

Denali for Families

**A Visitor's Guide to
Denali National Park and Preserve**

The current park lands of Denali National Park and Preserve include the traditional homelands of the Dene, also known as the Athabascan People. They are the Ahtna, Benhti Kenaga' (Tanana), Dinak'I (Upper Kuskokwim), and Denaakk'e (Koyukon), and in the southeast park, the Dena'ina. For thousands of years, these peoples have interacted with the land to make homes, hunt and gather foods, create art, and trade. Alaska Natives have been stewards of the land since long before it was managed by the National Park Service, and they continue to practice traditional values and utilize park resources today.

Credits

Author: Kris Capps

Editors: Jill Bruebaker, Ellen Grover, Sierra McLane, Sarah Hayes, and Laura Vachula.

Layout and Design: Ellen Grover, Elizabeth Menezes, Laura Vachula, and Debbie Whitecar

Inspiration and Oversight: Christie Denzel Anastasia, Kristen Friesen, Philip Hooge, Shelli Huls, Sierra McLane, Ingrid Nixon, and Lisa Oakley

Many thanks to the families who provided photographs, quotes, and inspiration for sharing Denali with others. May families everywhere get to experience special outdoor places.

Front Cover: Emily Mesner

This guide was produced by the National Park Service and Alaska Geographic working in partnership through the Murie Science and Learning Center.



Denali for Families

**A Visitor's Guide to
Denali National Park and Preserve**



NPS Photo

Produced in 2015
Updated in 2020

Contents



How To Use This Book	1
Park Road, Entrance Area, and Trails	3
Planning Your Trip	5
Local Amenities	7
Visitor Centers	10
Safety First	13
Leave No Trace	17
Experience Denali: Hiking	20
Hiking Checklist	20
Off-Trail Hiking	21
Experience Denali: Camping	24
Backcountry Camping	26
Experience Denali: Biking	28
Biking Checklist	28
Experience Denali: By Bus	30
Bus Checklist	30
Which Bus?	31
Bus Etiquette	32
Car Seat	33
Experience Denali: In Fall, Winter, Spring	35

Family Fun in the Entrance Area	38
Denali Visitor Center	38
Murie Science and Learning Center	41
Denali Sled Dog Kennels	43
Camping in the Entrance Area	45
Hiking in the Entrance Area	47
Biking in the Entrance Area	52
Family Fun in the Savage River Area	53
Camping in the Savage River Area	53
Hiking in the Savage River Area	55
Biking in the Savage River Area	57
Family Fun Beyond Mile 15	60
Camping Beyond Mile 15	60
Hiking Beyond Mile 15	61
Biking Beyond Mile 15	62
Family Fun at Eielson	64
Eielson Visitor Center	64
Hiking at Eielson	65
Family Fun at Wonder Lake	68
Camping at Wonder Lake	68
Hiking at Wonder Lake	69
Extending Your Visit	72
Visiting Talkeetna	74
Staying Connected	75



Welcome to Denali

From Our Family to Yours

Denali National Park and Preserve is a vast wilderness in Interior Alaska. Here, visitors are encouraged to forge their own paths and make their own discoveries. The memories of these extraordinary experiences can last a lifetime.

People dream of visiting Denali for many reasons. Like the wilderness here, the opportunities are vast. Whether you're hoping to see a large mammal, like a moose or grizzly bear, looking forward to the thrill and independence of hiking, or excited to experience an ecosystem that is different from your home, there's something for everyone. We know that it is not always easy to coordinate a group traveling together, so we wrote this book

for families and independent travelers who want to prepare for and make the most of a self-guided visit to Denali. With a dash of planning, you can enjoy a trip that is fun for the whole family.

Denali for Families is the result of park efforts to make Denali a welcoming and accessible place for families and lifelong learners. Inside this book, you will find details on how to plan your trip to Denali, what to bring, and what amenities are available once you get here. We explain how to stay safe around wildlife, how to keep warm and dry, and how to help your family to leave no trace during your time here. We unpack Denali's transportation systems and recommend good places for learning, hiking, biking, camping, and adventuring with family members of all ages.

Local Denali families made the recommendations that you will find in this book, and photographs of these families are featured on its pages. We love this park, and this book represents our welcome, from our family to yours, so that you can love it, too.





How To Use This Book

Whether you've already reached the park or you're dreaming about a trip, we've compiled some important tips to consider as you prepare to explore Denali with your family.

The first few pages of this book are filled with **Information** to help with trip planning and park orientation and answers many of the most frequently asked questions. Be sure to review the wildlife safety information before you begin your travels through bear country.

The **Experience Denali** section provides an overview of what to expect if you plan to camp, hike, bike, or ride the bus while you are here.

The third part of the book leads you to the **Family Fun** you can have in Denali. This is where you'll learn where to camp, great areas for hiking or biking, and what to see and do in each part of the park. The section is divided into five areas, moving further into the park as you go: the Entrance Area, Savage River, Beyond Mile 15, Eielson, and Wonder Lake.

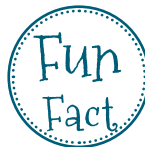
Explore the resources listed in the **Extending Your Visit** and **Staying Connected** sections at the back of the book where you'll find ideas to keep your Denali adventure alive after you arrive home.

We want you to travel smart and have fun. To enhance your experience, take this book along with you so you won't forget to talk about the **special call-out features**.



Science facts so you can learn all about the park.

Fun facts that your travel companions will love.



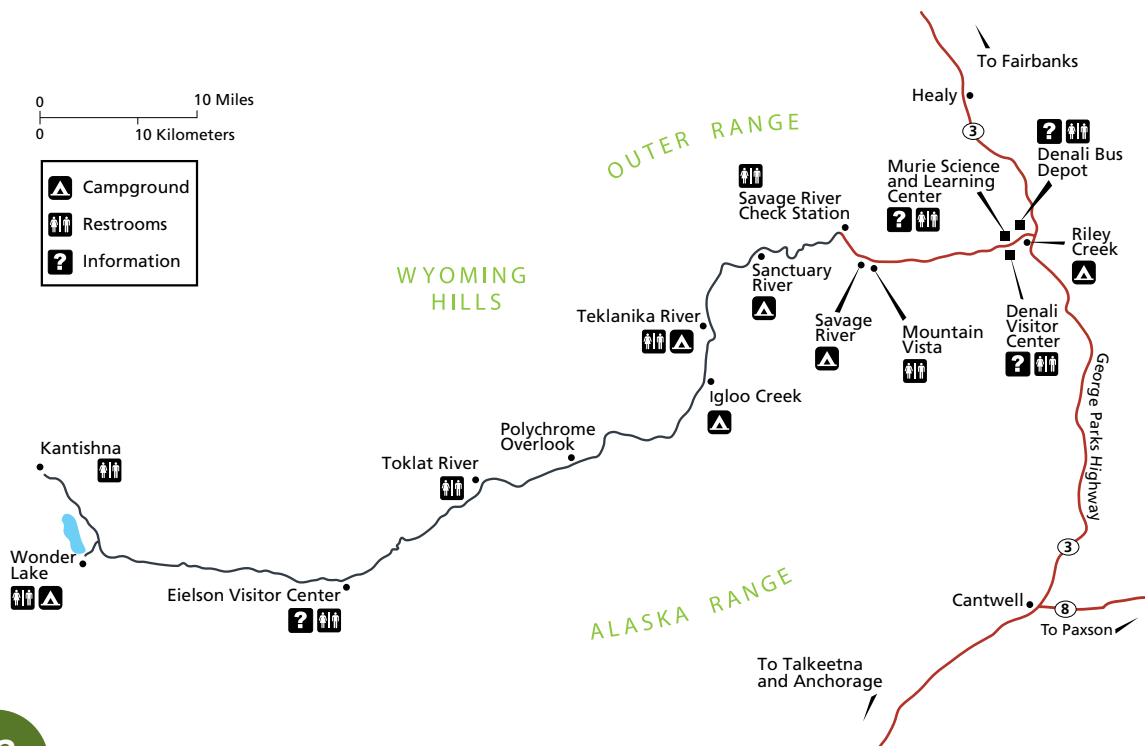
Specially written with kids in mind.

Hint
Important tips
for visitors.

