

NATURAL FIRES IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

There will be occasions during the warm, dry weather of summer when forest fires will start in Yellowstone National Park from natural causes. Thunderstorms in the Rockies often produce lightning without rainfall. These "dry" strikes can easily start a fire.

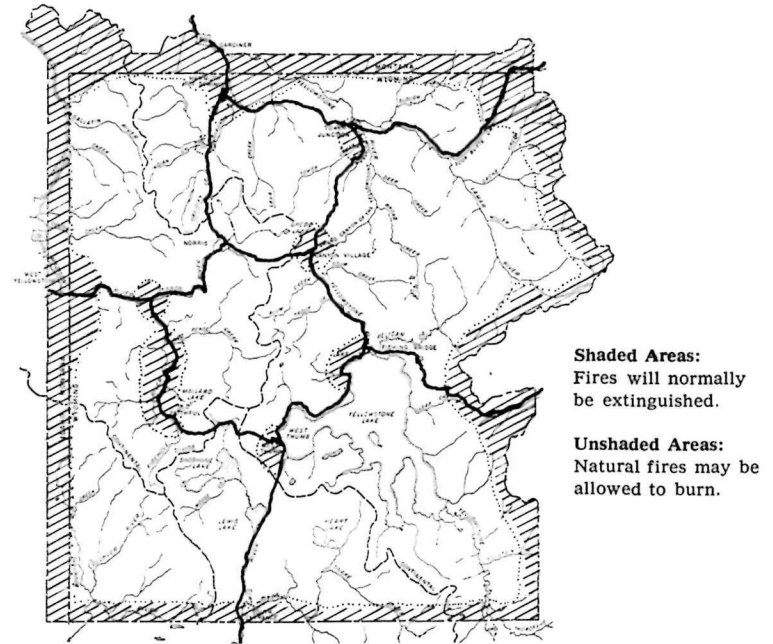
Park Rangers react quickly to fires, moving in with aircraft and other modern equipment to control blazes. For almost a century attempts have been made to protect the 2¼ million acres of Yellowstone from wildfire. Beginning in 1972, however, rangers have been reacting differently to fires in Yellowstone. Some natural fires are being allowed to burn. Why?

The primary purpose of Yellowstone National Park is to maintain the park in as natural a condition as possible — that is, man's influence over the communities of plants and animals is held to the minimum. We are the visitors, the observers who learn from the age-old ecological processes without trying to manipulate them.

Research has shown that natural fires have been part of Yellowstone's environment for thousands of years prior to the arrival of modern man. Large fires burned at average intervals of 20 to 25 years in the low grasslands, at intervals of perhaps a century or more in the vast lodgepole pine forests, and less frequently in the grasslands at high elevations.

Fire was such an important part of the Yellowstone environment that various communities of plants and animals **required** periodic burning to persist. Some plants, like lodgepole pines, reproduce far more abundantly after a fire because the heat opens seed-bearing cones. Sunlight then reaches the forest floor and a new generation grows vigorously. Certain birds (such as the bluebird), mammals, and insects thrive in recently burned areas. The entire life system in Yellowstone is keyed to the periodic stress of natural fires.

The map of Yellowstone National Park illustrates the 1,700,000 acres where natural fires may be allowed to burn. Control measures will be taken if a fire approaches the park boundary or an area of visitor use. Man-caused fires will continue to be suppressed throughout the park.



Other National Parks and National Forests in the Rocky Mountains are following similar policies where similar conditions exist. A publication, **The Natural Role of Fire**, explains the ecological reasons for such a policy in clear terms and photographs. It is available at the visitor centers in Yellowstone National Park.



Courtesy of
Yellowstone Library and Museum Association

VISITOR SAFETY AND NATURAL FIRES:

With a program of this kind there is always a chance that the backcountry visitor will come in contact with a natural fire. You, the visitor, should be aware of the following:

1. Every natural fire will initially be observed from the air by the National Park Service.
2. As soon as each fire is located a check of backcountry permits issued for the proximity of the fire will be made. All efforts will be made to contact park visitors using, or planning to use the area.
3. If you encounter a fire please do not attempt to extinguish it unless it is obviously man-caused.
4. For your safety the following tips may be of value:
 - a. Fires generally travel uphill faster than they do downhill.
 - b. Fires normally travel in the same direction that the wind is blowing. Look at the smoke, see which way it is blowing and find a safe location away from the path of the fire.
 - c. Large open meadows located upwind, and on the downhill side of a fire usually afford safety. Large open areas will also allow you to be seen from the air and therefore easier for the park helicopter to locate and contact you personally.
 - d. Keep your party together.
 - e. Be alert for wind changes and falling trees or limbs.
 - f. By all means don't panic; stay together and take the time to determine the likeliest path of the fire and act accordingly. Most fires in the Park move very slowly unless unusually high winds (over 20 mph) are present.
5. We want you to understand and appreciate this role of fire operating in a truly natural ecosystem; but please do it safely. By all means, continue to be careful with your own use of fire!