

A Few Denali FAQs

1. Where are the caribou? Where do they migrate to?

The caribou you see in the park are all part of the Denali Caribou Herd. At this time of the year they are scattered throughout the low-lying areas north of the Alaska Range, like the ones the buses pass through. In the fall, they move north of the Outer Range and northwest of Wonder Lake. In the spring, they move to calving grounds that include some areas south of the park road near the glaciers. While they do follow a seasonal movement pattern, our Resource Management staff considers this a non-migratory herd of caribou.

2. Why aren't the caribou moving in large herds?

Most people have seen pictures of large herds of caribou. There are two reasons that similar sized groups are not seen in Denali:

- a) The Denali herd is smaller. Only 2000 animals live in this area instead of the hundreds of thousands which are found in larger herds like the Western Arctic and the Porcupine.
- b) The Denali herd is considered "non-migratory." The animals do move around the park on a yearly cycle, but they don't migrate hundreds of miles like some herds, such as the Porcupine Herd on Alaska's North Slope.

3. How come there are cars on the road?

There are five basic exceptions to the no-cars rule:

- a) People staying at Teklanika Campground are allowed to drive in at the beginning of their stay and out at the end of it but cannot use their cars while at the campground and may not drive farther than the campground.
- b) Professional photographers are given special permits to practice their trade. Applicants must have published photographs in publications with a large distribution. Only five permits are granted per day.
- c) Individuals owning property in Kantishna are able to use the road to access their land since the road provides the only access for vehicles. The Kantishna exception also includes family, friends, and invited guests of these landowners, as well as employees of businesses in the town.
- d) Researchers who need vehicles are sometimes allowed to drive cars on the road.
- e) People with severe physical disabilities who cannot take the regular or wheelchair accessible buses.

In addition, Park Service employees drive the road to perform maintenance and law enforcement duties. Rangers living inside the road-restricted area of the park are given a limited number of permits to drive out.

4. Why do photographers get special treatment?

Back to the Park Service mission: preservation and access. Professional photographers allow thousands of people to experience the park through pictures, even if they are never able to visit. They also provide the park with free publicity. Professional photographers also donate slides to the park slide file.

5. How much snow do you get?

Headquarters gets an average of 80 inches a year, but it can vary from as little as 13 inches to as much as 174 inches.

6. What do you see if you go all the way to Wonder Lake?

Wonder Lake. Spectacular views of the Alaska Range if it's visible, lots of tundra ponds with water birds, beaver, and moose. Not so many bears - you begin moving out of the mountains and out of prime grizzly habitat.

7. Is there fishing in the Park?

Sure, and you don't even need a license. Problem is that there are very few fish. Glacial silt in the rivers discourages fish from inhabiting the river water along the park road. You may find an occasional clear stream with grayling such as Caribou Creek or Hogan Creek. There are also lake trout in Wonder Lake.

8. Is hunting allowed in the park?

No sport hunting is allowed inside either the wilderness area or the new park boundary. Sport hunting is allowed in the Preserve, but that area is not accessible by bus. Subsistence hunting for individuals possessing subsistence permits is allowed inside the new park but not inside the wilderness area.

9. Is the road open in winter?

Dog mushers, skiers and hikers continue to use parts of the road and other areas of the park all winter long. As for motorized vehicles, it is open as far as Teklanika until the park gets its first snow, but then it is closed at Headquarters.

10. How long does the road stay open to motorized vehicles?

It is open for buses from Memorial Day weekend through about the second week in September (variable). Usually there is a short period during which private vehicles are allowed to drive the road in the third week of September. This privilege is granted by lottery. Inquire at the DVC for details or refer to the *Alpenglow*.

11. What's the difference between a white and black spruce?

Black and white spruce are two different species of tree which can look so much alike it is difficult to tell the difference outside of a laboratory. The following are indicators which may help differentiate the two:

- a) Habitat. White spruce thrive in well-drained areas, while black spruce can only compete in bogs or on moist ground.
- b) Size of cones. Black spruce cones are smaller.
- c) Shape. White spruce have a Christmas tree shape while black spruce look more like pipe cleaners.

12. What is tundra?

Tundra is simply the land above treeline. Treeline varies with latitude, existing at about 18,000' at the equator, about 10,000' in Colorado, about 2700' in Denali and drops to sea level in the vicinity of the Arctic Circle. Tundra comes in two basic forms: dry tundra, which is usually found on well-drained mountain slopes and ridges, and moist tundra which is damp to downright boggy. The word tundra comes from a Lapp word meaning "marshy plain."

13. Do the river beds ever fill up during spring melt-off?

No. Denali's river beds never fill up. The canyons in which they flow were carved by glaciers, which were much larger than the rivers that occupy the valleys today. There is never enough water to fill the entire bed. Denali's rivers are known as braided rivers because they are always in several channels. Most of the rivers in the park begin at the glaciers remaining at the head of the valleys. As a result they carry a large amount of silt. As the rivers flow the silt is deposited. Over time the silt builds up to the point that it changes the course of the river. Thus, the river is always changing but always in channels on the river bed.