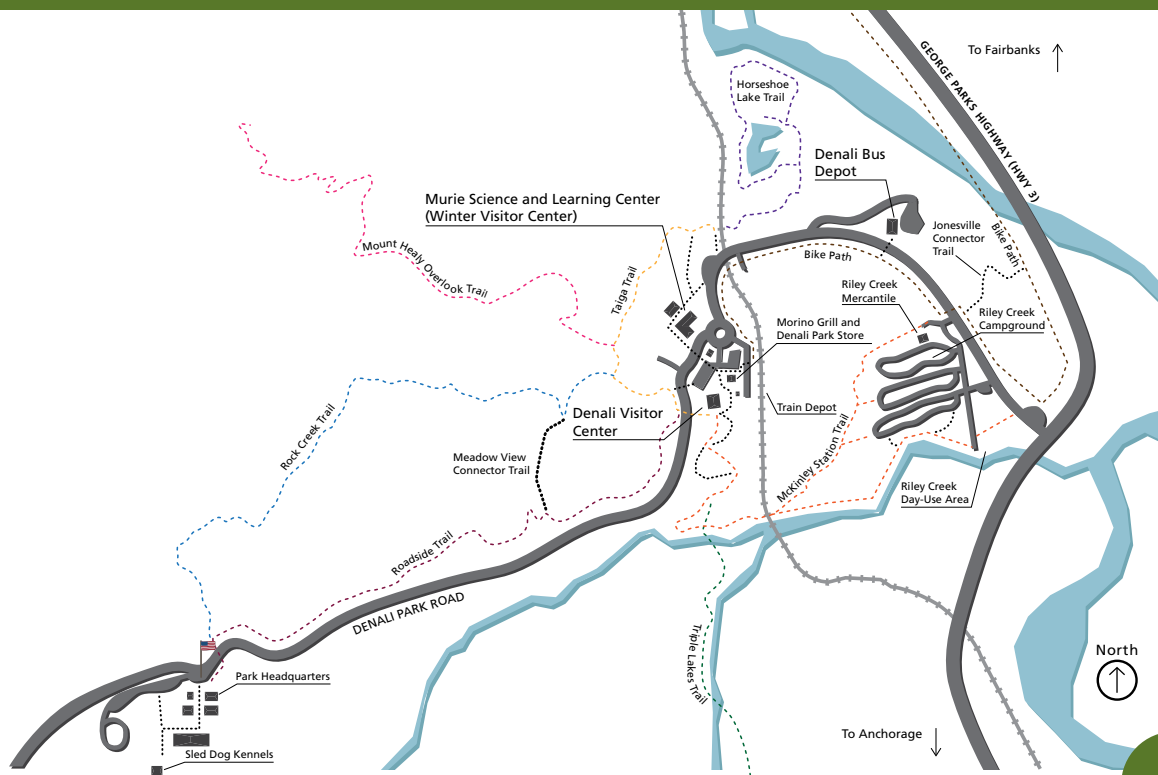




Denali Park Road



Entrance Area Facilities and Trails



Planning Your Trip

All trips involve careful planning. When traveling with a family, that careful planning can make the difference between a trip of a lifetime and a disaster.

Whether you've already reached the park entrance area or you're dreaming about a trip, we've compiled some important tips to consider as you prepare to explore Denali. It's good to check the park website as well for information on current conditions.

Your stay

One of the most important decisions to make before your trip is how long you will have at the park to explore. Some visitors come for only half a day, some for several days, and still others for a week or more. It's a long way to Denali even if you are already in Alaska, so make sure you allow enough time to relax and enjoy the experience. Here are some suggestions to help you plan.

If you have 1 day

Explore the entrance area! Visit the Denali Visitor Center and the sled dog kennels. Then take the free shuttle to Savage River for sightseeing and to hike. There are also a variety of trails to explore in the entrance area starting from the visitor center. Camp at Riley Creek Campground.

If you have 2-3 days

Enjoy activities in the entrance area, and then spend one full day on a transit bus past Mile 15, getting off to explore stops along the way (read more about riding park buses with young kids in the Experience Denali: By Bus section).

If you have more than 3 days

Explore the entrance area, then camp at Savage River or Teklanika and ride a transit bus to Eielson or Wonder Lake.



Getting here

- From Anchorage: 237 miles, 5 hours by car, 7.5 hours by train
- From Fairbanks: 120 miles, 2.5 hours by car, 4 hours by train
- From Talkeetna: 137 miles, 3 hours by car, 4.5 hours by train
- From Seward: 363 miles, 7 hours by car, 11.5 hours by train

Lodging

There are no hotels inside the park (other than a few in Kantishna), only campgrounds. Accommodations can be found in Healy, Cantwell, and along the George Parks Highway. For hotel information, contact the Denali Chamber of Commerce at 907-683-4636.

When to visit

Most people visit Denali during the summer season or the shoulder seasons. The summer season lasts from roughly mid-May through mid-September. The shoulder seasons run for a few weeks before and after the summer season. Summer is the time when most visitors come to Denali and when the widest variety of services and activities are possible.

Reservations

Once you've decided when you will visit the park, make reservations. For camping and bus reservations, visit www.reservedenali.com or call 1-800-622-7275.

How much does it cost?

Check the park website for current pricing, but here is a sampling of fees.

- Entrance: \$15 per person (good for 7 days), ages 15 and under are free.
- Transit Buses: \$34-65 (depending on destination), ages 15 and under are free.
- Camping: \$17-34 per night, depending on site and tent/RV.



Family Photo

Local Amenities

Bathrooms

Restroom facilities are located at visitor centers, campground facilities, and bus stops throughout the entrance area. Buses along the Park Road stop about every 90 minutes for a bathroom break.

Medical

The closest physicians and hospitals are in Fairbanks, 120 miles away. For emergency care one mile north of the park in summer, contact Canyon Clinic at 907-683-4433.

Emergency: Dial 911

Report emergencies to park rangers, campground hosts, or bus drivers.

Food

There is only one restaurant in the park, the Morino Grill, located next to the Denali Visitor Center. Basic groceries and some pre-packaged food can be found at the Riley Creek Mercantile, adjacent to the Riley Creek Campground. The Denali Bus Depot sells snacks and coffee. There are also some restaurants and convenience stores located just outside the park. Note that most of these options are only available in summer. Groceries, camping gear, and other essentials are available year-round in Healy, 13 miles north of the park entrance.

Picnic Areas

- Riley Creek Day-Use Area (entrance area)
- Denali Visitor Center (outside of the downstairs door)
- Mountain Vista Rest Area (Mile 13)
- Savage River Turnout (Mile 15)

Phones and Internet

There is cell phone coverage in the park entrance area, but only as far as Mile 4 along the Park Road. There are no pay phones in the park. Free wireless internet is available to visitors at the Denali Visitor Center, Denali Bus Depot, Riley Creek Mercantile, and Winter Visitor Center (Murie Science and Learning Center).



Fuel

In summer, there is a gas station one mile north of the park. Year-round gas stations are also located 13 miles north in Healy and 30 miles south in Cantwell.

Laundry and Showers

In summer, these essentials can be found at the Riley Creek Mercantile, adjacent to the Riley Creek Campground.

Lost & Found

Contact a ranger or call 907-683-9275.

Child Care

Denali Preschool and Learning Center has drop-off service on a space-available basis. Call 907-683-7789 for more information.

Pets

Pets are not allowed on most park trails, on the bus, or in the backcountry. They may be walked on the road, Bike Path, and the Roadside Trail, but must be on a leash at all times. Pets must never be left unattended.

Post Office

For the Denali National Park postmark, take your cards to the post office near the Riley Creek Campground.



The park is home to Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America, at 20,310 feet (6,190 m). The mountain is called Denali, or "The High One", in Native Athabascan.

"A trip out to Eielson Visitor Center is a supreme family adventure. Opportunities for learning, discovery, and enrichment abound. But there is also ample opportunity for just having fun!"



Family Photo

Visitor Centers

Here are some of the main facilities in Denali where you can find information, amenities, and friendly staff who can help you to make the most out of your visit.

Denali Visitor Center

Located in the park entrance area, this is a must stop for all visitors. There is a lot to see and do here, and the center provides a great introduction to the park. You'll find general information, bus schedules, exhibits, interpretive programs, a park film, a bookstore, and ranger-guided walks. See page 38 for more information.

Murie Science and Learning Center

Located in the park entrance area, this science center doubles as the park's Winter Visitor Center and has exhibits, hands-on activities for kids, and information on research taking place in the park. See page 41 for details.

Riley Creek Mercantile

Located in the park entrance area, the Mercantile has snacks (including ice cream!), bathrooms, showers, and information. It's where you'll check in if you are camping at any of the park campgrounds.

Denali Bus Depot

Located in the park entrance area, all transit buses depart from here. You can also obtain general information, bus tickets, and campground information here.

Toklat Rest Stop

Get off the bus here at Mile 53 to stretch your legs and enjoy views of the Toklat River, use the restroom, shop at the bookstore, and obtain information at the Toklat tent.

Eielson Visitor Center

Located at Mile 66 on the Park Road, this is another must stop if you are traveling this far into the park. Get off the bus and stretch your legs on one of the hiking trails, check out the exhibits, and talk to a ranger. See page 64 for more information.

Denali Park Road

The Denali Park Road stretches 92 miles from the George Parks Highway to the former mining camp of Kantishna. In summer, the first 15 miles are accessible to private vehicles. Visitors must use the park bus system to travel beyond. Throughout this guide and during your visit here, you will frequently hear sections of the road referred to by the mile number, although in most instances there is no visual mile marker.

The Park Road is a narrow, gravel road where buses travel at a moderate pace, giving visitors plenty of time to enjoy the view. The first 15 miles are paved; this is a good place to look for moose and caribou. Take a look at the streambeds as you pass because animals like to walk along those gravel bars and can be easy to spot. After Savage River at Mile 15, you start to leave the trees behind and the country opens up to tundra and mountains.

If you have children, you will be the best judge for how long they may enjoy riding on a bus in the park. Many parents find it most rewarding to prioritize off-bus adventures, with short to moderate bus rides in between.

