

Kobuk Valley

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior
Kobuk Valley National Park



Great Kobuk Sand Dunes

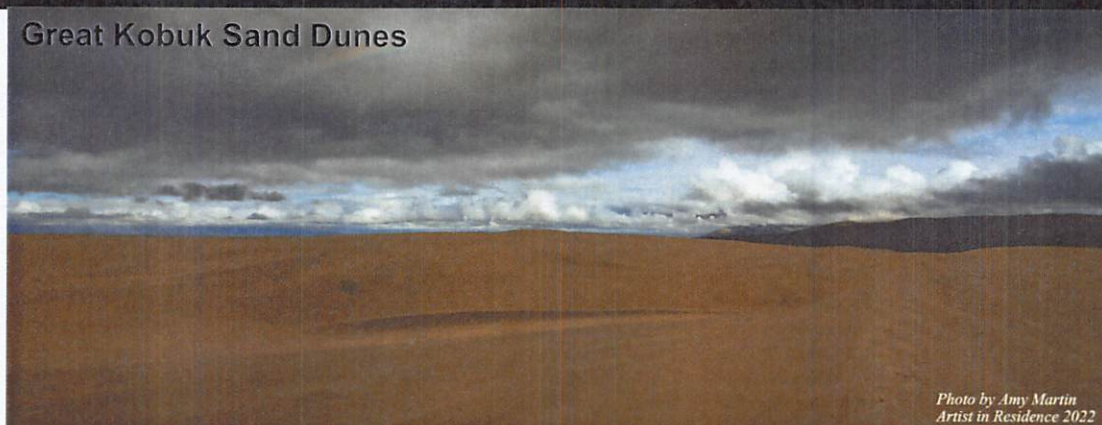


Photo by Amy Martin
Artist in Residence 2022

The Great Kobuk Sand Dunes rise out of the trees and tundra to a massive area of sand between the Kobuk River and the rounded hills of the Waring Mountains. Unique in the entire Arctic, this 25 sq mile field of bare sand lies in sharp contrast to the surrounding boreal forest. The result of wind and glaciation, the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes offer spectacular contrasts in scenery for the visitor, berry picking and hunting for locals, and habitat for unique plants.

Origin

Long before the glaciers of the last ice age sculpted this land, erosion worked to reduce the rocks of the Baird and Waring Mountains and their predecessors to rubble. Winds drove the finer materials freely across the country, perhaps creating small dunes to be removed by the next storm.

About 28,000 years ago the climate began to change. Average temperatures cooled, and winter snowfall no longer melted entirely during the short arctic summers. Over millennia, the snow accumulated, compressed, and became ice. Ice sheets covering sheltered slopes grew and combined with others to eventually fill the valleys of the Brooks Range and cover much of the surrounding landscape.

Winds continued to move sand created by past erosion and newly generated sand ground down by glaciers. Walls of glacial ice trapped this moving sand along what would become the Kobuk River some thousands of years in the future.

About 14,000 years ago the global climate began to warm and glaciers began to melt. Plants recaptured more than 300 sq miles of fine sand that accumulated at the foot of the ice sheets in Kobuk Valley. About 30 sq miles in two locations remain un-vegetated.

Plants attempting to invade the original dunes fought burial by wind-blown sand or destruction by root exposure. Over time, the plants dominated, stabilizing a few square meters each year. The barren Dunes that we see in Kobuk Valley National Park today are all that remain of this once vast desert.

Today, the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes are surrounded by creeks. Kavet Creek follows the western edge; Ahnewetut Creek bisects the Dunes; and Niaktovik Creek follows the southeastern edge separating the Dunes from the Waring Mountains.

Traditional Use

The lands surrounding the Great and Little Kobuk Sand Dunes are sites that are traditionally used by the Inupiat who are indigenous to the region. The Kobuk River acts as a highway for local residents to travel between villages, to hunt, and to practice their subsistence lifestyle along the river. In the summer, locals travel by boat. In the winter, they switch to snowmobiles, locally called snowmachines or snowgos, and are able to travel much more widely.

