

Denali Wildlife

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

Denali National Park and Preserve



Denali's spectacular wildlife attracts people from all around the world. In fact, Denali was the first national park created to protect wildlife. *Do you know what animal was the driving force behind making Denali a national park?* Ewe (pronounced "you"; ewe are female sheep) guessed it — the Dall sheep! Park advocate Charles Sheldon started working to protect this area in 1906 because he saw the local population of Dall sheep dwindling from over-hunting. Sheldon's observations inspired him to petition for Denali to become a national park.

Wildlife in Denali are free to behave naturally without interference from humans. Predator – prey relationships here include lynx chasing down snowshoe hares through the snowy woods, packs of wolves stalking caribou herds and watching for the best time to strike, and bears pausing from berry-eating to snatch up a ground squirrel. *Do you know a predator – prey relationship that happens near your house? How is wildlife adapted to survive in the environment where you live?*



Dall sheep

Domestic sheep that live on farms are very different from Denali's wild and agile Dall sheep. Dall sheep can weigh as much as football players, but they scale cliffs like rock climbers! They live high in the mountains, eating tiny alpine plants and using their climbing adaptation to stay away from predators. You can tell their age by counting the segments in their horns like tree rings!

Denali Protects Creatures Large...



Moose

Moose are the biggest animals in Denali. They weigh around 800 pounds, about the same weight as a motorcycle! But don't hop on their backs. They are herbivores and may look gentle as they munch on willow, birch, and aspen to maintain their immense body weight. However, they can be aggressive if you get too close and you should keep your distance from these wild animals.



Grizzly Bear

As omnivores, grizzlies devour roots, berries, moose, and carrion alike. They have to work hard all summer to save up enough calories for winter. Hibernating half of the year can be exhausting! Scientists in Denali learn about grizzlies by analyzing what they leave behind... that's right, scat, or poop! During a recent study, visitors were asked to help collect bear scat for DNA analyses.



Caribou

Our most numerous large mammal, Denali's more than 2,000 caribou roam the park in groups. Caribou are well adapted for life in the sub-arctic, even when there is snow on the ground. They paw through the snow with their spade-shaped hooves to reach lichen (their favorite food) underneath. They can also run up to 50 miles an hour to get away from predators. They could keep up with a car on a highway—but only briefly!



Grey Wolf

Wolves can be a rare sight in the vast wilderness of Denali. These large predators need lots of space to roam and search for prey. Denali typically has 10 - 12 packs living north of the Alaska Range. Scientists in Denali count wolves using aerial surveys and radio collars. Usually one or two wolves in each pack have a radio collar, which sends out signals that allow scientists to locate and study the packs.

Keep Wildlife Wild

Keeping wildlife wild is a big part of the National Park Service's mission. Denali is not a zoo where animals are caged or trained to act a certain way. Instead, Denali's visitors are taught to stay a safe distance from wildlife and to make sure that wild animals never get human food. This is to keep everyone safe, and to prevent animals from becoming reliant on humans as a food source.



Have you seen people feeding squirrels or birds? In Denali, and in many other places, it's best to let wildlife fend for themselves. That way they practice survival without human help. One way we ensure that wildlife does not get human food in Denali is by using Bear Resistant Food Containers (BRFCs) like the black canister in the photo. Backpackers in Denali put all of their food in a BRFC and place it far away from their tent at night. Wild animals might come along and smell it, or even bite at it, but it's locked so they can't get inside.

The National Park Service continues the mission of protecting wildlife in Denali, but we need your help. It is up to all of us to make sure wild animals have lots of space to roam, and that all species are protected. We are not aware of any endangered animal species living in Denali, but as the climate warms and our Earth changes, we need to be extra watchful to understand how those changes affect animal populations. *Can you think of a way to measure how well a species is doing?*

... and small!



Snowshoe Hare

Snowshoe hares are the pizza of the boreal forest — everyone likes to eat them! Hares have many predators, including bears, wolves, foxes, and even owls, but their #1 predator is the lynx, Denali's only wild cat. Snowshoe hares have many adaptations to help them avoid predation. Their fur turns white in winter and brown in summer for camouflage. They also have big "snowshoe" feet to help them stay on top of the snow.

Wood Frog

Wood frogs are the only amphibian that lives in Denali! They are very unique in their method for surviving winter; instead of migrating like many birds or hibernating like bears and ground squirrels, wood frogs freeze! When winter comes they burrow into dry leaves under the snow, and over half of their body water freezes. Then, when it gets warm enough, they defrost and can start hopping in just a few hours!

Willow Ptarmigan

Three species of ptarmigan live in different habitats across Denali. They eat twigs, bugs, flowers, leaves, and other plant materials. Similar to snowshoe hares, ptarmigan turn white in winter for camouflage. They withstand cold temperatures by burying themselves in snow for insulation. Because of their common and friendly presence across the state, the willow ptarmigan is Alaska's beloved state bird.

Arctic Ground Squirrel

About the size of big burritos (and just as delicious for bears), ground squirrels live in shallow burrows in Denali's treeless tundra. They warn their colony-mates of danger using whistles and chirps. During hibernation, their body temperatures drop below freezing. Every few weeks the frozen squirrels shiver for 12 to 15 hours to warm up, likely to prevent brain damage.