

# Sequoia and Kings Canyon

Sequoia and Kings Canyon  
National Parks  
California

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Cover photo in Mineral King Valley by Kathleen Norris Cook

From atop Moro Rock you can grasp the multiple superlatives that brought Sequoia—and eventually Kings Canyon—into the National Park System so early that Sequoia is now our second oldest national park. To the north lies the Giant Forest plateau where sequoias rise above their forest neighbors. In cathedral-like Giant Forest

stands the 275-foot-tall General Sherman giant sequoia tree, whose trunk weighs an estimated 1,385 tons and whose circumference at the ground is nearly 103 feet. To the west, in contrast to these gargantuan conifers, are the dry foothills with their oak trees and chaparral vegetation descending toward the San Joaquin Valley. To the south,

and down, more than 5,000 vertical feet, the Middle Fork of the Kaweah River threads its rugged canyon. To the east, snowcapped peaks of the Great Western Divide and the Kaweah Peaks top out on Mount Kaweah at 13,802 feet. Just out of sight beyond the divide, the highest mountain in the contiguous 48 states, Mount

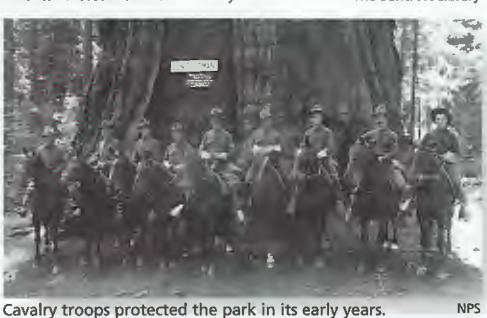
Whitney, reaches 14,494 feet of elevation. Big trees, high peaks, and deep canyons in North America's longest single continuous mountain range: superlatives abound amidst glorious scenery. Pioneering conservationist John Muir explored and named the Giant Forest. "When I entered this sublime wilderness the day was near-

ly done," he observed, "the trees with rosy, glowing countenances seemed to be hushed and thoughtful, as if waiting in conscious religious dependence on the sun, and one naturally walked softly and awestricken among them." May you follow in Muir's footsteps.

## Earth's Largest Tree

In volume of total wood the giant sequoia stands alone as the largest living tree on Earth. Its nearly conical trunk—like a club, not a walking stick—shows why. At least one tree species lives longer, one has a greater diameter, three grow taller, but none is larger. In all the world, sequoias grow naturally only on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, most often between 5,000 and 7,000 feet. There are some 75 groves in all. The General Sherman tree is between 2,300 and 2,700 years old. Its largest branch is almost seven feet in diameter. Each year the General Sherman adds enough wood growth to make a 60-foot-tall tree of usual proportions.

"Most of the Sierra trees die of disease, fungi, etc.," John Muir wrote, "but nothing hurts the Big Tree. Barring accidents, it seems to be immortal." Muir was partly right. Chemicals in the wood and bark provide resistance to insects and fungi, and thick bark insulates them from most fire. The main cause of sequoia deaths is toppling. They have a shallow root system with no tap root. Soil moisture, root damage, and strong winds can lead to toppling.



Sequoia, America's Second Oldest National Park San Joaquin Valley residents and others urged Congress to protect Sierra tracts from logging in the 1880s. Some park proponents sought to protect water supplies for irrigation; others, the Big Trees. Preserving land for scenic and recreational values was an infant idea then.

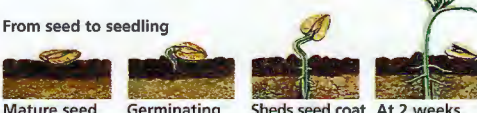
Sequoia National Park was created on September 25, 1890. A week later Congress tripled its size and created General Grant National Park to protect Grant Grove. In 1893 a Sierra Forest Reserve protected more lands, and in 1926 Kern Canyon was added to Sequoia. In 1940 General Grant was merged into the newly-created Kings Canyon National Park. In 1978 Mineral King was added to Sequoia. Since 1943 Sequoia and Kings Canyon have been managed jointly.

**John Muir** Conservationist John Muir's response to logging the giant sequoias was: "As well sell the rain clouds and the snow and the rivers to be cut up and carried away, if that were possible." Muir explored and named the Giant Forest, where stand four of the world's five largest trees. He also pioneered Mount Whitney's steep east face. And he would prove the geologic role of Sierran glaciers, a new theory disputed by California state geologist Josiah D. Whitney.

