

Bering Land Bridge

Official Map and Guide

Bering Land Bridge is as much a part of America's cultural heritage as Yellowstone or Yosemite, if not more so. The distance across the Bering Strait from Siberia to Alaska's Seward Peninsula is approximately 55 miles, and for several periods during the Pleistocene Ice Ages the trip could be made entirely on land instead of water. During additional periods the passage from Siberia to North America could also have been made by small watercraft bumping along coastlines. Bering Land Bridge National Preserve commemorates this prehistoric peopling of the Americas from Asia some 13,000 or more years ago. It also preserves important future clues in this great detective story regarding human presence in the Americas. During the late Wisconsinan glacial episode (see painting below left), so much of the Earth's water supply was locked up in huge ice masses

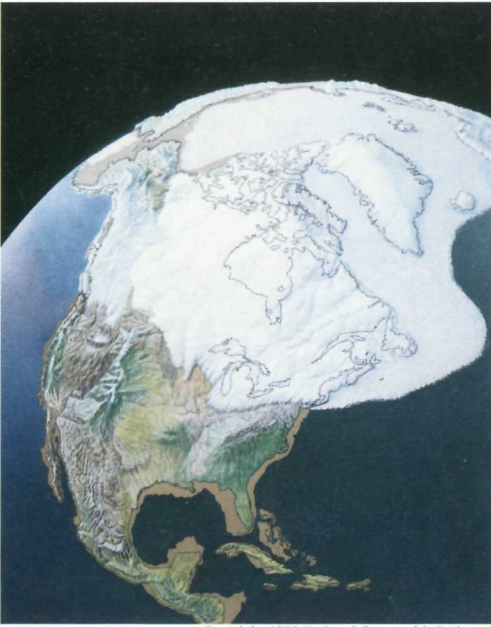
that the sea level fell 280 to 350 feet *below* today's level, exposing vast areas of land formerly under water. The result here was a continuous land bridge that stretched between Siberia and Alaska. Most archeologists agree that it was across this Bering Land Bridge, also called Beringia, that humans first passed from Asia to populate the Americas.

"Bridge" is really a misnomer, for the land mass ranged up to 1,000 miles wide. Just *when* humans first traversed Beringia is subject to less agreement. The Pleistocene epoch began 1.6 million years ago and ended only 10,000 years ago after a final onslaught of ice known as the late Wisconsinan glaciation. It is theoretically possible for people to have entered North America from Asia at repeated intervals between 40,000 and 13,000 years

Bering Land Bridge National Preserve
Alaska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Inuit hunters and bowhead whales, by Nancy Lange Simmerman



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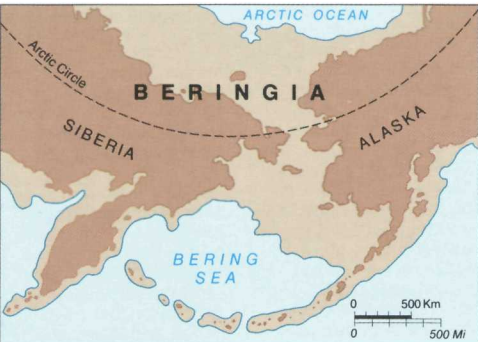
Continental Glaciation

The only way today to grasp how massive the Ice Age glaciation was might be to stand on one of Earth's two existing polar ice sheets—in Greenland or Antarctica. During the final Ice Age push, the Wisconsinan glacial period illustrated at left, vast ice sheets up to nearly two miles thick blanketed much of North America. Because the amount of water available is constant, this great hoarding of global water in huge ice sheets caused sea levels to drop dramatically. Such was the case in the Bering Strait (see maps at right).