Subsistence activities occur all year along the Kobuk River and in the areas surrounding the Dunes. Locals set nets for a variety of fish depending on the season including several species of whitefish, Northern pike, Dolly Varden, the occasional lake trout, salmon and sheefish, grayling, and burbot.

Summer brings increased fishing for salmon and sheefish that migrate upstream from the ocean. Various plants growing in or near wetlands are harvested for immediate use or stored for winter for food and medicinal purposes.

August is a time for picking berries. Blueberries, lowbush

cranberries, salmonberries, bearberries, and the occasional nagoonberry are harvested along the margins of the Dunes. Some of these species are found in other places, but the crops of bearberries near the dunes are extra special to the residents of nearby villages.

Early fall and freeze-up are a time for hunting large animals, especially caribou along the river or across the land. A long-used hunting area lies at the mouth of Kavet Creek, and people from throughout the region gather here as the caribou arrive from the north.

Winter is a time for hunting and trapping furbearing animals. Wolves, wolverines, fox, otters, beavers, and weasels are harvested and their hides used to make clothing adequate to withstand the extreme cold and days without a sunrise.

Although many of these activities are not done in most U.S. national parks, they are critical to the residents of Northwest Alaska. Recreational visitors should respect locals harvesting resources for subsistence.

Private Lands

Long before national parks were established in Alaska, Alaska Natives were coerced to adopt Western ownership practices by acquiring lands that they and their families had traditionally used for subsistence. Many of these land "allotments" are within the boundaries of national park units today.

Native allotments are privately owned and visitors should not trespass. There are two allotments located near the mouth of Kavet Creek, for example, and many cabins along the Kobuk River. It is inappropriate to cross or camp on private lands unless specifically invited by the landowner.

Access

Visitors travel to the Dunes by plane, usually landing at the east end of the Dunes or by hiking in to the west end from the Kobuk River. The easiest access point, Kavet Creek, is a 3-4 day float from the Ambler or a two-hour boat ride from Kiana or Ambler. From the mouth of Kavet Creek, the Dunes are about 1.6 mi south.

It is necessary to cross Kavet Creek to reach the dunes. Land along the creek is wet and boggy. Stay on higher ground to avoid getting wet feet.

There is no marked trail to the Dunes. We suggest that you leave the river corridor to the west (right) of the east side of the private land on the bluff. Other routes cross private land or lead you through large wetland areas where walking is difficult and mosquitoes swarm from every bush. At the foot of the bluff, work your way to the left, away from the high ground. Follow the contour of the slope, climbing gradually to remain above the wetlands. You should be able to see the Dunes in the distance after you have gone about a half mile from the river.

