

Denali

National Park and Preserve
Alaska
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Mount McKinley massif, by Bradford Washburn © 1979 National Geographic Society

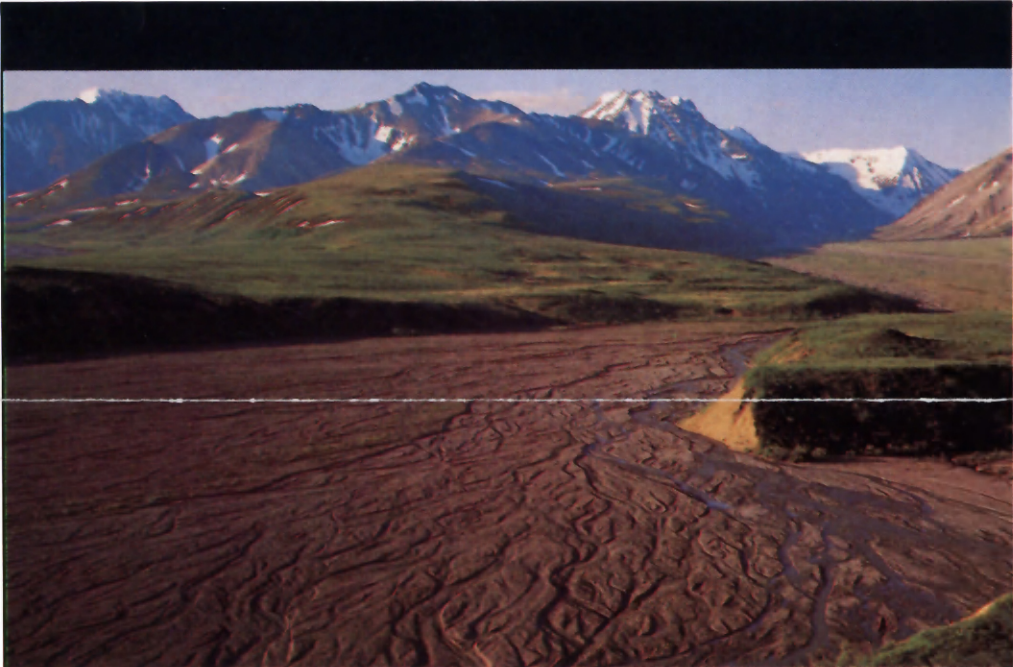
Denali, the “High One.” What nearby Athabascan native peoples called the massive peak is now the name of the new national park and preserve. The 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act enlarged the boundary of former Mount McKinley National Park by 4 million acres and the area was redesignated. At 6 million acres, the park is larger than Massachusetts. The Mount McKinley massif remains named for former Senator—later President—William McKinley. It crowns the 600-mile-long Alaska Range. The park exemplifies interior Alaska’s character as one of the world’s last great frontiers for wilderness adventure. It is largely wild and unspoiled, as explorers found it.

Denali National Park and Preserve is managed as three distinct units, each under different regulations. *Denali Wilderness*, the former Mount McKinley National Park established in 1917 as a wildlife refuge, is managed to maintain the accessible but undeveloped wilderness park-land character. Backcountry use is regulated, and most usual national park regulations apply here. *Denali National Park* (excluding Denali Wilderness) allows traditional subsistence hunting and trapping by local rural residents with permits. This recognizes a long-standing dependence on wildlife, fish, and plant materials for subsistence in rural Alaska. *Denali National Preserve* allows the subsistence uses listed for Denali

National Park, but also allows sport hunting, trapping, and fishing by state permit and under state regulations. There are two such preserve units.

Paradoxically, this expansive landscape, habitat of large caribou, moose, and grizzly bears, lies adorned with miniaturized plants. Their diminutive beauty contrasts with their large importance as food to the animals that live or migrate through here. These plant and animal life forms are long adapted to survive northern life, but there is newness in the landscape, too. The rivers are so young, and so laden with pulverized rock called rock flour, that they can wander across their broad, flat

valleys to set new channels in a matter of days. The miniaturized beauty of the tundra plants and the youthful wanderings of the rivers are striking counterpoints to the lofty, isolated, and often cloud-hidden grandeur of the Mount McKinley massif.