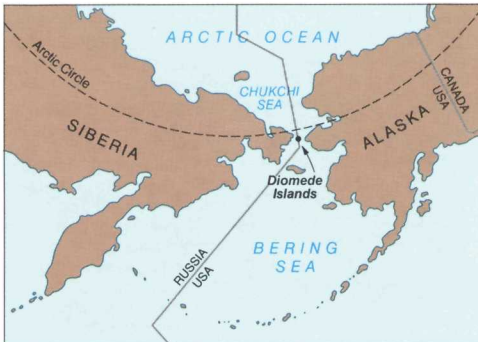
Continental shelves are the shallow submarine plains that border many continents. Typically continental shelves end in steep slopes that descend to an oceanic abyss. Where a wide continental shelf slopes gradually, a small drop in sea level can greatly expand shoreline areas. Sea level fell approximately 300 feet during the Wisconsinan glacial period, exposing a relatively flat, low-lying stretch of continental plain that linked North America to Asia. What today is the 55-mile stretch of sea that separates Alaska and

Siberia was once dry land. Although popularly known as a "land bridge," this land mass that joined the Americas to Asia was as much as 1,000 miles wide (see map at right).

Numerous clues to the intriguing question of how and when humans arrived in the Americas undoubtedly lie under water now. For the past 10,000 years sea level has risen an average of one foot per century, and that rate is increasing. Recent global climate change has speeded up the rate at which the polar ice masses are melting. Archeologists have already begun to study some coastal sites before the rising sea claims them. In parts of Alaska this warming trend is melting the permafrost, the so-called "permanently frozen subsoil," and damaging buildings and roads. Images from satellites show most of Earth's 160,000 glaciers shrinking at an accelerating rate. By 2050 the Rockies, Cascades, and Glacier National Park will have lost almost all their glaciers.



20,000 years ago In the four Wisconsinan glacial stages of the Pleistocene Ice Age, Beringia joined Asia and North America. Nearly all of the Aleutian island chain was one peninsula, and with its islands it also nearly linked the continents. As glaciers fluctuated, much of



Today Some 150 U.S. citizens live only three miles from Russia. They are the residents, mostly Inupiat, of Little Diomed Island in the Bering Strait. From the Seward Peninsula of Alaska it is only 25 miles to Little Diomed, and from there only three miles to Big Diomed



Age mammals that fed or hunted on the grasslands of Beringia. People who lived in southern France 17,000 years ago painted a number of these same mammals on the walls of Lascaux Cave. The illustration above shows many of the Ice

Greg Harlin/Instansbury, Ronsaville, Wood, Inc.

Peopling the Amerieas

Arising in tropical Africa, the human species stayed in Earth's middle latitudes until liberated by the conquest of fire. With captive fire came climate control—and migrations northward around the Mediterranean Sea. Using hides for warm clothing and developing insulating shelters, humans eventually inhabited far northern climates. Crossing the Bering Land Bridge, humans spread rapidly eastward and southward over the Americas. Constantly sorting out new clues in this fascinating story, scientists generally agree about its broad themes while arguing many of its details.

Many plants and other animals also moved between continents via Beringia. (The land bridge *prevented* marine mammals and fish from moving between the Bering and Chukchi seas, however.) Today's park remains a landscape of migrations, although most are now seasonal. In summer the park is host to birdlife from six continents, and some of these birds migrate 20,000 miles yearly.



The First Americans Whether on land, along the Bering Sea coast, or across seasonal ice, humans crossed Beringia from Asia to North America 13,000 or more years ago.

Humans were latecomers to this magnificent land mass so widely separated from other continents by vast oceans except near Earth's poles. Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Indonesian Archipelago, Australia, and Europe already hosted humans. Well-dated finds in both the southwestern United States and South America suggest that people were

in these locations about 12,000 years ago. Much closer to the Bering Land Bridge, the arctic coastline was not peopled year-round until some 4,500 years ago.

Marine Mammals. When Asia and Alaska were joined, marine mammals could not travel between the Bering and Chukchi seas. Nor could they range between the Atlantic and Pacific via arctic waters. Various seals, bowhead whales,

walrus, and beluga whales were historically important to Inupiat of the Seward Peninsula—and remain so for subsistence lifeways today. Walrus is an important food source for people living on the Diomedes and St. Lawrence islands.