Camping and Visitation	The shore of the Kobuk River just downriver (west) from the mouth of Kavet Creek is level and above all but the most extreme flood levels. There is space here to set up tents and to perform routine camp tasks. Please do not camp elsewhere as there are several allotments in the area. Our goal, shared with the people who have used these lands for millennia, is to preserve these lands in their undeveloped condition to support the animals, plants, and people who live here. The best time to visit the Dunes is between mid-June and the beginning of August. Before then, the plants have not	put on their season's growth and ice can make hiking or floating treacherous. August brings the rainy season, and visitors run the risk of getting cold and wet with no opportunity to dry. Mid-August begins the season of most fishing and berry-picking, and visitors may disrupt critical subsistence activities. Visitors should plan to travel in groups of two or more and bring a communication device. Even a sprained ankle may be life-threatening if you have no assistance and no way to call for help.
Vegetation	The Great Kobuk Sand Dunes are surrounded by northern boreal forest. Trees found here are black spruce, white spruce, quaking aspen and black cottonwood, at least five species of willows, paper birch, dwarf birch, and glandular birch. Ground cover consists of lichens, mosses, sedges and grasses. In 1981, 6800 acres west of the Dunes burned. The regrowth of species adapted to light and open space here represents the first stage of forest succession. Spruce trees will eventually replace the aspen and birch and their shade will eliminate many of the shrubs.	Plant life on the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes is sparse. As the Dunes migrate to the west, they bury the plants of the boreal forest and establish a habitat similar to coastal beaches. This similarity is highlighted by the abundant wild rye sprouting from the drifting sand. The Kobuk Locoweed is a small flowering herb of the pea family that is only found in Kobuk Valley National Park. Other grasses, a few hardy forbs and annual flowers complete the flora of the open dunes. As the Dunes move on, a succession of mosses and algae, lichens, grasses, and shrubs forecast the return of the boreal forest.
Wildlife	This northernmost boreal forest of North America is home to abundant wildlife. Squirrels, lemmings, voles and shrews hide in the tall grass and dense shrubbery. Moose roam the woods along with black bears and grizzly bears. Caribou migrate through the area in the spring and fall, though a few caribou may roam the area year-round. Beaver, otter, and mink stick to the creeks and rivers. Porcupines are the plague of spruce trees, while lynxes and foxes prowl in search of an easy meal. The Dunes are also the home territory of a pack of wolves. You are likely to see fresh tracks or hear howls, but may never see a wolf. It is important to treat these animals	with respect and give them their space. Warblers, peregrine falcons, loons, sandhill cranes, mergansers, and rough-legged hawks are just a few of the nearly 200 species of birds that may be seen here. The area may harbor the elusive Siberian tit, a small, chickadee-like bird. Perhaps the most surprising creature found here is the wood frog. The amphibian with the most northern distribution in North America, this frog is commonly seen by summer visitors.
Equipment	Like much of Northwest Alaska, the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes are subject to rapid, and sometimes violent weather changes. A sunny day on the dunes may reach a temperature greater than 90° F (33° C). Or wind can bring rain and cool temperatures close to freezing. Mosquitoes, sunburn, and windburn are ever present hazards that most visitors will meet. The hike to the Dunes involves crossing both rugged terrain and marshy areas. It is possible to meet a bear, moose or other large animals just on the other side of the brush.	We recommend that each hiker carry two liters (1/2 gallon) of water or a filter to purify water from the streams, food, a compass and map, toilet paper, small first aid kit, a camera, and bug shirt or repellent. Clothing should include a long-sleeve shirt or light jacket and rain gear even on sunny days, sturdy footwear, a hat, and sunglasses. A good day pack to carry your gear will make your trip more comfortable. Avoid packing more weight than you can carry comfortably. Weapons are unnecessary if you make enough human-type noise. The wildlife wants to meet you less than you want to meet them.
Ethics and Courtesies	Kobuk Valley National Park was established to protect the natural and cultural resources found here. Help us meet this goal by practicing minimum impact visit guidelines as you tour the area. Carry out all of your trash. The Sand Dunes are a valued resource and located within Designated Wilderness. Scrape a shallow depression for human wastes. Burn used toilet paper or take it with you. Do not molest animals that you see here. Maintain your distance, even for taking pictures. All of the creatures here are wild and all can pose a threat, especially wildlife traveling with their young.	Private lands and cabins are located all along the Kobuk River. Respect them just as you would respect privately owned land anywhere and do not camp on or cross these lands. Residents of Northwest Alaska may stop by your camp for a visit. The traditional welcome is coffee or tea and crackers. If you don't have these, at least invite visitors to sit and visit for a while. Although local residents may stop at your camp, you should not stop at theirs unless specifically invited. Locals are busy living their subsistence lifestyle, hunting and gathering foods in the Park. Remember, you are the visitor here, and they are at home.
For Further Information	For more specific information on the Kobuk Sand Dunes and Kobuk Valley National Park, write or call: Western Arctic National Parklands P. O. Box 1029 Kotzebue, Alaska 99752 Phone (907)442-3890	Park offices are located at the Northwest Arctic Heritage Center at 171 3rd Avenue in Kotzebue. The Heritage Center includes an exhibit area showcasing the area's native plants & animals and the Iñupiaq culture that has helped people to live in this environment for thousands of years, as well as an Alaska Geographic bookstore and maps and brochures to help you navigate the area. Come visit us!