East Fork of the Toklat River
Ed Cooper Photo

The Land

More than 430 species of flowering plants as well as many species of mosses, lichens, fungi, algae, and others grace the slopes and valleys of Denali. Only plants adapted to long, bitterly cold winters can survive in this subarctic wilderness. Deep beds of intermittent permafrost—ground frozen for thousands of years—underlie portions of the park and preserve. Only the thinnest layer of topsoil thaws each summer to support life. After the continental glaciers retreated 10,000 to 14,000 years ago, hundreds of years were required to begin building new soils, and to begin the slow process of revegetation. Denali’s lowlands and slopes consist of two major plant associations, taiga and tundra.

Taiga (pronounced *ti-ga*), a Russian term meaning “land of little sticks,” aptly suggests the scant tree growth here near the Arctic Circle. Much of the park and preserve’s taiga lies in the valleys along the rivers. White and black spruce, the most common trees, are interspersed with quaking aspen, paper birch, and balsam poplar. Stands of deciduous trees occur along streamside gravel bars or where soils have been disturbed by fire or other action. Woods are frequently carpeted with mosses and lichens. Many open areas are filled with shrubs such as dwarf birch, blueberry, and a variety of willow species. The limit of tree growth occurs at about 2,700 feet in the

park and preserve. For comparison, the elevation at the park hotel is 1,750 feet. Above the tree limit, taiga gives way to tundra.

Tundra is a fascinating world of dwarfed shrubs and miniaturized wildflowers adapted to a short growing season. There are two types, moist tundra and dry tundra, with myriad gradations in between. Moist tundra varies in composition: some areas contain tussocks of sedges and cottongrass; others contain dwarfed shrubs, particularly willows and birches. Plants of the dry tundra live scattered among barren rocks at higher elevations. Tiny highlands plants grow closely matted to the ground, creating their own livable microclimate. Flowered dryas, dwarf fireweed, moss campion, dwarf rhododendron, and forget-me-not (Alaska’s state flower) dot the rocky landscape, offering stunning summer displays of delicate blossoms. Although small in stature they loom large in importance because their nutrients provide food that sustains even the largest species of park wildlife.



Park tour buses in the mid-1930s
Skinner Foundation, Alaska State Library

The History

Many generations of native Athabascans wandered over this region before Caucasians began to discover and explore it. Nomadic bands hunted lowland hills of Denali’s northern reaches spring through fall for caribou, sheep, and moose. They preserved berries for winter, netted fish, and gathered edible plants. As snows began to fall, they migrated to lower elevations, closer to the river valleys’ better protection from winter’s severe weather. Much of the Alaska Range formed a mighty barrier between interior Athabascans and Cook Inlet Athabascans to the south.

The park was originally established to protect its large mammals, not because of majestic Mount McKinley. Charles Sheldon conceived the plan to conserve the region as a national park. Naturalist, hunter, and conservationist, Sheldon first traveled here in 1906 and again in 1907 with a packer and guide named Harry Karstens. (Karstens later made the first ascent of Mt. McKinley’s south peak and would serve as the park’s first superintendent.) Sheldon devoted much of his 1907 travels to studying boundaries for the proposed national park that would include territories suitable for a game refuge. When Sheldon returned to the East in 1908, the Game Committee of the Boone and Crockett Club, of which he was chairman, launched the campaign to establish a national park. Largely due

to these efforts, Mount McKinley National Park was established in 1917. Its populations of Dall sheep and other wildlife were now legislatively protected. However, Mount McKinley itself was not wholly included within the boundaries.