Survival



Skin-covered kayaks with light wood frames were preferred over wooden boats in icy waters. A

sealskin float rests behind this hunter set to hurl his harpoon with a throwing board. Larger, open-

decked umiaks and the kayakers were moved over ice on sleds. si

This Inuit hunter used both harpoons and a rifle for hunting marine mam-

mals. si

Ice fishing, mostly by women, elders, and children, provided important food in late winter and

early spring when food was scarce. AMNH

These 19th-century north Alaskan Inuit (above) wear labrets or lip plugs like those reported as far back as 1655 from the Diomedes Islands in the Bering Strait. si

The Lamut group (above right) wear traditional decorated garb. AMNH

A malemute team sets up a chorus of howlings. It pulls with a tandem harness, first developed in Russia. The sled modeled at left might have been pulled with each dog being attached directly to it, a less efficient method early used in Siberia and Alaska. UA

Bering Sea-style sled. NMNH

Black bear mask with semihuman figure in right eye. NMNH



Kayak paddle. NMNH

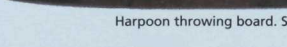
Skin-covered kayak model. si



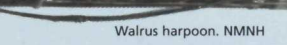
Hunting hat, bird motif. si



Ivory harpoon foreshaft. si



Harpoon throwing board. si



Walrus harpoon. NMNH



Ivory harpoon heads. si



Boot creeper, seal net weight, and ice scratcher. si/MAE/NMNH



Man's ground squirrel parka. si



Tungshak spirit mask for hunting ritual. NMNH

Credits key: si Smithsonian Institution; AMNH American Museum of Natural History, New York; MAE Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia; NMNH National Museum of Natural History; UA University of Alaska

Bering Land Bridge



James Magdanz

Low sunlight casts long shadows toward the distant finish line as Libby Riddles mushes her winning team in the grueling, annual Iditarod race.



Kory Matthews

Traditional subsistence lifestyles are recognized in National Park Service management policies for a variety of national parklands in Alaska. Ice fishing yields valuable dietary protein.

Bering Land Bridge National Preserve Alaska



Reindeer, close relatives of caribou, were introduced from Siberia in 1892 to provide both a

reliable, year-round food source and a herding economy for the Inuit people.



Kory Matthews

Holding a puppy, Crystal Milligrock projects the important partnership of people and dogs here.



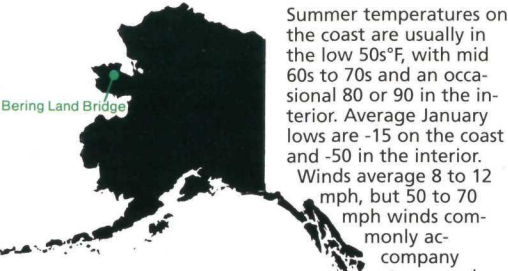
Kathy O'Reilly Doyle

Granite tors stand as craggy testimony to past volcanism at Serpentine Hot Springs. Hot springs

reveal the continuing presence in this area of substantial geothermal energy.

Access and Information

Access Bering Land Bridge National Preserve sprawls across 2.7 million acres of the northern Seward Peninsula in northwestern Alaska. It is one of the most remote and least-visited areas in the National Park System. Its western boundary lies 42 miles from the Bering Strait and International Date Line. No roads connect northwestern Alaska with other regions. From the towns of Nome and Kotzebue, served daily by jets from Anchorage, bush planes and small boats provide most summer access into the park. Winter access is mostly by small planes on skis, snow machines, or dog sleds.



Information Park offices in Nome are open weekdays 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. For information or trip planning contact: Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, P.O. Box 220, Nome, AK 99762, 907-443-2522, www.nps.gov/bela

Climate and Weather Weather is a central concern in visiting the park.

Summer temperatures on the coast are usually in the low 50s°F, with mid 60s to 70s and an occasional 80 or 90 in the interior. Average January lows are -15 on the coast and -50 in the interior. Winds average 8 to 12 mph, but 50 to 70 mph winds commonly accompany storms and produce extremely low and dangerous chill factors. And averages can be meaningless: summer can see snow, near-freezing temperatures, and long periods of clouds, wind, and rain. **Exposure and hypothermia are real threats here.** Summer days are long and almost without darkness; winter days are short, with only a few hours of light.

Things to See and Do

Activities Camping, hiking, backpacking, exploration, nature observation, photography, and coastal boating are some of the many possible activities. Winter offers opportunities for snowmobiling, dog sledding, and some cross-country skiing. Hunting and fishing are permitted under state regulations, and Alaska hunting and fishing licenses are required. You can explore remains of the Gold Rush era and evidence of ancient Inuit life. The park and its surroundings, including Native villages, offer opportunities to observe and learn about traditional subsistence living and historic reindeer herding.