While on the bus, children can get impatient when wildlife sightings are sporadic or if that grizzly bear is too far away to see with the naked eye. If you have binoculars, be sure to bring them for far-away sightings. Your chances of seeing a bear improve if you go as far as Toklat at Mile 53. Another 13 miles takes you to the Eielson Visitor Center. There's plenty of room to stretch your legs here and time for children to run around outside.



Hint

A special event called Road Lottery starts the second Friday after Labor Day. Families who win a permit can drive their personal vehicles into the park beyond Mile 15 on one day and set their own pace. Apply for this privilege in the spring at www.recreation.gov. Winners are notified in June. Be warned, the road can close at any time due to bad weather.

Safety First

At its core, Denali is a wild place. You might see a moose walking through your campground or hike for hours through the remote wilderness without seeing another group. The wild parts of the park can be some of the most appealing, but it is important to remember that every activity is at your own risk. Keep in mind that even the entrance of Denali is several hours from the nearest hospital and other emergency services. You know your family best, so choose activities based on each member's abilities. Being prepared is the best way to have a fun and safe trip!



Hint

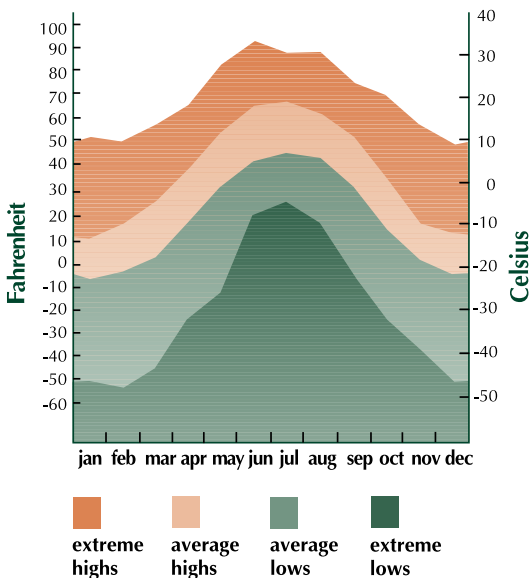
There is no cell service beyond Mile 4 of the Park Road (which is most of the park). Give your itinerary to those who aren't traveling with you and let them know that they may not be able to reach you while you explore Denali—even for a few days if you are camping further in!

Preparing for Weather

Like the rest of Alaska, weather in Denali is extremely variable. Rangers tell visitors to expect sun, wind, rain, clouds—and even snow—all on the same day! Average summer temperatures range from 33 to 75°F.

What to wear

Bring good rain gear (tops and bottoms), a winter hat (even in the summer, it can drop to below freezing at night!), mittens or gloves, a hat (for sun or rain), several layers of clothing (wool or fleece is better than cotton), spare socks, good hiking shoes or boots, and a little extra of everything! Denali National Park and Preserve is a remote park two to five hours from a large city, so bring everything with you.





Denali National Park
and Preserve was
created in 1917 to
protect the Dall sheep.

Preparing for Wildlife

During your visit to Denali, there's a good chance that you will encounter wildlife. Whether it's a grizzly bear, moose, or a small arctic ground squirrel, it's important to remember that these animals are truly wild, and you should use caution when they are around. You can safely observe animals in Denali and help protect their well-being by following a few guidelines.

Stay away

Seeing wildlife is fun for all ages, but make sure to keep your distance. You are required to stay 25 yards from all wildlife (even further from bears – see the next pages). If your presence changes the animals' behavior, you are too close. Binoculars can help you observe animals from a safe distance for both you and them.

Don't feed wildlife

Feeding wild animals teaches them bad habits and puts their health at risk. Protect the creatures in Denali by making sure all of your food ends up in a human mouth only. Learn more about good Leave No Trace practices on page 17.

Know what to do

Ask a ranger or look in the Summer Guide for a quick wildlife safety briefing on how to respond if an animal becomes aggressive. For example, if a moose feels threatened, it will charge! Run away as quickly as you can. The next page has detailed instructions for staying safe if you encounter a bear.



Bear Safety

Denali is home to both black bears and grizzly bears. Black bears are usually found in forested areas of the park, while grizzly bears generally live on the tundra. You are as likely to encounter a bear on a trail as anywhere else in the park, since bears like to use trails too!

Are you prepared if you encounter a bear? Be sure to keep your distance (the requirement is a minimum of 300 yards) and know that the best place to view a wild bear up close is from inside a bus.

To keep your family safe in bear country, follow these safety rules:

- Carry bear spray. Keep it accessible, and know how to use it.
- Never run away from a bear. This will cause a chase response, and bears can run faster than people.
- Never approach a bear.
- Never get between a sow and her cubs.
- Never drop your pack or anything else to distract a bear.
- Never leave food out unattended for a bear to find.
- Always be aware of your surroundings.
- Watch for bear tracks and scat.
- Make lots of noise when hiking on trails or in the backcountry. Sing or talk with your companions as you walk. Be especially vigilant in dense brush, along rivers, and when walking into the wind.

If you have a bear encounter, be sure to report it to a park ranger.



What To Do in a Bear Encounter

Unaware Bear

If you see a bear and the bear does not see you, slowly and quietly back away and reroute around the bear.

Surprised or Threatened Bear

If you surprise a bear or it feels threatened, it may charge you or approach aggressively.

1. Gather into a group and get your bear spray ready.
2. Wave your arms over your head slowly and speak in a low, calm voice, showing the bear that you are not a threat.
3. Slowly back away if possible, but **do not run!**
4. If the bear continues to approach and comes within range (20 feet), use your bear spray, aiming at the bear's head.

Curious Bear

If a bear acts tolerant of people, seems curious, or approaches you in a non-aggressive way, stand your ground.

1. Gather into a group, get your bear spray ready, and plant your feet.
2. Wave your arms over your head and shout aggressively and sternly at the bear to look threatening.
3. If the bear comes within range (20 feet), use your bear spray, aiming at the bear's head.



Leave No Trace

Leave the park the way you would like to find it! Challenge your family to leave behind no trace that you were there. This will help keep Denali National Park and Preserve in great shape, both for future visitors and for the wildlife that calls this magical place home.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

If you are on a formal trail, stay on the trail. If you are hiking away from a formal trail, spread your group out and walk side by side. Try walking on hard surfaces like gravel bars rather than vegetation, and do not leave navigational aids such as cairns or arrows so the next visitors can experience that same feeling of discovery that you did.

Dispose of Waste Properly

When you stop for a snack, be sure to pick up all of your trash and bring it back with you to throw away. Don't leave any food scraps behind, even those that are biodegradable. Ground squirrels or birds might look like they want a handout, but don't give it to them. By not feeding animals you can help keep wildlife wild.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Keep your group size small, be courteous, and let nature's sounds prevail. When you get home, share your pictures with friends and family but remember not to post GPS-referenced photos or track logs on social media. This protects resources and lets future visitors have that same experience of discovery.

Dig a Hole

There are no toilets off the road! Be prepared with a trowel so you can dig a hole at least 6 inches deep and at least 100 feet away from water to safely dispose of human feces. Remember to carry out all your toilet paper and wipes.



Leave only footprints...

Take only pictures

Enjoy the rocks, flowers, and bones that you may find while exploring, but please do not take anything with you besides memories. Leave everything behind for others to enjoy!

If you find something that you think might be an artifact (an item 50 years or older), leave it where you found it. If you want to remember your find AND help park archeologists, take a photograph of your discovery. When you return to the park entrance, notify a ranger at the Denali Visitor Center, describe where the artifact is located, and show them your photo. Sometimes where an artifact is located is as important as what it is.

Park archeologists learn about early park inhabitants with these kinds of exciting discoveries. They've found evidence that humans have inhabited this area for over 13,000 years. Alaska Natives still use the land for hunting and gathering, turning the wild resources into food, clothing, shelter, medicine, transportation, and handicrafts, just as their ancestors have for thousands of years. Today these activities are considered subsistence use.



Not long ago, a preschooler found an unusual looking stick on the braided riverbed. It turned out to be an artifact made of caribou antler, hundreds of years old. This discovery helped archeologists document use of this area by Alaska Natives.



Family Photo



Denali National Park and Preserve has more than six million acres of wilderness to explore. This is a wild place where you get to find your own way, because in much of the park there are no formal trails. If there is an established trail, please stay on it.

Family Photo

Experience Denali hiking

There are lots of trails near the entrance to the park, or a short distance away. The Family Fun sections of this book describe great trails for families, detailing where to access the trail, hiking distance, level of difficulty, and interesting things to see and talk about along the way. The hiking times provided are for an average adult walker, so adjust the time accordingly for your group—double it if hiking with kids under age 5.

Hiking Checklist

Here's a list of important items to include in your pack. Remember to dress in layers of non-absorbent clothing, such as fleece or wool. Avoid cotton because when it gets wet, it stays wet. For hikes longer than an hour, tell someone where you're going.