**Sequoia and Redwood Compared** The giant sequoia has a column-like trunk, huge stout branches, and cinnamon-colored bark. Also called "Sierra redwood" and "Big Tree," its scientific name is *Sequoiadendron giganteum*. The taller and more slender coast redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*, is more conifer-like in profile.



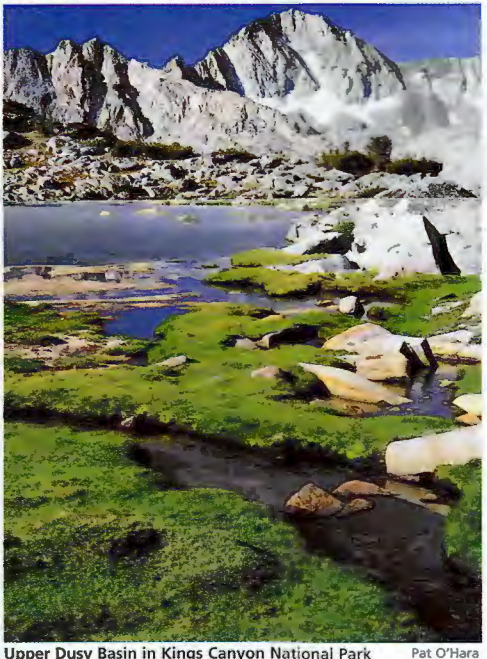
**Giant Sequoia Ecology** Sequoias don't die of old age and are resistant to fire and insect damage. Most die by falling over. These huge trees sprout from seeds as small and light as oat flakes. Mature trees may yearly produce 2,000 egg-sized cones—bearing 400,000 seeds dispersed only as cones open. Cones hang on trees, green and closed, up to 20 years. Douglas squirrels (above) or larvae of a cone-boring beetle may make a few cones open, but fire is the key to seed dispersal and seedbed fertility. It makes the cones dry, open, and drop seeds. It lets sunlight in and burns logs and branches on the forest floor to ashes as fertilizer.



## Deep Canyons and High Peaks

These parks encompass the most rugged portions of the Sierra Nevada. From the highest peaks in the lower 48 states, ice glaciers descended to carve some of the country's deepest canyons. In their upper reaches, these gorges show the U-shaped profile characteristic of glacial gouging. At lower elevations, they resume the V shape of water-carved canyons. In Sequoia, the Generals Highway climbs the stream-cut walls of Deep Canyon. The Kings Canyon Scenic Byway passes through both geologic profiles; where it ends, you can stand on canyon floor scoured flat by glaciers and stare up at canyon walls rising nearly a mile.

Extreme elevation change—from 1,500 to 14,494 feet—creates a huge variety of habitats. Plants and animals here inhabit life zones ranging from desert heat to arctic cold. This rich diversity stands as one of the values Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks preserve for the world.



**The Snowy, Sawtoothed Mountain Range** More than 400 miles long and 60 to 80 miles wide, the Sierra Nevada exceeds the whole Alps area—French, Swiss, and Italian. Palisade Crest in Kings Canyon National Park and the Mount Whitney group in Sequoia each boast six peaks more than 14,000 feet of elevation.

No roads cross the range here; intimate appreciations of the mountains' scale and grandeur are hard-won afoot or with packstock. Panoramic vistas can be seen from atop Moro Rock; from roadside pullouts along the Generals Highway; from Panoramic Point near Grant Grove; and from roadside pullouts before Kings Canyon Scenic Byway descends into the canyon. The Mineral King valley provides superlative hiking access to meadows, alpine lakes, and Sierra peaks.

Because park roads top out at 7,800 feet of elevation, most people who visit the parks do not experience the alpine country. Above 9,000 feet the harsh climate cannot support tall trees or dense forests. Above about 11,000 feet, no trees grow. Here are mostly boulders, rocks, and gravel punctuated with small alpine lakes, meadows, and low-growing shrubs. Summer flourishes but briefly. Preparing for winter, the marmot stores body fat; the pika stores small piles of hay. Mountain lakes dot Sierran highcountry, many set in cirques, small bowls carved by glaciers.



The General Sherman Tree, world's largest living tree, is in Giant Forest, Sequoia National Park. The General Grant, the Nation's Christmas Tree, is in Grant Grove, Kings Canyon National Park.

The world's first, second, third, and sixth tallest trees grow within a mile of each other on Redwood Creek along the Northern California coast in Redwood National Park.

