

Denali

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

Science of Sled Dogs – Student Reading

Denali National Park and Preserve

Mt. McKinley National Park was established in 1917. In 1980, it was renamed Denali National Park and Preserve. The park now covers six million acres (that's almost twice the size of the state of Connecticut!). It is also home to Denali, the mountain. At 20,310 feet high, Denali is North America's tallest mountain. Denali has large areas of tundra and taiga forests. Many types of birds and mammals live in the park, including moose, ptarmigan, caribou, grizzly bears, black bears, Dall sheep, Arctic ground squirrels...and sled dogs!



Arctic
Ground Squirrel



Moose



Ptarmigan



Dall Sheep



Sled Dog

Stewards of a Special Place

Denali National Park Rangers are stewards of a very special place that belongs to all Americans. They protect and preserve over six million acres of wild lands in Alaska. A few select park rangers are extra lucky because they get to work with the Denali sled dogs every day.

Sled dogs and rangers work as a team to preserve and protect this special place. Rangers work closely with the dogs on a daily basis and depend on them in the winter for traveling safely throughout the park. Because of this close relationship, rangers have come to understand what characteristics are most important for helping sled dogs be happy and hard working in the cold, snowy environment of Denali. These characteristics are called adaptations.



Adaptations of Sled Dogs

Sled dogs are not wild animals, but they are not house pets either. Adaptations are physical characteristics or behaviors that help an organism, or living thing, survive in its environment. During the distance learning session with the ranger, you will learn about lots of sled dog adaptations. Think about how these adaptations make Denali's sled dogs similar or different from dogs you may have met.

The Kennels

The sled dog kennels are located near the work offices of Denali's park rangers. There are 34 dogs currently at the kennels, but the numbers fluctuate as puppies are born and dogs retire. Every day park rangers must be at the kennels to feed and water the dogs as well as give them attention from humans. The primary purpose of these dogs, since 1922, has been to provide transportation in a park where mechanized vehicles are mostly prohibited.



The Job of a Sled Dog

Denali's kennel began in the 1920s in the first few years of the park's history. Then, dog teams patrolled the boundaries helping the rangers prevent poachers from illegally killing wildlife. Today, during the winter, the sled dogs continue to work hard providing a variety of services. Their work has focused on transporting construction materials to restore and repair historic ranger patrol cabins throughout the park, removing litter from the Toklat River area after several floods had scattered an old bridge and construction debris, and assisting park scientists with delivering scientific monitoring equipment to remote sites.

During the summer, the sled dogs greet hundreds of visitors every day. Visitors can pet and play with the dogs before being treated to a dog sledding demonstration.



Photo Credits: p. 1, Mt. McKinley (Tim Rains); Moose, Ptarmigan, Dall sheep, Arctic ground squirrel (Brian Mayhew); sled dogs (NPS photo); p. 2, kennels, sled dogs (NPS photos)