Sheldon wanted to call the park Denali, but his suggestion would not be followed until 1980. That year the boundary was expanded to include both the Denali caribou herd’s wintering and calving grounds and the entire Mount McKinley massif. More than tripled in size, the park became Denali National Park and Preserve. It was also designated an International Biosphere Reserve significant for its potential for subarctic ecosystems research. Predator-prey relationships exist in balance here as they may have existed elsewhere before human intrusions. Denali National Park and Preserve remains a subarctic wilderness of wild- life and glaciated mountains in which the human element is still crucial.



Alaska Range peaks above the Throfare River.
Ed Cooper Photo

The Mountain

Mount McKinley has been called the Alaskan landscape’s most impressive feature. While you may not see it during your stay here, *it is there!* Mount McKinley is the highest mountain on the North American continent. Measured from the 2,000-foot lowlands near Wonder Lake to its summit, this mountain could be called the tallest in the world. The vertical relief of 18,000 feet, greater than that of Mount Everest, tops out on the summit at 20,320 feet. Mount McKinley makes its own weather and can, unfortunately, be cloud-hidden as much as 75 percent of the summer. Temperatures at the summit are severe even in summer. Winter lows at just 14,500 feet can plummet below —95°F! During storms, winds can gust to more than 150 mph. Permanent snowfields cover more than 50 percent of the mountain and feed the many glaciers that surround its base. The mountain’s granite and slate core is, in fact, overlain by ice that is hundreds of feet thick in places.

Mount McKinley reigns in lofty isolation over the Alaska Range, that magnificent 600-mile arc of mountains that divides south-central Alaska from the interior plateau. Its life as a mountain range began some 65 million years ago, the result of the Denali Fault, North America’s largest crustal break. This fault, where two tectonic plates have moved against each other,

stretches for 1,300 miles from the Yukon border down to the Aleutian peninsula. There the Alaska and Aleutian Ranges meet in a mad jumble of peaks that includes active volcanoes. Earthquake tremors both mild and moderate are frequent occurrences in the park and preserve. The building of these massive mountains began out of a flat lowland. The material that Earth’s inner turmoil thrust up has subsequently been eroded, sculpted, and weighed down by huge masses of ice. Numerous glaciers still radiate from the high peaks of the Alaska Range, where the frigid temperatures prevent their melting. Some of the glaciers are visible from the park road. The debris-laden snout of the 35-mile-long Muldrow Glacier lies within a half mile of the park road. The park and preserve owes its beautiful landscape contrasts—wide, low plains and dark, somber mountains; brightly colored peaks and sheer granite domes—to the Denali Fault. Geologists say that Mount McKinley still rises.



Wildlife of Taiga and Tundra

Spring, summer, and fall provide a compressed respite from the subarctic’s long season of deep cold. For most animals it is a busy respite during which they must garner most of their annual food supplies. Dall sheep, relatives of the bighorn sheep, graze the alpine tundra for the young shoots of mountain avens. Ewes and rams live apart in summer, while the lambs are getting their start. In early summer sheep are at lower elevations, but they will follow the snowmelt higher and higher as summer progresses. Caribou, like the Dall sheep, travel in groups. Both sexes sport antlers, the only deer family members to do so. Caribou migrate great distances from their calving grounds south of the Alaska Range to their winter range in the western and northern reaches of the park and preserve. The Denali herd has fluctuated greatly in number over the last 30 years. Today a group of 50 or more may be seen from the park road, quite different from the thousands seen many years ago.

Moose, the deer family’s largest members, are not herd animals. Bulls may group in threes or fours or wander alone until they pursue several

cow moose during the rut, or mating season. The calves are born in May and will stay with the cow one or two years. In spring, the cow and calf feed on willows and other new green vegetation. At this time of year, be cautious about traveling in willow thickets. A cow moose can be very dangerous while protecting her calf from a perceived threat. Wolves are rarely seen, but play an important role in the natural scheme. In winter, wolves generally hunt in packs. Individuals, however, can be sighted as well. Pack organization is strongest during the whelping (pupping) season in spring. The presence of wolves in Denali is an indication of the quality of this wilderness. If you are lucky enough to see a wolf, consider it a rare and privileged experience.