**Sierran Wildlife** Mule deer are prime prey of elusive mountain lions. Pine martens, fishers, and wolverines pursue squirrels and other small animals. Black bears may take fawns or eat carrion but mostly eat vegetation. Marmots and pikas live in mountains. Coyotes, gray fox, bobcats, and ringtails patrol the foothills. Decades of planting non-native brook, brown, and other trout displaced native rainbow and Little Kern golden trout. Planted fish also damaged amphibian populations, especially frogs.



## Visiting the Parks

**Getting Here** Vehicle access is by Calif. 180 into Kings Canyon or Calif. 198 into Sequoia. The Generals Highway connects both, making loop trips possible. Vehicles longer than 22 feet are not advised between Potwisha and Giant Forest Museum in Sequoia Park; Calif. 180 has fewer curves. There is no road access from U.S. 395 on the parks' east side. Air, bus, Amtrak, and rental cars are available in Fresno and Visalia. Gasoline is not available in the parks.

**Information** The free park newspaper describes park resources and facilities. Call 559-565-3341 for 24-hour recorded information on road and weather conditions (updated daily), camping, lodging, and activities, or to reach a ranger. Or write: Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, 47050 Generals Highway, Three Rivers, CA 93271-9700. Information is also available at [www.nps.gov/seeki](http://www.nps.gov/seeki).

**Activities** Check bulletin boards for schedules of ranger-led walks and talks.

**Crystal Cave** This cool, beautiful cavern is open in summer only. Buy tickets for tours only at Lodgepole and Foothills visitor centers; not at the cave.

**Food and Lodging** For reservations in Kings Canyon year-round, call 559-335-5500. Wuksachi Village Lodge is open year-round in Sequoia; call 888-252-5757. Grant Grove and Wuksachi offer food service year-round; Cedar Grove and Lodgepole in summer. Nearby towns offer food and lodging.

**Camping** Campgrounds range from warm foothills to cool forests; some are open all year. Only Lodgepole and Dorst Creek accept reservations for summer; call 800-365-2267 or write National Park Reservation Service, P.O. Box 1600, Cumberland, MD 21502. Lodgepole, Grant Grove, and Atwell Mill campgrounds are near sequoias. To reserve group sites (summer use only), write to the parks.

**Protect the Past** Archeological sites and artifacts and all park resources are protected by law. If you

find artifacts or see evidence of collecting, please notify the park.

**Trails** Day-hikes are available in all areas. Always use trail maps. **Motorbikes, mountain bikes, and pets are not permitted on any park trail.**

**Bears** Black bears are attracted by human food and can cause severe property damage trying to get it. If they succeed they may get aggressive and must be killed, so proper food storage is required at all times. Keep all food and odorous items in the metal boxes provided. Lodge guests must bring all items indoors. Keep a clean camp; put all garbage in bear-proof containers. If a bear approaches, scare it away; make loud noises and throw pebbles, but keep a safe distance and use good judgment. There are no grizzly bears in these parks.



**Please don't feed any wildlife.** Let them live in natural conditions—for their good and your safety. Rodents here can have fleas carrying plague. Don't try to touch animals. **Pets must be leashed at all times.**

**Free wilderness permits are required for all overnight backcountry trips.** Reservations are accepted for a fee. Requests must be faxed or mailed in no earlier than March 1 and no later than three weeks before the start of your trip. Some first-come, first-served permits are available after 1 p.m. the day before departure. Ask for specific regulations on use of horses, burros, and llamas. For wilderness information call 559-565-3708.

**Mountain Hazards** Natural areas pose hazards: falling trees, rolling rocks, cliffs, fast rivers, and wild animals. You are responsible for your own safety. Seek first aid at visitor centers. In an emergency call 911 from any park phone; no coins needed.

**Park roads are steep, narrow, and winding.** Downshift even in automatics to prevent a burned-out transmission going uphill and burned-out brakes downhill. Pull into a safe turnout to look at scenery.

Slow-moving vehicles must pull over to let others pass. Seatbelts are required by law. Motorcyclists: watch for oil buildup on roads.

**Rattlesnakes are common in the parks.** Always be sure you can see where you step or reach.

Rivers and waterfalls are treacherous, especially in spring and early summer's high water. Be alert for undercut banks and slippery rocks. Fast currents and cold water are a deadly combination. **Don't swim above waterfalls or in swift water.** Keep children in sight.

**Giardia lamblia** is a protozoan in natural water in the parks. Boil surface water three minutes before drinking.

If you camp or hike in the foothills, check clothes often for ticks. They can carry Lyme disease. Get information on removal and bites at visitor centers.