- ☐ **Water and snacks—lots of snacks**
- ☐ **Sturdy hiking boots or shoes and extra socks**
- ☐ **Rain gear—the weather changes fast**
- ☐ **Hat and gloves—yes, even in summer**
- ☐ **Extra layers of clothing in case it gets colder or you get wet**
- ☐ **Map and/or trail guide**
- ☐ **Binoculars and camera**
- ☐ **Sunscreen and sun hat**
- ☐ **Insect repellent and/or head nets**
- ☐ **First aid kit, knife, whistle, and compass or GPS**
- ☐ **Bear spray**
- ☐ **Toilet paper and a plastic bag to pack it all out**

Off-Trail Hiking

An off-trail wilderness hike can be an unforgettable experience for the whole family. Just get off the bus and start hiking—anywhere. You may hike a bit, stop at a river for a while to play, hike a little more, then have a snack and relax. The rewards are worth the effort, and you'll generally find yourselves alone in the wilderness, even if you never leave sight of the Park Road.

Where to Begin

A good strategy is to take an early transit bus into the park, traveling to either Toklat River or Eielson Visitor Center, and scouting the terrain from the Park Road. On your return towards the park entrance, you can ask your driver to let you off at whatever area looked most appealing. After your hike, return to anywhere along the road and wave down a passing transit bus. You can also stop by the Backcountry Information Center to ask the rangers for ideas and to watch the safety video.



NPS Photo / Sierra Malaine



Hint

Much of the park's landscape that the road runs through is above tree line. If you're not experienced with a map and compass, pick an area with good visibility and use the Park Road as your navigation tool. Keep an eye on the road as you hike away, and when you're ready to return, hike back in the same direction.



Hint

If you haven't hiked here before, try hiking with a ranger. Ranger-led Discovery Hikes are offered daily during the summer. Topics and difficulty levels vary, so check with the Denali Visitor Center to find a hike that matches your group's age and ability.



Experience Denali camping

One of the best ways to connect with nature in Denali National Park and Preserve is to go camping. You may choose an established campground or you can backpack until you find a great place in the wilderness to spend the night. Backcountry camping takes more planning, especially with children, but it can be done, and it's a fantastic way to teach self-reliance, leave no trace values, and the awe of discovery.

All six of the park's campgrounds are described in more detail later, but here is a quick overview of each.

Riley Creek, Mile 1

The largest campground in the park is perfect for families on a tight schedule that need easy access to park amenities. There's good hiking and many activities in the area. There are sites for RVs and tents, flush toilets, and running water.

Savage River, Mile 13

This smaller campground is close to the entrance area with sites for RVs and tents, flush toilets, and running water. You can drive your own vehicle to the campground and feel a little closer to the wilderness. There's also good hiking in the area.

Sanctuary River, Mile 23

This is one of the smallest campgrounds in the park with only seven tent sites and no treated water. No vehicles are allowed here, so you must take the park camper bus. A good choice for families with some camping experience.

Fun
Fact

Denali National Park
and Preserve is only
300 miles south of
the Arctic Circle.

Teklanika River, Mile 29

Great family campground for those wanting to get farther into the park and looking for a more remote experience. You can drive your own vehicle to the campground, but you must stay a minimum of three nights.

Igloo Creek, Mile 34

Like Sanctuary, this is one of the smallest campgrounds with only seven tent sites and no treated water. No vehicles are allowed here, so you must take the park camper bus.

Wonder Lake, Mile 85

For those wanting to see it all! Be aware that it takes about six hours to get here on the bus. Tents only, no vehicles. A good choice if you have the time. Water and toilets are available at this campground.

If you plan to camp

- Bring a three-season, rainproof tent.
- Bring a warm sleeping bag and warm clothing.
- Bring all your own food; there are not many stores in the area.
- Make a reservation in advance. Each campsite is limited to no more than 8 people per site, except Wonder Lake, which is limited to 4 per site. Some campgrounds are tent-only, and some accommodate RVs. There are no electrical or water hookups for RVs in the park.



Camping Tips

Bear-resistant food storage is a requirement while camping in Denali. Food and scented items can be stored inside a hard-sided vehicle at your campsite. Permanent bear-resistant food lockers are also available at all campgrounds.

Backcountry Camping

Don't be afraid to venture beyond the established campgrounds. This could be a memorable experience for your family. It does require some pre-planning and some backcountry experience.

When you arrive, go to the Backcountry Information Center in the park entrance area to choose a destination area for your trek, watch the safety video, and obtain a free backcountry permit. Permits cannot be reserved in advance. Depending on when you arrive and where you plan to go, you may be able to begin your backpacking adventure the same day. Most likely, though, you'll spend the night in the entrance area before you board the camper bus and head into the wilderness.

With children, you might not have to hike far to have amazing, new experiences. However, you do have to camp at least one-half mile away from and out of sight of the Park Road. This can be harder than it looks in the vast open tundra. Experts at the Backcountry Information Center can suggest areas that might be most appropriate for your family.

Remember that it is required that you store your food and other smelly items in a bear-resistant food container. The rangers at the Backcountry Information Center will be happy to provide you with as many containers as you need, so ask for extras if you anticipate needing to store food-soiled clothing or diapers. They are bulky, so you might need to use larger backpacks than you normally would.



Hint

Allow plenty of time at the Backcountry Information Center—the permitting process takes an hour or more. All family members will need to watch a safety video preparing you for your trip.





“The Park Road can be an exciting trip for kids with solid biking skills, while the multi-use bike path in the entrance area is excellent for bikers of all ages and abilities. You can even ride to the local ice cream shop!”

Experience Denali biking

If you have room and the inclination, bring your bikes with you. Biking in Denali can be a fantastic family experience, though conditions in some areas may not be ideal for younger riders. The entrance area and first 15 miles of the Park Road are paved, but shoulders are narrow and these areas have more vehicle traffic. West of Savage River, biking the unpaved road can feel like a wild experience, though it is still important to watch for traffic—and wildlife!

The Family Fun sections of this book highlight good biking areas for kids, detailing where to access bike trails, distance, level of difficulty, and interesting things to see and talk about along the way.

Biking Checklist

You want to go light, but you also want to be prepared for a change in the weather.

Don't forget to take...

- ☐ **Water and snacks**
- ☐ **Rain gear**
- ☐ **Hats and gloves**
- ☐ **Layers of clothes**
- ☐ **First aid kit**
- ☐ **Bear spray**
- ☐ **Bike repair kit**

If you have a bike problem that you can't repair, flag down a transit bus heading back to the entrance area.



NPS Photo / Alex Vanderstuyf



By riding the bus, you reduce traffic problems and help protect the natural resources of the park. As a result, wildlife is comfortable wandering near the road, providing excellent sightings for visitors. There's nothing like seeing a grizzly bear with only a bus window between you and the bear.

Experience Denali by bus

All visitors to Denali wishing to venture past Mile 15 into the heart of the park must ride a bus. Visitors are encouraged to get on and off transit buses to explore the park at their own pace. How far you ride the bus into the park depends on the time you have, the ages of your family members, and your sense of adventure.

The good news is, you don't have to spend all day on the bus. There are many options for families, and you can get off at any time and take a break.

Bus Checklist

- ☐ Car or booster seat (see page 33)
- ☐ Water, lunch, and lots of snacks—once you leave the park entrance area, there is no food service or water available
- ☐ Sturdy walking shoes
- ☐ Warm clothing and rain gear, even if the weather looks great
- ☐ Insect repellent, sunscreen
- ☐ Binoculars, camera, magnifying glass
- ☐ Junior Ranger book for kids of all ages
- ☐ Books, activities, toys for children



Hint

Make bus reservations in advance online or at the Denali Bus Depot. Kids under the age of four need a car seat to ride the bus.

Which bus?

Shuttle to Savage

Mile 15, 2 hours roundtrip

Not sure your family will tolerate a long bus ride?

Try a shorter ride first. Take the **free shuttle** to Savage River, where there is a small parking area, picnic tables, restrooms, and trails (see hiking tips). The shuttle leaves from various locations in the entrance area regularly and runs back and forth all day long.

Narrated Tours

Denali has several tour buses with narration and guides. These trips are not specifically geared for children, so younger ones might be better off on a transit bus where they can get off and on—or return to the park entrance—as necessary. Tours range from 4 to 12 hours in length and vary in price accordingly.

Transit Bus into the Park

Transit Buses start from the Denali Bus Depot and head out to many destinations in the park. You can choose the perfect distance for your family and get off the bus at any time to take a break or wave down a bus heading in the opposite direction.

Wondering where to go? Here are the main options and round-trip times for each. The times include bathroom breaks but not off-bus adventures, so factor that in when choosing your destination. You can always get off before your named destination and head back to the entrance on a different bus if you or your kids have had enough.

- Mile 53: Toklat River (6 hrs)
- Mile 66: Eielson (8 hrs)
- Mile 85: Wonder Lake (11 hrs)
- Mile 92: Kantishna (12 hrs)

Eat on the bus

Drivers encourage all passengers to eat on the bus rather than outside at rest stops. This keeps food scraps from landing on the ground and attracting wildlife and gives you more time to enjoy the stops along the way. There is no food allowed inside the tent at the Toklat Rest Stop. The Eielson Visitor Center has a small indoor eating area, but it fills fast when it is cold or wet outside.