Grizzly bears are omnivores, eating small plants, berries, ground squirrels, moose, or caribou calves, and occasional carrion. They are seen throughout the park. Sows generally bear two cubs, sometimes one, and rarely three. They too are fiercely protective of their offspring. Wolves and grizzly bears play an important role as predators. Ever ready to take

advantage of an opportunity, they cull old and sick animals from the caribou, moose, and sheep populations.

Smaller mammals abound within the limits of this harsh, northern environment: fox, weasel, wolverine, lynx, marten, snowshoe hare, hoary marmot, red squirrel, ground squirrel, pika, porcupine, beaver, shrew, vole, and lemming. There are 37 mammal species recorded in the park and preserve.

Birdlife is varied and interesting. Raven, ptarmigan, magpie, and gray jay are some of the species that winter here. Most birds migrate long distances between their nesting grounds here in the park and their wintering areas. Wheatears winter in Africa; arctic terns in Antarctica and southern South America; jaegers take to life at sea in the southern oceans. On the open tundra, you may easily see tree sparrows, Lapland longspurs, and various shorebirds. Short-eared owls and marsh hawks can be seen soaring low in search of rodents. Golden eagles patrol the

higher elevations and ridgetops. Raptors, birds of prey, of the spruce forest are the hawk owl and goshawk. In these forests, you may also see the spruce grouse and varied thrush. Plovers, gyrfalcons, mew gulls, and snow buntings are among the 157 species of birds recorded here.

Winter challenges wildlife with frigid temperatures and the cessation of plant growth. Food is scarce. Grizzlies fatten up in summer and remain in a torpor or deep sleep most of the winter. Ground squirrels and marmots hibernate, their body functions virtually halted. Beavers and red squirrels hole up and subsist on food caches. Weasels, snowshoe hares, and ptarmigan, however, turn white and continue the struggle to survive above ground against extreme conditions.

to graph wild animals with a telephoto lens. Close approaches only disturb them and endanger you. Keep your campsite clean. Store food in your vehicle, not in your tent.

For backcountry procedures and other safety messages see the Denali Alpenglöw. Never feed any wild animals, including squirrels and gulls that frequent campgrounds.



By Road. Denali lies 240 miles north of Anchorage and 120 miles south of Fairbanks. Alaska Highway 3, connecting the two cities, is open all year.

By Train. The Alaska Railroad provides daily summer passenger and freight service to the park from Anchorage and Fairbanks. Passenger service is limited in winter. For information write or call the Alaska Railroad Corporation, Passenger Services, P.O. Box 107500, Anchorage, AK 99510-7500 or call (800) 544-0552 Continental USA and Hawaii, (907) 265-2494 Anchorage, (907) 456-4155 Fairbanks.

By Bus. Several companies provide service in summer. Denali Express (800) 327-7651 or (907) 274-8539 Anchorage, Alaska Sightseeing Tours (907) 276-1305 Anchorage or (907) 452-8518 Fairbanks, Grey Line of Alaska/Westours (907) 277-5581 Anchorage or (907) 456-7741 Fairbanks.

Be Prepared. Most visitors come here between late May and mid-September. Summer is cool, wet, and windy and snow can occur. Bring clothing for temperatures from 35°F to 75°F. A hat, mittens or gloves, and rain gear are essential. Sturdy foot gear, insect repellent, binoculars, and camera are desirable. Unpredictable weather in May and early June and in mid-September may delay the opening and closing of park roads and facilities. Call (907) 683-2686 for recorded information.

Winter Activities. Check at park headquarters for weather conditions and backcountry permits. Denali Dog Tours, P.O. Box 670, Denali National Park, AK 99755, offers expedition equipment freighting.

Road Traffic Limits. To protect wildlife viewing opportunities, limits are set on park road traffic. Expect delays getting out of the park during the peak season. Many activities are available in the entrance area.