**Cougars live in these parks.** Avoid hiking or running alone. Watch children closely. If you encounter a cougar, don't run or crouch down. Stand your

ground or back off slowly. Pick up small children. Wave, shout, and throw stones. If attacked, fight back.

**Lightning Danger** When a thunderstorm threatens, get in a vehicle or large building. Don't stand under a lone tree. Avoid open areas and water and high places such as Moro Rock. If your hair stands on end, drop to your knees and bend forward with your hands on your knees. Don't lie flat.

**Winter** Entry roads are kept open to Grant Grove and Giant Forest/Lodgepole but may be closed temporarily for plowing. The Generals Highway between Lodgepole and Grant Grove is usually kept open—except during and after heavy storms. Tire chains may be required any time. Ask about dangers of hypothermia, carbon monoxide poisoning, snowplay, and winter driving. Several visitor centers stay open daily. Naturalist programs may be given on weekends and holidays. At Grant Grove and in the Giant Forest/Wuksachi area there are food service, cross-country ski and snowshoe rentals, winter camping, and snowplay areas. Grant Grove, Wuksachi, and nearby communities offer lodging.

## Profile of the Sierra

Phenomenal changes in topographic relief that characterize these parks are illustrated in this geological cross section through the Sierra Nevada from the North Fork of the Kaweah River, straight east through the Giant Forest to Mount Whitney, the parks' highest point.

**Foothills Chaparral** Dry, hot summers in the Sierra's western foothills give rise to chaparral, a drought-resistant shrub community adapted to withstand periodic fire.

Winter rains bring wildflower bursts in spring before grasslands and chaparral go brown for summer and fall.

**The Giant Sequoia Belt** The world's 75 giant sequoia groves grow on moist, unglaciated ridges on the Sierra's west slope, between 5,000 and 7,000 feet of elevation. Only eight groves lie north of Kings River—scattered over nearly 200 miles. The rest occur south of the river at intervals of 4.5 miles or

less in a 60-mile-long belt. This Big Tree's range had shrunk to this area by about 2.5 million years ago when climates became drier. Some 60 million years ago its ancestral species ranged more widely. Visually dominant in their groves, sequoias are part of the mixed-conifer forest that includes white fir, sugar pine, yellow pine, and

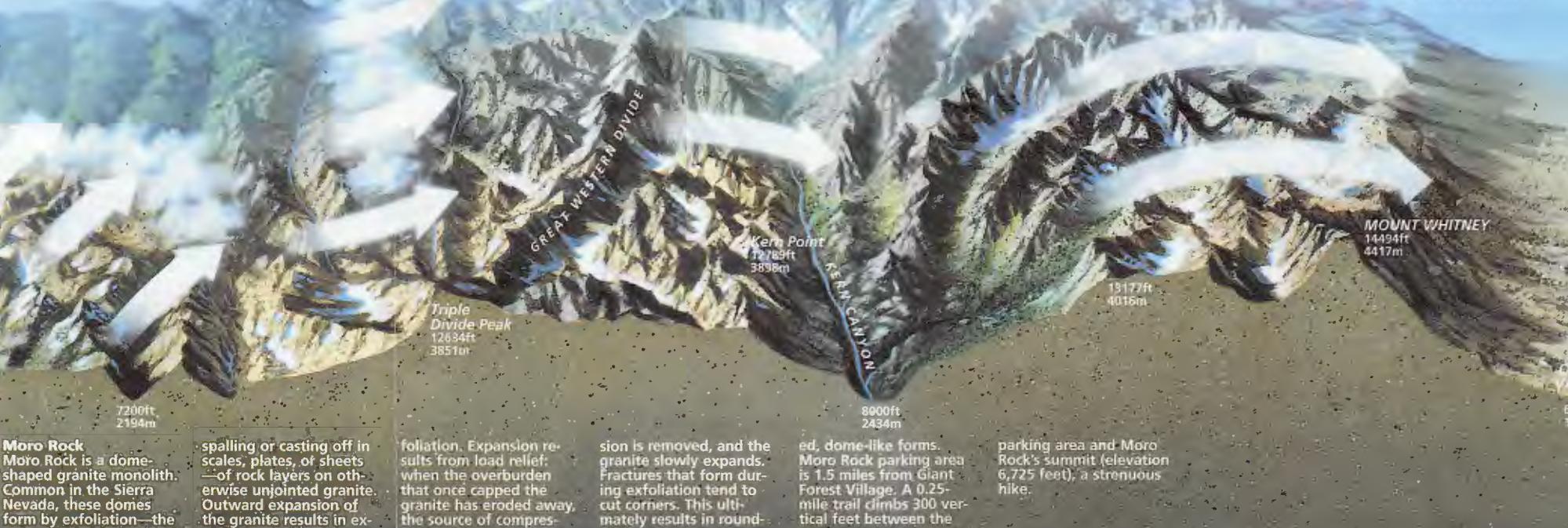
incense-cedar. The largest remaining sequoia groves are at Redwood Mountain in Kings Canyon National Park and at Giant Forest in Sequoia National Park. Redwood Mountain grove covers 3,100 acres and has 15,800