Hint

Don't forget to pick up a Junior Ranger booklet and Discovery Pack at the Denali Visitor Center. Kids can work through the booklet in between stops and sightings.

Bathroom Breaks

Designated bathroom breaks are at Teklanika Rest Stop (Mile 30, 90 minutes), Toklat River (Mile 53, 3 hours) Eielson Visitor Center (Mile 66, 4 hours) and Wonder Lake Campground (Mile 84, 5.5 hours). If a child needs to go in between these stops or feels nauseated, just let the driver know.

Bus Etiquette

During a wildlife stop, be as quiet as possible—this is hard for adults and harder still for children. Disturbing a wild animal might make it reluctant to return to the road. Your voice could also acclimate a bear to the human voice, making a human voice much less likely to deter a curious bear in the backcountry.

Keep heads, arms, and cameras inside the bus. Share your window with a neighbor from the other side of the aisle. Always keep looking. The Denali landscape is vast, filled with gullies and small hills. Sometimes wildlife can emerge or disappear right before your eyes.



Car Seat

If you want to ride a bus in Denali with young children, you will be required to follow Alaska Child Passenger laws. Car seats are required for children under the age of four, while booster seats are required for children age four and up until standard height and weight requirements have been met. You must bring your own car and booster seats, and secure them appropriately while off the bus.

If you have car seats and wish to get off the bus and hike, please do so at designated points along the Park Road where the seats can be stowed out of reach of animals. Good locations include Savage Check Station, Eielson Visitor Center, any of the campgrounds, or the Toklat Rest Stop. Each of these areas has bear-resistant storage containers to safely house the car seat while you are gone. Child car seats tend to be laden with odors that may attract animals looking for food. If you stash the car seat in a bush or on the tundra, you may come back to a demolished seat. In the long run, you may also teach bears to associate the smells of children with the smells of food, so please store your car seat properly.



Hint

Before you hop on the bus, attach a rope to your car seat to make it easier to handle. Also, tuck a garbage bag into the seat so that if it's raining when you step off the bus, you can keep the seat dry.





Family Photo

Experience Denali in fall, winter, and spring

Many of the services and options described in this guide, including buses, programs, and many camping and hiking options, are only available in summer. That said, Denali is an amazing place to visit in fall, winter, and spring. The Winter Visitor Center at the Murie Science and Learning Center (Mile 1.4 of the Park Road) is open daily and park rangers are available to share information.

Sightsee Along the Park Road

In fall, after the summer season ends in September, the Park Road usually opens to private vehicles out to Teklanika Rest Area (Mile 30). The Park Road typically closes at Mile 3 after the first snowfall. This could be as early as September!

The road is only open to Mile 3 for most of the winter and the unplowed section becomes a snowy, winter trail. Experience Denali at this time of year through a variety of winter recreation opportunities.

In spring, plowing the Park Road begins in mid-March most years. Check at the visitor center to see how far you can drive. The road is often open to private vehicles as far as Teklanika through late May, depending on weather and summer bus service.



Hike or Snowshoe

Seeing the park by foot is a great way to experience Denali. All of the trails around the park entrance area are open year-round for day-hiking. Backcountry permits for overnight trips can be acquired from the rangers at the visitor center. You can borrow snowshoes and ice grippers for free at the Winter Visitor Center.

Ski

Once the snow falls and the Park Road is closed to private vehicles at Mile 3, the road becomes a winter trail. Strap on your skis and glide into the wilderness. The road is typically maintained for cross-country skiing up to Mile 7. Often some of the trails around the visitor center are groomed for skiing as well.

Cycle

Take advantage of the fact that buses are not running. Ask at the visitor center to learn how far the Park Road is open. You can drive to the furthest point open to private vehicles, unload bikes, and ride along the Park Road west of the gate with almost no traffic. Watch for wildlife, use caution on muddy or icy sections of road, and be aware that occasional park vehicles may pass by.

Visit the Sled Dogs

Swing by the Sled Dog Kennels at Park Headquarters (Mile 3) to meet the park's fluffiest and friendliest rangers. Often the sled dogs are far in the park working on projects in the winter, but you can still look around the dog yard. Days and hours vary so ask at the visitor center.

Look for the Northern Lights

Stop by the Winter Visitor Center to find out the aurora forecast or search for it online. When the sun goes down, turn your eyes to the sky to try to catch a glimpse of the dancing Northern Lights.

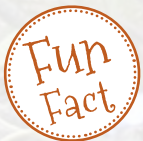


NPS Photo / Kent Miller



Hint

The Park Road may reopen to Mile 13 in mid-February. Check the alerts online at nps.gov/DENA to find out how far the road is open.



There are more than 750 species of plants in Denali including Alaska's state flower, the alpine forget-me-not.

Alaska Geographic Photo

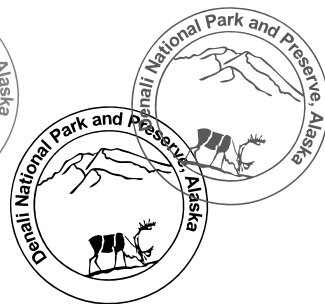
Family Fun in the entrance area

This is the busiest place in the park for families, and the first place to stop. Check out the Denali Visitor Center, the Murie Science and Learning Center, and the Sled Dog Kennels—every one of these places pays special attention to the youngest visitors. Taking the time to get an overview of the park here will enrich your visit and guide you to activities that your family will most enjoy.

Denali Visitor Center

Mile 1.5 Park Road

The Denali Visitor Center is the main source of visitor information in the summer, and should be your first stop. The world-class visitor center provides an overall look at the six million acres waiting to be explored, and how families can best enjoy it. There is something for everyone here—information on Denali, wildlife, history, weather, and anything else having to do with the park, and lots of things to see and to touch.



Hint

For a good introduction to the park, watch the award-winning film *Heartbeats of Denali*. The movie follows the seasons and wildlife throughout the park and will entertain viewers of all ages—even the youngest viewers will enjoy this 18-minute film.



NPS Photo

Ranger Programs

Guided walks and chats take place daily at the Denali Visitor Center throughout the summer. Topics and timing can vary, so look for schedules posted on bulletin boards or check at the front desk.

Become a Junior Ranger! Ask for a free Junior Ranger book at the front desk and keep it with you during your visit. Inside you will find enriching activities that can keep children of all ages busy at a picnic table, in the tent or RV, and on the bus. By completing activities in the book, you earn a Junior Ranger Badge to take home. Check in with a ranger before you leave, or you can mail your book in later to receive a badge.



Before you leave the visitor center, check out a Discovery Pack for free at the front desk. It is full of activities and tools for exploring Denali. Take the pack of tools and start exploring the area right around your campsite or along a trail.

Take Memories Home

Adjacent to the Denali Visitor Center is the Denali Park Store, filled with wonderful books, cards, and mementos to help your family remember their Denali visit. Additional souvenir shops are located in the Nenana Canyon, one mile north of the park entrance.



NPS Photo / Kira Heeschen



Ask a ranger at the visitor center for a scavenger hunt. While you explore the exhibits, hunt for each of the items on the list.



NPS Photo / Kent Miller

Murie Science and Learning Center

Located a short walk from the Denali Visitor Center, the Murie Science and Learning Center is open for educational programs in summer.

In winter, the Murie Science and Learning Center serves as the park's Winter Visitor Center and is open daily with films, exhibits, kids activities, and rangers to help enhance your visit.



Hint
You can borrow snowshoes and ice grippers for free at the Murie Science and Learning Center during winter. Just ask at the front desk.



Learning Lab

This space is kept fresh with continually changing hands-on activities for kids of all ages to explore. Junior Ranger books are also available by request.

Denali's Dinosaurs

An amazing discovery occurred near Igloo Creek on June 27, 2005. A student on a field trip spotted a three-toed dinosaur track. The dinosaur that left behind the track was a smaller relative of *Tyrannosaurus rex*! Since then, thousands of dinosaur and prehistoric bird tracks and other trace fossils have been found. You can see these critters in a mural and touch real fossils at the Murie Science and Learning Center. That will help you imagine what it was like in Denali 70 million years ago.



Wolf Display

Find a real wolf skeleton on display at the Murie Science and Learning Center. The skeleton was assembled by local students from Cantwell. The wolf was trapped legally by an Alaskan who donated the animal to the school for this project. With the help of a park expert, the students carefully dissected the carcass and then re-assembled the wolf skeleton. See the skeleton and feel the fur pelt of the wolf while you learn about the animals that make Denali their home.



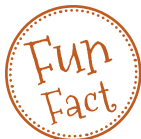
Denali Sled Dog Kennels

The Sled Dog Kennels are one of the most popular stops at Denali and provide a chance to meet the dogs who patrol the park during winter months. Denali is the only national park in America with sled dogs that work to protect the park. The dogs help us contact winter visitors, haul supplies, transport researchers, and preserve the tradition of mushing in the park. Visitors can meet the dogs and see them in action, pulling their fall training cart around the track. It is easy to see how much they love to run and pull!