Wilderness Safety. Denali is a true wilderness. Grizzly bears and moose are dangerous. Crossing glacial rivers is treacherous. Before venturing into the park, read the safety articles in *Denali Alpenglöw*, the park newspaper.

For information write: Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve, P.O. Box 9, Fairbanks, AK 99701, telephone (907) 451-7352 or (907) 683-2686. Alaska Public Lands Information Centers are located at 250 Cushman St., Fairbanks, AK 99701, telephone (907) 451-7352 or (907) 451-7439 (number for deaf access); and at 605 West 4th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501, telephone (907) 271-2737 or (907) 271-2738 (number for deaf access). For a free list of maps, and other publications, write: Alaska Natural History Association, P.O. Box 838, Denali Park, AK 99755.

How to Get Here



What to Do in the Park and Preserve

General Park Orientation. Obtain the park newspaper, *Denali Alpenglöw*, and other literature at the Visitor Access Center near the park entrance. Make this your first stop upon arrival. There is an admission fee of \$3 per person. People under 17, persons 62 and older (Golden Age Pass), and handicapped individuals (Golden Access Pass) will be admitted free. The Denali Annual Pass, \$15, and the Golden Eagle pass – an entrance pass to all federal areas – \$25, are also available.

Public Transportation. Private vehicles are restricted beyond the Savage River (mile 15). Buses are available and tickets may be obtained at the Visitor Access Center up to 2 days in advance. Buses travel regularly from the Visitor Access Center to Eielson Visitor Center and between Eielson Visitor Center and Wonder Lake. Buses make stops for wildlife viewing and at comfort stations. You may get on or off the bus along the park road except in closed areas. Buses are in heavy demand during July and August; check at the Visitor Access Center for information and schedules. The round trip between the Visitor Access Center and Eielson Visitor Center takes 8 hours. The round trip between Eielson Visitor Center and Wonder Lake takes an additional 3 hours. There is no food service, so bring food and drink. Warm clothing and rain gear are advisable.

Tour Bus. The Denali Wildlife Tour and the Denali Natural History Tour are available through the park concessioner in summer. Guide and food are provided. Contact Denali National Park Hotel for reservations and prices, (907) 683-2215 in summer or (907) 276-7234 in winter.

Air Tours. Aircraft may be chartered for flight-seeing tours. Arrange these with Denali Air, (907) 683-2261.

Camping. Riley Creek, Savage River, and Teklanika River campgrounds are accessible by private vehicle. Sanctuary River, Igloo Creek, and Wonder Lake campgrounds – tents only – are accessible by bus only. You must register for all park campsites in person at the Visitor Access Center (daily use fee, check out time 11 a.m.). You may

register for 1, the same day or to begin the next day, 2, all consecutive nights of your stay up to 14 nights, and 3, a combination of campgrounds. Organized groups may obtain space at Savage River Group Campground; advance reservations are advisable.

Hiking. Denali offers exciting hikes for both novice and experienced hikers. The only established park trails, mostly short loops, are near the hotel. Walk them on your own or join a scheduled ranger walk. Take longer hikes on your own or take a ranger-led discovery hike. The best routes for hiking are along river bars or ridgetops. Glacial streams can be cold, swift and dangerous to cross. Sturdy foot gear is essential. (Overnight hikers see Backcountry Permits.) Check at the Visitor Access Center for backcountry information and areas closed to hiking.

Mountaineering. All Mt. McKinley and Mount Foraker climbers must register with the park superintendent. Groups heading for other peaks are urged to register. For information write: Talkeetna Ranger Station, Box 588, Talkeetna, AK 99676 or call (907) 733-2311.

Regulations

Backcountry Permits. A free backcountry use permit for overnight camping must be obtained and then returned when the trip is complete. Permits are issued in summer at Visitor Access Center and in winter at park headquarters. A stove is recommended for backpacking; campfires are not allowed in the Denali Wilderness. Any garbage or trash must be packed out.