sequoia trees more than one foot in diameter at their bases. Giant Forest is 1,800 acres and has 8,400 such trees. About 36,500 acres of sequoia groves remain in the Sierra, mostly under federal or state protection.

**Elevation and Precipitation** The Sierra Nevada forces moist, eastbound air upwards. As it rises the air is cooled and forced to release its moisture as precipitation. Drought-resistant chaparral covers lower west slope elevations. Gargantuan sequoia/mixed-conifer forests cover middle elevations. Air masses crest the mountains mostly depleted of moisture. East of the Sierra Nevada, in its rainshadow,

lies the semi-arid Great Basin. On the Sierra's west slope precipitation generally increases until it reaches a maximum between 5,000 and 8,000 feet of elevation. This zone of maximum precipitation includes

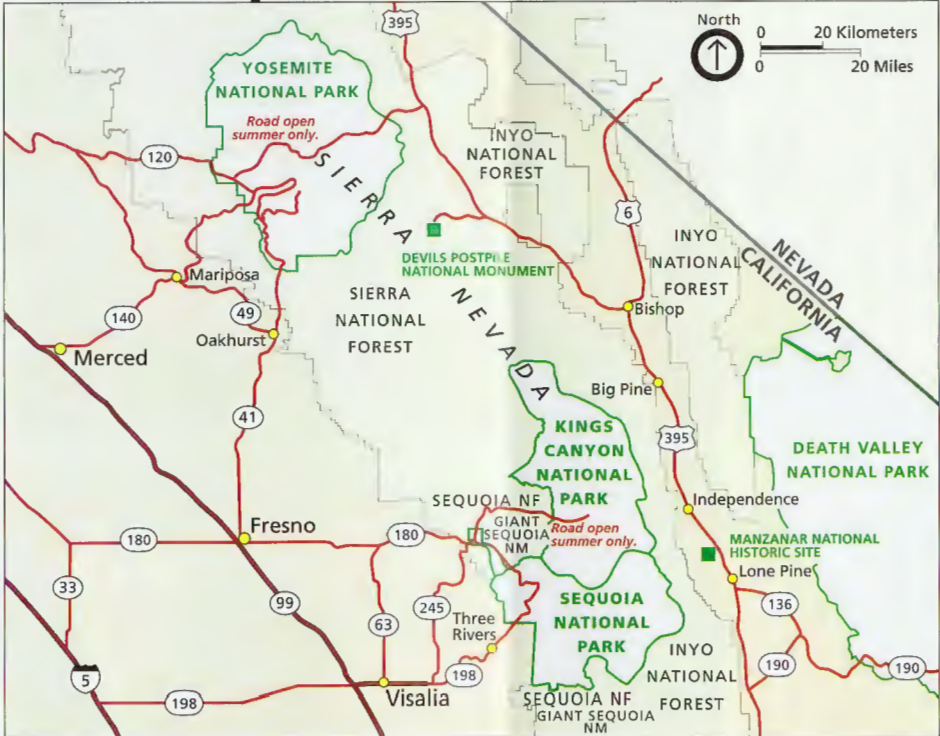
Moving from west to east in this cross section, the distance from the North Fork Kaweah River to Mount Whitney is approximately 34 miles. The park's giant sequoia groves are labeled on the illustration.