Scenery The park contains extensive lava flows and ash/steam explosion craters now turned to lakes called maars. It also offers dynamic coast and beach environments of barrier islands and low sand dunes. Tundra plant communities range from wet tundra along the coast to alpine tundra on mountains in and near the park. Serpentine Hot Springs lies in a haunting valley marked by imposing granite spires called tors.

Plants and Animals More than 400 species of plants have been listed at the preserve. Many of them evolved in ancient Beringia and spread into Asia or North America. The Seward Peninsula

boasts a rich and diverse birdlife. More than 170 known species include such seabirds as gulls, murre, and kittiwakes; such migrating and nesting waterfowl as ducks, swans, and geese; such birds of prey as hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls; and many songbirds of tundra and uplands. At the crossroads of the Asiatic-North American flyway, this area offers rare opportunities to observe several Old World species. **Mammals** include the muskox, grizzly bear, moose, reindeer, wolf, wolverine, foxes, and smaller species. Once extinct on the Seward Peninsula, muskoxen were reintroduced in 1970 and today are thriving. Reindeer

from Siberia were introduced here in 1892 as a meat source to replace the native caribou that seem to have disappeared earlier in the century. Reindeer herding and husbandry is a small but continuing industry for Inuit herders. Polar bears frequent the coastline in winter and may come ashore. **Marine mammals** occasionally seen along the coast include several species of seals, walrus, and beluga and bowhead whales. Fish in rivers, streams, and lakes include several species of salmon, grayling, char, whitefish, and pike.

Facilities

Facilities in this wildlands park are extremely limited and there are few trails. Six shelter cabins widely scattered in the preserve are primarily for emergency winter use. A bunkhouse-style cabin at Serpentine Hot Springs sleeps 15 to 20 people in two sections. A wooden tub for bathing there is enclosed in a small bathhouse. All cabins are unreserved and bush etiquette may require sharing space with strangers. Camping is relatively unrestricted, with no formal campsites and no developed water, power, or sanitation facilities.

In Nome and Kotzebue Park offices in Nome offer information and limited displays on

park themes. Nome and Kotzebue provide services expected in small towns—hospital, restaurants, hotels, and grocery and hardware stores. Camping gear and sporting goods are often of limited variety, quantity, or availability. Air taxi services provide scheduled flights to neighboring villages or charter flights into the preserve.

In Neighboring Villages Small stores in nearby villages offer limited clothing, food, or supplies. As tourism develops, some villages also offer meals, lodging, and village tours.

Precautions and Safety

Insects Mosquitoes and other biting insects are common in the summer. Headnets and repellent are recommended.

Self Reliance Very often you are completely on your own in the park, with few if any links to the outside world. Hiking can be difficult and strenuous, especially across tussock tundra. You must be prepared for varied and changing weather conditions. Use only durable, tested equipment and be experienced in its use before you set out.

Subsistence Subsistence hunting, fishing, trapping, and collecting of wild plants sustain village cultures and are protected by federal law. Do not disturb cabins, camps,

drying racks, wood supplies, boats, fish nets, or other equipment, even if they look abandoned.

Archaeological Resources Artifacts, sites, structures, and other archaeological and historical resources are protected by federal law. Do not disturb them. Please report such finds to the National Park Service.

Wildlife Encounters Bears, moose, and other wildlife can prove deadly, especially if surprised or if they think their young are threatened. Respect these animals and keep a safe distance. This area has black, brown/grizzly, and polar bears. When you hike, lessen your chance of an encounter by watching for bears and bear signs, making

noise, and traveling in groups. Food trash and any cooking gear must be properly stored well away from your sleeping areas. Avoid taking odoriferous foods. Keep a clean camp and use bear-resistant food canisters. It is legal to carry a firearm for protection. Before beginning your trip, get the free bear pamphlet that gives in-depth advice on bear safety. You can get a copy at the Nome or Kotzebue park offices or by writing to the park address (*far left*).

Motorized Vehicles The use of off-road vehicles, including all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), is prohibited. Snowmachines are allowed during periods of adequate snow cover.

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