14. What do sheep eat?

Sheep eat a variety of different plant species. Many of the tundra plants (such as *Dryas* sp.) are evergreen so that they don't have to waste the short growing season sprouting new leaves each year. These evergreen plants provide the sheep a year round source of nutrients and energy.

15. Do the sheep stay up high in the mountains in the winter?

Yes. Since the sheep's chief defense from predators is its maneuverability on steep slopes, it is important for them to stay high during the winter while wolves are hunting large prey in packs. They usually move off the northern slopes of the Alaska Range and into the Outer Range where it snows less and it is easier to paw through to find food.

16. How many wolves are in the park?

Check the most current stats. Approximately 97 north of the Alaska Range as of spring 2008.

17. Where can we see a particular type of bird?

There is a bird checklist that identifies each bird's habitat in the bookstore on the DVC campus. Find out the habitat and then ask someone where you can find such a place. There is also a Bird Finding Guide to Denali National Park, which provides some more specific tidbits on a few birds.

18. How many bears are in the park?

No biological surveys have been conducted but the grizzly population has been estimated at 200-300. We know even less about black bears.

19. Are there any black bears in the park?

Yes, but you are unlikely to see them on a trip along the park road. The park road travels through grizzly habitat and black bears cannot compete. An occasional black bear has been spotted in forested patches along the road and you do reach the edge of their range at Wonder Lake and Kantishna.

20. How far is Eielson Visitor Center?

66 miles from the park entrance.

21. Do you control game populations in the park?

No. Denali National Park is an intact ecosystem. Natural balances are allowed to reign unaltered by people. In the park, we prefer to call animals "wildlife" rather than game.

22. Can I feed the ground squirrels?

No. It disrupts their natural ability to find food and produces an overpopulation of fat ground squirrels. This disrupts the workings of Denali's complete ecosystem which we work so hard to preserve. Besides, it is against park rules and you could get a ticket for it.

23. Why is that area closed?

Closures exist to protect both people and wildlife. Areas with a high risk of bear danger - around a kill, for instance - are closed. Denning or nesting sites are also protected along with any other resource where managers feel it is important for animals & vegetation to be undisturbed.

24. Why can't I see Mt. McKinley?

Options:

- a) The mountain creates its own weather causing clouds to obscure the view. The mountain is only visible one day in three or four during the summer.
- b) It's not visible from here.

25. How many rangers work here? In winter?

There are approximately 170 summer seasonal employees in Denali. In winter, there are around 100 permanent employees plus a handful of temporary staff.

26. What causes the color in these rocks (at Polychrome) ?

These are the volcanic rocks of the Cantwell formation (which includes basalt, andesite, and rhyolite) and provide the subtle colors of Polychrome.

27. How high are we here (at Polychrome)?

The rest area is at about 3700' above sea level and 800' above the valley floor.

28. What is that cabin (at East Fork)?

The large cabin you see was built in the 1930's by the Alaska Road Commission to support the park road-building effort. In the 1950's, Adolph Murie and his family lived there while he was researching Dall sheep predation by wolves in the park. Today, the cabin is used in winter as a stopover for dog team patrols. During the summer it is used to house Denali's Artists in Residence. The smaller cabin was built in the 1970's by researcher Frederick Dean and is still used by wildlife researchers in the park today.

29. Are these timber wolves in the park?

The wolves in Denali are commonly called gray wolves. The scientific name is Canis lupus. This is the same animal seen in the upper peninsula of Michigan or Minnesota. However, in those areas the commonly used name is timber wolf. The only other species of wolf in the U.S. is the red wolf found in the southeast states.

30. What is the difference between caribou and reindeer?

Caribou and reindeer are the same species, Rangifer tarandus. Reindeer are the European subspecies, tending to be smaller and domesticated. Reindeer were introduced to the Seward peninsula of Alaska a few decades ago and are now flourishing there.

31. Do you have any deer or elk in the park?

Denali has only two members of the deer family, moose and caribou.

32. Are there any bald eagles in the park?

Only an occasional one passing overhead. Bald eagles are fish eaters and the park has virtually no fish. If you keep your eyes on the sky you are likely to see a golden eagle soaring overhead.

33. Does the park have a problem with poaching?

The park does have some poaching problems. Most poaching occurs just inside the park boundaries and can involve either aerial or ground-based hunters. There are two to three known occurrences each year.

34. Does the Park Service limit the number of planes and helicopters flying over the park?

No. In Alaska, the National Park Service has no authority to regulate its own airspace. At Denali, we have an informal agreement with local helicopters and small plane tour operators to stay within certain travel corridors and at least 500 feet above the ground.

35. Ranger, when are we going to see a grizzly bear?

It could happen anytime. Informal surveys have shown that over 90% of all people who ride the park's buses see grizzly bears so keep your eyes peeled.

36. Didn't these shuttle buses used to be free?

Yes, until 1994 any park visitor could ride park shuttle buses for seven days just by paying the park entrance fee. However, the cost of the shuttle bus system to the federal government was becoming prohibitive. The decision was made to contract out transportation to a concession-run operation.