sick teammate was unable to continue descent. With medical guidance over the radio from NPS rangers and help from a guided group in the vicinity, the group was able to slowly descend. The patient was helped down from Denali Pass to 17,200-foot camp by ascending NPS rescuers and then treated in high camp throughout the night. With minimal improvement by morning, the call was made to evacuate this patient by helicopter for further care.

~Compiled by Mountaineering Ranger-Paramedic David Weber



Pilot Andy Hermansky coming in for a landing. NPS Photo (Emily Mesner)

2019 Medical Summary

During the 2019 climbing season, Denali mountaineering rangers and volunteers treated 18 patients that met our life, limb or eyesight-threatened threshold. Those patients not meeting this treatment guideline were evaluated and advised to self-treat/evacuate. The following list breaks down the field diagnoses from this past climbing season:

- Traumatic Injury – 7 cases, including two cases of frostbite
- General Medical Illness (not altitude related) – 4 cases
- High Altitude Cerebral Edema – 1 case
- High Altitude Pulmonary Edema – 6 cases

Eleven (11) of these patients were treated at 14,200-foot camp on Denali's West Buttress climbing route, three (3) were

treated at 17,200-foot camp, two (2) were treated at 7,200-foot camp and two (2) were treated at 11,200-foot camp. Fifteen (15) of these patients were evacuated by helicopter from the mountain and three (3) patients were able to self-evacuate following an initial assessment and stabilization by our medical providers.

For the second climbing season in a row, the mountaineering rangers are pleased to report zero climbing-related fatalities. The rangers are hopeful that this trend persists in coming seasons. The ranger team will continue to focus on their preventative search and rescue (PSAR) and outreach education efforts in 2020.

Per usual, the patient records from this past climbing season describe ailments commonly associated with mountaineering in the Alaska Range. Nearly all of these illnesses and injuries are preventable with prudent decision-making and a reasonable ascent profile during climbing expeditions. Find additional information regarding the prevention, recognition, and treatment of common mountain medicine maladies online in the Denali mountaineering handbook:

<https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/part2medicalissues.htm>

Disturbing Trends

On the topic of preventative SAR and medical issues, rangers and mountain volunteers have observed several disturbing trends on Denali that have been on the rise in recent seasons.

- First, many climbers are attempting to summit directly from 14,200-foot camp. Both the success rate and style of these climbs are notably less impressive compared to those fully acclimatized climbers going to the summit from an established camp at 17,200 feet. The rangers note that many of the climbers attempting to summit from 14,200 feet are not prepared for the elevation change, nor the extended time required.
- Second, the increase in “speed ascents” is also setting a poor precedent. The climbers attempting to summit in this fast and light fashion are rarely prepared with the equipment or supplies required if anything goes wrong. Carrying such minimal gear, necessitates other climbers or rangers having to come to their aid if something should go wrong. This is a negligent risk management plan, especially in the extreme arctic environment characteristic of Denali.
- Finally, an increasing number of climbers are skiing and snowboarding above 14,200-foot camp. The drastic and variable ski conditions found on the upper mountain are often well above the abilities of the climbers witnessed by the ranger staff. There is terrific terrain for skiing on Denali, but that terrain has high, and possibly fatal, consequences. This fact must be considered and prior experience should be gained before skiing/snowboarding during a climbing expedition. These unfavorable trends will be highlighted during the PSAR presentations that all climbers receive during the upcoming season.