Sled dog demonstrations are 30 minutes long and take place several times each day throughout the peak summer season. Because of limited parking, most people visit the demonstrations via shuttle buses that leave from the Denali Visitor Center. Confirm times and bus information at the Denali Visitor Center. There is no fee for the bus ride or program.



Hint
Come early, so that you can meet and pet the sled dogs. Remember to hold your child's hand as you approach dogs, and never leave small children unattended in the dog yard. This is a must-see stop in the park and it's free!



It's not easy naming all the new puppies every year. One litter was named after climbing knots —Clove, Munter, and Prusik. Another was named after bumblebees—Lucor, Sitken, Mixtus, and Sylvie (pictured at right). Look at the names on the doghouses and see if you can guess which dogs are from the same litter! To see names of retired sled dogs from past years, go into the Kennels Building and look at all the nametags on the walls.

"The Denali kennels offer a place for a boy and "his" dog to plan exciting adventures into wild places... and a few naps in the sun along the way."



Sled dogs have many adaptations that help them survive the extremely cold winter temperatures here in Denali. Did you know that sled dogs have two different kinds of fur? They have a layer of guard hairs on the outside of their coats that acts like a water-resistant rain jacket, and a layer of underfur underneath that acts like a warm fleece jacket.

Camping in the Entrance Area

Riley Creek Campground

All ages

This is an excellent stop when you arrive at Denali. It is in the entrance area—close to the Denali Visitor Center and trails—and it has flush toilets and running water in the summer. This is the largest campground in the park and is certainly not wilderness camping, but it can provide a comfortable spot to use as a home base. There is plenty for a family to do near here before you extend your visit further into the park. Visit the Denali Visitor Center, the Sled Dog Kennels, and attend an evening ranger program.



Keep your eyes open around camp—red squirrels and snowshoe hares are commonly seen in Riley Creek Campground. Large animals, like moose and bear, also occasionally wander through.



You can camp here during the winter season, too—for free! There are no amenities other than pit toilets during the winter, but you can visit the Winter Visitor Center for water, flush toilets, and visitor information.

Hiking in the Entrance Area

The wilderness is never far away at Denali. A short walk can take you away from the highway, the visitor center, and civilization. On some of these trails, the only sounds will be rushing rivers, chirping squirrels, and bird song. A display outside the back door of the visitor center provides information about all the nearby trails. Here are a few worth checking out, and how to find them.

Spruce Forest Trail

All ages

Easy, 0.27 miles, 15 minutes roundtrip

Access: From the Denali Visitor Center

Even toddlers will enjoy exploring this short loop. The trail is wide and flat, and there are usually lots of red squirrels and Canada jays to see along the way. This is a mature spruce forest, so you'll see lots of spruce cones on the ground and perhaps piles of them hoarded by squirrels. These piles are called middens. If you spot any blueberries growing along the trail, feel free to eat them, but please leave the wildflowers for the next visitor to enjoy.



Hint

If you're new to hiking, check at the visitor center for ranger-guided nature walks.



Keep your eyes peeled for moose in the entrance area. They often graze in a clearing off the highway just north of the park. If you find yourself in a traffic jam caused by wildlife, be sure to stay in your vehicle and follow normal traffic laws, as well as respect the animals.

Horseshoe Lake Trail

Ages 4 and up

Easy to moderate, 1.5 miles, 1.5 hours roundtrip if you walk to the lake and back, 3 miles if you walk the path around the lake. Access: Take the Taiga Trail from the Denali Visitor Center, past the Mount Healy Overlook Trail junction. This trail can also be accessed from the Bike Path.

This is one of the most popular trails in the park because it is easily accessible and quite scenic. It does have one long, steep section and some short, steep hills. The reward? You might get to see a family of beavers or a moose. At the edge of the lake, beavers have constructed a lodge, excavating underwater tunnels and rooms. Notice the chewed patches in the bark of spruce trees along the trail. This is the work of gnawing porcupines.



McKinley Station Trail

Ages 4 and up

Moderate, 1.6 miles, 1 hour one way
Access: From the Denali Visitor Center or Riley Creek Campground

This trail connects the Denali Visitor Center with the Riley Creek Campground and Mercantile. You can hike part way and return to the visitor center, or hike the whole trail and catch a free bus back. Check at the visitor center for the bus schedule.

The trail goes down two steep hills (100 foot elevation change) to Hines Creek. From the trail, you'll see a bridge across Hines Creek to your right, and a wide gravel bar that is great for digging in the dirt and playing at the edge of the creek. There's even a big rock to sit on at the other end of the bridge. To your left is the Alaska Railroad trestle. If timing is right, you can watch the train go by. This is a good spot to relax, have a snack, and if you want, turn around and head back to the Denali Visitor Center.

Cross the bridge over Hines Creek and follow the trail for another five minutes. You'll come to a suspension bridge that spans Riley Creek. It's quite impressive with tall supports at both ends and cables holding it all together. Look downstream—you can still see the Alaska Railroad trestle.

You can stand on the bridge and sometimes see animal tracks in the mud next to the creek. The bridge can be an exciting destination for kids.

Mount Healy Overlook Trail

Ages 9 and up

Strenuous, 5 miles, 3-4 hours roundtrip

Access: Take the Taiga Trail from the Denali Visitor Center for 0.3 miles and look for the Mount Healy Overlook Trail junction.

This strenuous hike will thrill and wear out almost anyone. The first mile is mildly steep and takes you to an overlook with benches. The rest of the trail is much steeper. On this hike, you'll have the opportunity to experience most of the ecosystems in the park on one trail, and then enjoy a spectacular view at the top.



Family Photo



Family Photo



On a clear day, you can see Mount McKinley from the top of the Mount Healy Overlook Trail.

From the George Park Highway

There are two hiking options that begin at Mile 231 of the George Parks Highway, just six miles south of the park entrance. If you are driving your own vehicle, turn south (right) on the Parks Highway as you leave the Park Road. Just before you reach the bridge over the Nenana River, you'll see a small pull-out on the west side of the road where you can park.

Oxbow Trail

All ages

Easy, 1.7 mile loop, 1 hour

Access: Mile 231 George Parks Highway

The Oxbow Trail begins across the Parks Highway from the pull-out, on the east side of the road. Watch for traffic while crossing the highway.

This flat trail loops through a mature spruce forest. The turnaround point is a spacious gravel bar right at the curve of the Nenana River. This is a great spot for kids to run around, enjoy a picnic lunch, throw rocks in the river, and wave to the rafts as they bounce by.

Triple Lakes Trail

Ages 8 and up

Moderately strenuous, 8.6 miles one way,
5 hours one-way

Access: Mile 231 George Parks Highway

The trail begins on the west side of the highway, across from the park sign. It's a steep uphill climb for about the first 15 minutes. The trail crosses the railroad tracks and then evens out as it rounds the side of the mountain. There are great southern views here of the river, the mountains, and the McKinley Village area—one of the few neighborhoods where local residents have their homes.

The trail loops back to the north and quickly reaches the first of three lakes. If you follow the trail further, you'll find two other lakes, one right after the other. The trail then moves to Riley Creek and heads north toward the Denali Visitor Center, about 8 miles away.

The first lake is a perfect destination for younger children, while those 8 and up may be able to hike the entire trail. Once you reach the first lake, enjoy a picnic, climb up the hillside for a panoramic view, or keep walking until you feel like turning around.



If you see a large boulder on the hillside looking like it fell from the sky, it's likely a glacial erratic. These large rocks were deposited by retreating glaciers.

Biking in the Entrance Area

Riley Creek Campground

Ages 4 and up

Easy, 5-10 minutes around each loop, longer with little bikers

The Riley Creek Campground is a great loop for young cyclists, as long as they keep an eye peeled for traffic. From here, you can ride the Bike Path to the Denali Park Post Office, the Riley Creek Mercantile, the Denali Visitor Center, the Denali Park Store, the Morino Grill, and all the way to the Nenana River.

Ride to the Nenana River

Ages 4 and up

Easy, 1.7 miles

Head back toward the main highway and stop for a photo at the Denali National Park entrance sign, located at the turn-off from the George Parks Highway. There's a pull-out so you can safely stop and take a break.

Just after the Denali National Park sign, the trail turns left and runs beside the highway north toward the Nenana Canyon businesses. A short ride to the footbridge may provide views of rafts floating below you on the Nenana River.

Bike Path

Ages 4 and up

- Denali Visitor Center to Denali Bus Depot: 1 mile
- Riley Creek Campground to Denali Visitor Center: 1.3 miles

The Bike Path is well marked and easy to follow. It is a great connecting trail around the entrance area and offers the chance to walk or ride. As it continues toward the Parks Highway, it offers older riders a longer route. The Bike Path connects the Denali Visitor Center to the Denali Bus Depot, Riley Creek Campground area, and the park entrance. Many people also hike the Bike Path, so watch for walkers.



Hint

Bike racks are provided at campgrounds, rest areas, and the visitor centers. If you go day hiking from the road, just carry your bike 25 yards from the roadway and hide it from view.

Family Fun in the Savage River area

Located near the end of the paved and publicly accessible portion of the Park Road (Miles 1-15), families can easily spend the entire day in the Savage River area. It's a great introduction to what lies further west and gives a taste of what Denali's wilderness has to offer. You can drive or take the free Savage River Shuttle—a good option since parking is limited.