Campfires. Campfires are allowed only in certain campgrounds. Firewood is sold at a store in the park entrance area.

Firearms. Make all firearms inoperative. Leave them at park headquarters when backpacking in the wilderness area. Firearms are allowed in the preserve and park additions.

Sport Fishing. A state license is required in the park additions and the preserve for sport fishing. No state license is required in the Denali Wilderness. Limits per person per day are lake trout (2 fish), grayling and other fish (10 fish or 4.5 kilos/10 pounds and 1 fish). Live bait or fish eggs may not be used. Glacial silt creates poor fishing in many park streams.

Sport Hunting. Sport hunting is not allowed in the wilderness or park areas. You can hunt in the preserve with a state license.

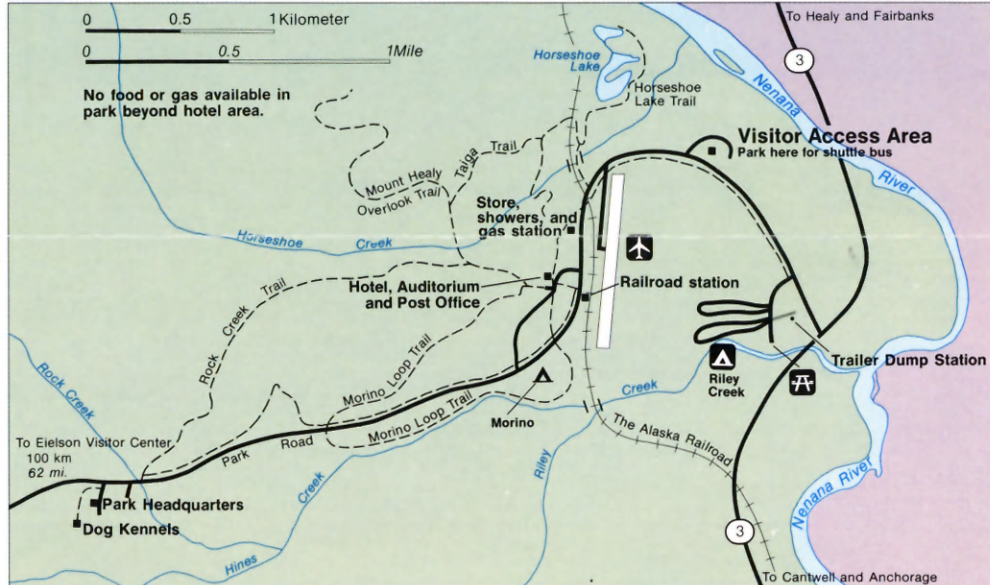
Closures. Some areas may be temporarily closed because of bear or other wildlife activity. Check on closures at Visitor Access Center. The Sable Pass Wildlife Restricted Area is prime grizzly bear habitat and offers excellent opportunities to observe and photograph bears and other wildlife from the road. The zone is strictly off limits for hiking. You must remain on the road.

Safe Driving. Protect park wildlife and yourself by driving safely. Maximum speed is 35 mph.

Pets. Pets are allowed on roadways and in campgrounds only and must be leashed or physically restrained at all times. They are prohibited on buses and trails or in the backcountry. Pets are not recommended in the preserve or park additions.

Food Storage. Campers must store all food in the bear-resistant food lockers located at each campground or in closed vehicles.

Entrance and Headquarters Area Map



Campground	Distance from Entrance*	Campsite				Toilet			Water
		Spaces	Tent	Trailer	Camper	Pit	Flush	Tap	
Riley Creek	0.8 0.5	102	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Morino	2.4 1.5	60	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Savage River	19.2 12.0	34	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Sanctuary River	35.0 22.0	7	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Teklanika River	46.4 29.0	50	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Igloo Creek	54.7 34.0	7	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Wonder Lake	136.0 85.0	28	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

* Kilometers/Miles

Write to the park superintendent for access information for the disabled.

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