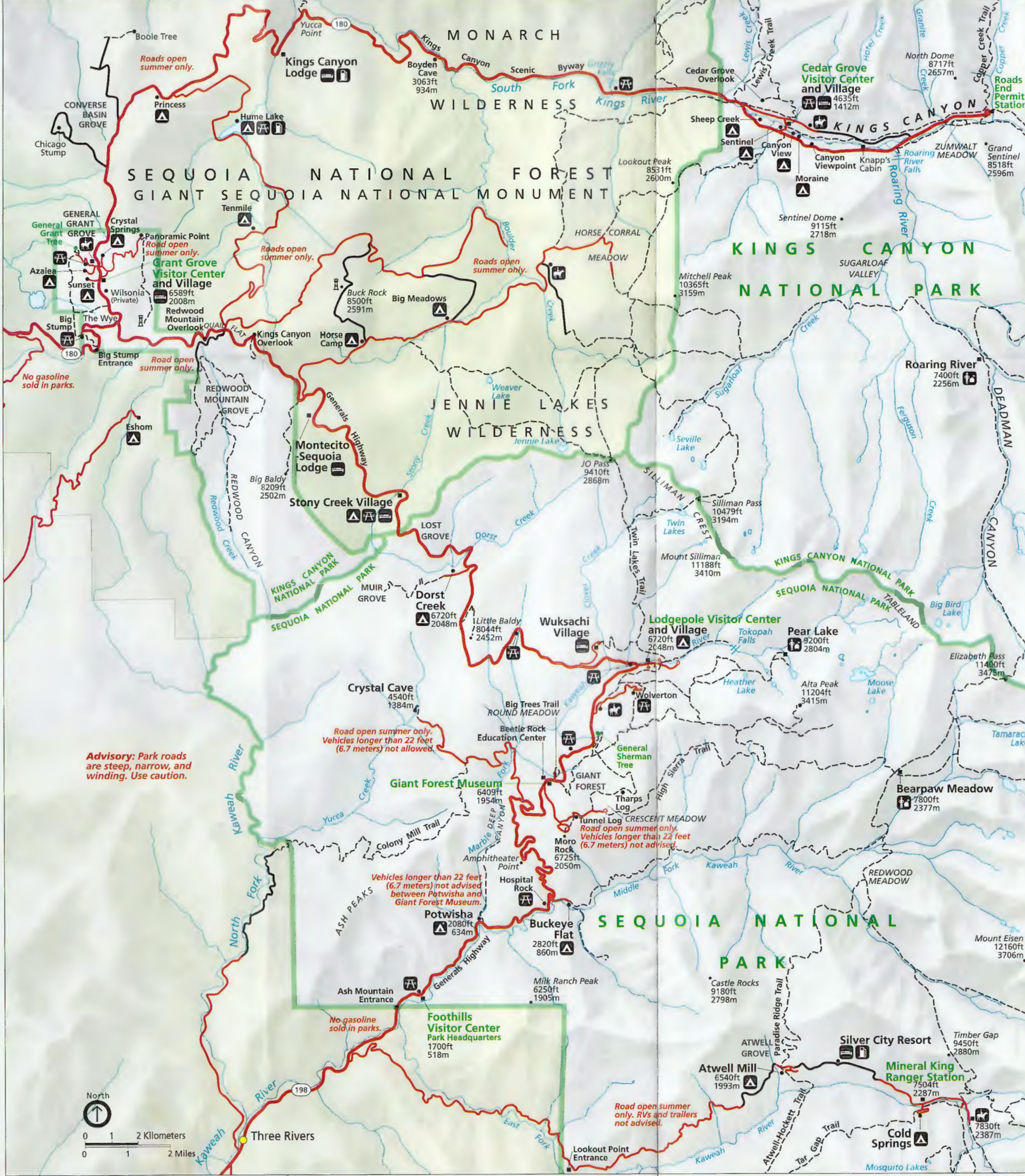
Sequoia and Kings Canyon

Area Map



- Legend:**
- Unpaved road
  - Hiking trail
  - John Muir and Pacific Crest trails
  - Backcountry ranger station (open summer only)
  - Campground
  - Picnic area
  - Lodging
  - Horseback riding
  - Gas station (in National Forest only)
  - Fire lookout
- Natural areas present hazards. You are responsible for your safety. Do not use these maps for hiking. Purchase trail maps at park visitor centers.**
- No road crosses the Sierra Nevada in Sequoia or Kings Canyon National Parks.
  - No road access from U.S. Highway 395 on the parks' east side.
  - Park roads are steep, narrow, and winding. See red labels on map below regarding vehicle length advisories.
  - Park roads subject to closure in winter.
  - Shift to first or second gear in automatic and manual vehicles on steep downhill roads.
- To Protect Forever**  
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks share a mission to protect forever the Sierran ecosystem, home of foothills chaparral, giant trees, and magnificent mountain landscapes.
- These parks' purpose is also to help people, now and in the future, to experience and understand the meaning and significance of these resources and to champion the values of national parks and designated wilderness.
- Sequoia and Kings Canyon are two of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.
- Visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.

Driving Map



Map of the Parks