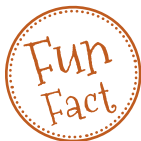
There's a nice campground, lots of easy hiking both on and off trail, excellent wildlife viewing opportunities, and a chance to see Mount McKinley.

Camping in the Savage River Area


Savage River Campground

All Ages, Mile 13

This is a comfortable campground for families, away from the hustle and bustle of the park entrance area. It has great views, some creature comforts like running water and toilets, evening ranger programs, and lots of room to roam. Campers can drive here in their own vehicles or ride a park bus.



Only two campgrounds in the park boast a view of Mount McKinley — Savage River at Mile 13 and Wonder Lake at Mile 85.



“The youngest of visitors to Denali can find immense joy in super-sized rocks, wiggling their toes in the mud, or bouncing across the rubbery tundra.”



You can take off in just about any direction from Savage Campground. Follow a small creek or head across the open tundra. Kids love running up and down the hill just south of the camp's group sites, or hiking up the hills across the Park Road.

Hiking in the Savage River Area

Mountain Vista Loop Trail

All ages

Easy, 0.6-mile loop, 30 minutes

Access: Mountain Vista Trailhead (Mile 13)

This trail near Savage Campground features a short loop with interpretive panels about the history of the area. Early visitors to the park (1923-1939) would overnight at Savage Camp, explore the area, and observe wildlife. Now families can do the same, but with a trail to follow. This is a great picnic area for families, with picnic tables, benches, and restrooms.

Savage Cabin Interpretive Trail

All ages

Easy, 0.3 miles, 30 minutes

Access: Savage Campground (Mile 13)

Located just across from the Savage River Campground, this flat gravel path is a fun and easy walk for all ages. Interpretive panels along the trail show the area in wintertime and feature historical photographs.

The trail leads to a historic cabin which used to be a cookhouse for road workers. The cabin is used in the summer as a stop for bus tour visitors to view a living history talk and in the winter as a patrol cabin.

Savage River Loop Trail

Ages 4 and up

Moderate, 1.6 miles, 1.5 hours

There is negligible elevation gain on this trail, but footing can occasionally be tricky, so think carefully before taking toddlers along. For younger kids, check out the path that forks from the main trail on the west side of the Savage River Bridge and leads to the large gravel bar at the edge of the river. Watch a flock of mew gulls from a distance as they strut around, feeding on insects and voles.

The main trail travels through the canyon on one side of the river, crosses a footbridge less than a mile downstream, and then comes back on the other side. This is one of the most popular trails in the park and a good area for spotting wildlife including marmots, Dall sheep, and American dippers. More than one visitor has watched Dall sheep trot down one side of the mountain, leap across the river, and climb up the other side.



Savage Alpine Trail

Ages 8 and up

Difficult, 4 miles, 3-4 hours one-way

This is a great hike for a family that wants a bit of a challenge. The trail goes up and over the side of Healy ridge and offers views of Mount McKinley on a clear day.

Hike this one-way trail in either direction, but know that the steepest section is on the Savage River end, which can be a challenging final descent with tired legs. Choose where you'll begin: Mountain Vista Trailhead for a gradual uphill and steep downhill, or start at Savage River to climb up the steep portion first and then enjoy a gradual descent. Both entrances to the trail are about two miles away from each other, so whichever direction you choose to hike, flag down a Savage River Shuttle at the end to return to where you began.

Savage Rock

Ages 5 and up

Easy, 15 minutes to the top

Hike just the first part of the Savage Alpine Trail, starting on the east side of the Savage River Bridge. The trail to Savage Rock is all uphill, which is why children like it. The gravel trail takes you around one side of Savage Rock, with steps in place between large boulders and a grove of Balsam poplar trees as a resting point.



Kids love to climb on Savage Rock. Just be careful of loose, rocky areas with unsafe footing.



Biking in the Savage River Area

Mountain Vista to the Denali Visitor Center

Ages 9 and up

Moderate, 10 miles, 90 minutes

Take the free Savage River Shuttle from the Denali Visitor Center to Mountain Vista Rest Area at Mile 13, and then ride the road back the way you came. This ride has more uphill than you think! Try to ride later in the evening when there are fewer buses on the road. Don't forget private vehicles can drive this stretch as well, so be careful.



Those squawking white birds by the Savage River are mew gulls. This seabird visits Denali during the summer season and seems to gather wherever people congregate in the park. Savage River is one of their favorite hangouts.





Hop off the bus or your bike and take a hike anywhere along the first 15 miles of the Park Road, but especially where creeks intersect the road. These wide gravel bars make for easy walking and are highways for wildlife.



Hint

If you plan on camping at Teklanika, purchase a Tek Pass to reserve seats for one day on the transit bus and then ride "standby" during the rest of your stay at Teklanika Campground. This way you don't have to decide which days you want to travel further into the park, allowing you the flexibility to relax and explore camp.

Family Fun beyond Mile 15

As you head further into the park, opportunities to get away from the crowds and into the heart of the backcountry increase. To travel beyond Savage River, visitors must have a ticket to ride the bus further into the park and must board from the Denali Bus Depot.

Camping Beyond Mile 15

Sanctuary and Igloo Campgrounds

Ages 6 and up, Mile 23 and 34

Both of these campgrounds are primitive and for tents only. They both have pit toilets, a central covered picnic area, picnic tables at each site, and bear-resistant food lockers. The large, bear-resistant food lockers also provide a great place to stash child car seats if you decide to backcountry camp from this area.

Teklanika Campground

All Ages, Mile 29

You can drive here in your personal vehicle if you are camping, but you have to stay at least three nights. You cannot drive any further into the park and you forfeit your site if you choose to drive out of the park during your reservation dates. This campground is truly remote, on the banks of the Teklanika River. There is a lot of space for children to run around here. The riverbed of the Teklanika is braided and has many swift channels so children should not be allowed to wander too far.

Teklanika is a great base for delving deeper into the park. When you buy or pick up your campground tickets at the Denali Bus Depot, purchase a specially priced "Tek Pass" that gives you three days of bus access further into the park. By staying at Teklanika, you can spend more time in the heart of the park because you begin your trip considerably west of the park entrance.

Hiking Beyond Mile 15

There are few trails beyond Mile 15, but endless opportunities for the unique experience of hiking off-trail. If you're feeling adventurous, consider beginning an off-trail hike in one of the areas suggested below.

Mile 17 Primrose Ridge

This is just past Savage River. Hiking involves some bushwacking before climbing into the open tundra. You don't have to go all the way to the top; walk as much as you want, then sit down, and enjoy the view with lunch.

Mile 29 Teklanika River

Get off the bus here and head to the river. Walk along the gravel riverbed and search for signs of wildlife along the way.

Mile 34 Igloo

Between Igloo Creek and Sable Pass, there are a number of fun areas to hike. Ask your bus driver for suggestions of where to get off and start hiking. This is a good place to look for raptors such as golden eagles.

Mile 46 Polychrome

This is a spectacular viewing stop and a great place to stretch your legs. It's a short stop on the bus, but there's plenty of time to climb the stairs and follow the path uphill for a 360-degree view. If you walk slowly, the loop only takes about 15 minutes. Remember to stay on the formalized trail.

Mile 54 Toklat

Walking along the Toklat River can offer surprising wildlife sightings for such easy hiking. This is the true heart of wilderness in Denali and is a great spot for kids to get rid of pent-up energy and run around.

Mile 58 Highway Pass

This is a good spot to get out and explore the tundra. If weather cooperates and is clear, the horizon is dominated by Denali. It is easy to keep the road within view and open tundra means you should be able to spot wildlife from a distance.

Mile 66 Eielson Visitor Center

If you make it this far, take full advantage of your time here. There's a lot to see and do, from activities in the visitor center to hiking around on the surrounding trails (see page 64 for more information).



Hint
It can be very windy out in the park. Wear warm clothes, especially a windbreaker and a hat.



Hint

If you plan on riding past Mile 15 (Savage River), bring a mountain bike or a hybrid. The road is only paved for the first 15 miles. Beyond Mile 15 the road is gravel, and beyond Mile 31 the road is narrow and there are no shoulders.

Biking Beyond Mile 15

Ages 9 and up
Moderate to Difficult

Choose your own section of the Park Road by taking a transit bus into the park with your bike. Get off anywhere you want, bike for a while, and then get back on a bus and head back to the entrance area. Each transit bus has a bike rack with room for two. When you purchase your bus tickets, let the reservationist know that you are planning to take bikes.



NPS Photo / Kent Miller



Family Fun at Eielson

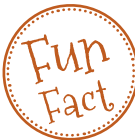
On a clear day, this eight-hour round-trip into the park offers outstanding views of Mount McKinley and the Alaska Range, and many wildlife viewing opportunities. The chance to see caribou, bears, raptors, and even wolves increases along this section of road.

Eielson Visitor Center

Mile 66 Park Road

Eielson Visitor Center boasts spectacular views of Mount McKinley, hiking trails, exhibits, hands-on activities for kids, and ranger-led programs. There is no food available at Eielson so bring your own snacks. There is a water fountain to refill your water bottle.

Visit the rangers at the information desk and ask to see their collection of tracks, pelts, and skulls. If it's cloudy, rainy or snowy, ask the rangers to show you the window exhibit where you can "see" the peaks even on a cloudy day.



It will be hard to miss the Arctic ground squirrels that scurry about from hole to hole, occasionally stopping to stand at attention on their hind legs. These creatures hibernate underground during the winter. Remember, keep these ground squirrels wild by not feeding them.

Hiking at Eielson

Get out and stretch after the long bus ride! There are three trails leading from the visitor center: a short loop for all ages, a longer route down to Gorge Creek, and a steep climb up the ridge. Check inside the visitor center for more information on hiking and ranger presentations.

Tundra Loop Trail

All ages

Easy, 0.4 miles roundtrip, 30 minutes roundtrip

The loop begins and ends at the visitor center, winding through the tundra with expansive views. If the mountain is out it will hold your full attention, but pull your eyes away and check out the wildflowers at your feet. Take the time to check out the Tundra Spur Trail, a short side trail that leads to the edge of the bench overlooking the valley below.

Gorge Creek Trail

Ages 8 and up

Strenuous, 1.5 miles, 2 hours roundtrip

This trail takes off from the Tundra Loop Trail and descends to the gravel bar along Gorge Creek below the visitor center. Several beautiful viewpoints offer places to stop and turn around if you don't want to hike all the way down to the creek. Remember, you have to climb back up whatever you go down! If you want to go further, this trail provides access to off-trail hiking along Gorge Creek and the Thorofare River. Scan the gravel bars and floodplains for wildlife on your way down.

Alpine Trail

Ages 8 and up

Strenuous, 2.2 miles, 2 hours roundtrip

This trail starts directly across from Eielson Visitor Center, and is one of those steep switchback trails that older children usually like to attack because sometimes parents can't keep up. You don't have to go all the way to Thorofare Ridge at the top; the trail also has long gradual uphill and even some human-made steps to make the walking easier. Before long, those tan and green buses look like toys and the view extends for miles beyond the visitor center.

*"Rolling down hills of
bouncy micro plants is a bit
exhausting, so a tundra nap
accompanied by a satisfied
smile is always in order."*





You can fish for trout in Wonder Lake. The lake is 2.5 miles long, a half mile wide and 280 feet deep. Ask a ranger or refer to the park website for fishing regulations, and remember to release what you catch – it is not recommended to eat trout from Wonder Lake due to heavy metal content.

Family Fun at Wonder Lake

Everyone loves the idea of camping at Wonder Lake, with Mount McKinley towering over the campground just 27 miles away. The campground not only boasts some excellent views but also provides evening ranger programs for all ages. Sometimes, staying here is worth the six-hour bus ride one way. And if you stay more than one day, you might be lucky enough to get a campsite with a view of "The Mountain". Nab that choice spot when previous campers leave in the morning and before other campers arrive on the bus.

Camping at Wonder Lake

Wonder Lake Campground

Ages 8 and up, Mile 85

There are two central covered areas with bear-resistant food lockers and tables, where campers can prepare food and visit with each other. If you want to be social, stay near here. If you prefer privacy, find a spot further away from this gathering point. No matter what, do not go to Wonder Lake without mosquito head nets! Mosquitoes can be quite persistent here until mid-August.



Hint

You probably don't need to go all the way to Wonder Lake to get good views—especially with young children. The bus ride is another 3 hours roundtrip from Eielson, and you will have already passed some excellent wildlife and mountain viewing areas. If you do decide to go, you should try to camp there.

Hiking at Wonder Lake

Campground Hikes

All ages

Easy

Enjoy the five-minute walk to the lake or wander up the dirt road that goes through the campground. Hiking off-trail in the area is fine, but it can be boggy! On a clear, windless day, walk up to the main road and head west, just past Mile 85, for picture-perfect views of Mount McKinley reflected in Reflection Pond. The walk is about two miles one-way.

Blueberry Hill Trail

Ages 6 and up

Easy, 0.6 miles, 30 minutes

Take the bus to the north end of Wonder Lake and find the trailhead at the base of the hill at the section of road built over the lake inlet. The trail winds through spruce trees to dry alpine tundra, then leads back to the road. Boardwalks allow easy access to the knoll, keeping feet above the wet tundra. This is a narrow trail, so you'll have to walk single file.

McKinley Bar Trail

Ages 6 and up

Easy, 2.5 miles one-way

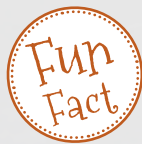
This flat trail is perfect for slightly older kids who don't mind a long walk with beautiful views. The trail takes you through spruce forests and over bogs to bring you to the banks of the McKinley River. If you are lucky and Mount McKinley is out, it will look like you are hiking straight into the mountain.



Hint

Bring along binoculars and settle in at the top of Blueberry Hill to see if you can spot and identify some of the birds that call Wonder Lake home. You might see scoters or pintails (beautiful ducks!), and Common loons nest here.

"It's fun to watch children creating their own adventures and having first time experiences with nature."



In August and September, Blueberry Hill is covered with—you guessed it—blueberries. Munch on the sweet berries while admiring views of Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake.

Family Photo

A photograph of four children laughing and playing outdoors in a forest. A boy in a red hoodie is in the center, with his arms raised. To his left, a girl with glasses and a grey jacket is leaning forward. To his right, a girl in a teal jacket is looking up. In the foreground, a girl with dark hair is laughing with her mouth wide open. The background is filled with green trees.

Science Camp

Visit the Murie Science and Learning Center website, www.nps.gov/rlc/murie, to find out when family field courses or camps for kids are available during the summer.

NPS Photo / Emily Mesner

Extending your Visit

While most visitors only have a few days in Denali, there are opportunities for families with more time to dig deeper into the park and its surroundings. Here are a few.

Murie Science and Learning Center (MSLC)

The MSLC offers family and youth programs and camps throughout the summer. Programs last from several hours to several days. Past programs have included family explorations of birds, wolves, dinosaurs, and wildflowers, and an hour-long program on climate change in Denali. Annual summer camps include Denali Discovery Camp and Denali Backcountry Adventures, both of which are made available to local youth before being opened to the general public. Some offerings are fee-based and require registration, while others are free of charge. For an updated schedule, stop by the MSLC when you arrive in the park, or check the MSLC website, www.nps.gov/rlc/murie.

Bring Your Classroom to Denali

Teachers wanting to bring their classes to Denali are encouraged to read the Education portion of the park website for current information. Rangers are available to provide programs for curriculum-based student groups, but this must be arranged in advance of the visit. There are restrictions regarding use of campgrounds and hiking for non-family field trips.

Teens at Denali

Youth Conservation Corps (YCC)

This 8-10 week program for local high school students is a great way to get a taste of what it is like to work for the National Park Service. These young rangers do everything from helping to build trails to answering questions at the visitor center. The best part of the program is that these rangers in training get paid to help protect our public lands. Visit the YCC website, www.nps.gov/gettinginvolved/youthprograms/ycc, for more information.

Student Conservation Association (SCA)

This national program offers young adults and high school students the opportunity to participate in hands-on conservation programs. In Denali, participants can work as part of a trail crew, intern at the sled dog kennels, or assist park rangers with visitor services. Visit the SCA website, www.thesca.org, for more information.



Visiting Talkeetna

Talkeetna is the jumping-off spot for climbers who want to work their way up the slopes of Mount McKinley the tallest mountain in North America. This small town, located on a spur road off the main highway, is a three-hour drive south of the park entrance.

Talkeetna offers fantastic views of "The Mountain." Stop by the Walter Harper Talkeetna Ranger Station to learn what it takes to summit Mount McKinley and see the expedition flags donated by mountain climbers for display on the walls. Visitors can also explore a three-dimensional map of the mountain at the Talkeetna Historical Association.



NPS Photo

Staying Connected

Get regular updates on what is happening here year-round, from weather to wolves to the first flower poking out of the spring snow.

Denali NPSwww.nps.gov/dena

InstagramDenaliNPS

Twittertwitter.com/DenaliNPS

Facebookwww.facebook.com/DenaliNPS

YouTubewww.youtube.com/user/DenaliNPS

Bring Denali to Your Classroom

If Denali is too far away to bring your class then consider signing up for one of the free, interactive distance learning programs offered by the park. Your class can learn about the science of sled dogs or learn why exactly Mount McKinley is so tall. Find out more on the park website under Education, www.nps.gov/dena/learn/education.

Virtual Junior Ranger Program

You don't have to come to the park to become a Junior Ranger. Go to the park website and download the Virtual Visit Activity Page. All the information you need to answer the questions can be found on the park website. Complete the form, send it in, and receive your very own badge.





*"You can guarantee
your family will be
touched by this place..."*

Denali for Families

It can be daunting to plan a trip that will be fun for the whole family, especially when your destination is a vast wilderness in Interior Alaska. Whether you've already reached Denali, or you're still dreaming about your perfect trip, enclosed you will find tips to make your visit easier and more fun. This guide is for families and independent travelers who want to take home happy memories from a Denali adventure.



Family Photo



Alaska
Geographic

