National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Denali National Park and Preserve

Backcountry Camping Guide

Michael Larson Photo

Getting Started

This brochure contains information vital to the success of your backcountry trip in Denali National Park and Preserve. The following paragraphs will outline the Denali backcountry permit system, the steps required to obtain your permit, and some important tips for a safe and memorable wilderness experience.

Denali's Trailless Wilderness

Traveling and camping in this expansive terrain is special. The lack of developed trails, bridges, or campsites means that you are free to determine your own route and discover Denali for yourself. However, with this freedom comes responsibility – responsibility for yourself and for the wilderness. Self-reliance is paramount. You must be prepared to travel cross-country through remote terrain in harsh weather, and rescue yourself in the event of problems. It is also your responsibility to help protect the special resources and opportunities that are present at Denali by carefully following the principles of Leave No Trace so that your travels do not diminish the experience of those who follow you.

Backcountry Unit System

The 6 million acres of Denali National Park and Preserve is divided into 87 separate backcountry units (see map on reverse side). Forty-two units within the Denali Wilderness have a limit on the number of individual people that can camp in each unit per night. During peak summer visitation many of these units are heavily used, so please come to the Backcountry Information Center with several alternative trip itineraries. Don't become discouraged if your first choice is not available. Remember, there are 6 million acres to choose from, and all of the units offer excellent wilderness trips!

Pay attention to the following requirements when planning a trek through Denali's backcountry:

- Forty-two backcountry units within the Denali Wilderness have a specific quota.
- Unit availability determines where you may camp each night and you must camp in the unit for which you have a permit.
- Maximum 7 consecutive nights in a single unit.
- Maximum 30 nights in the backcountry (various units).
- Permits are issued only in person (no telephone reservations), and no more than 24 hours in advance of the first day of your trip.
- All party members must be present to receive a permit.
- Permits are not required for day hiking in the backcountry.

Wildlife of Denali

Karen Ward Photo

Bears

Symbolic of the Alaskan wilderness, both grizzly bears and black bears inhabit the park and may be encountered in the backcountry. To keep these magnificent creatures wild and enhance your personal safety, keep the following in mind:

- Make noise while hiking to alert bears of your presence.
- Bear Resistant Food Containers are required in most units and are lent to visitors at no cost. They must be stored 100 yards (91 m) from cooking areas and tent sites.
- Be alert for bears and alter your activities to avoid them.
- Never run from a bear.
- Pepper spray can be carried as an added precaution. However, it is useful only as a last resort in the event of an emergency, and should not be viewed as substitute for proper backcountry behavior. Visitors must educate themselves on proper bear spray technique and know its limitations.

When you visit the Backcountry Information Center, you will be provided with more detailed information about hiking in bear country.

Bear Resistant Food Container (BRFC)

These hard plastic portable containers are a vital part of Denali's bear/human conflict management program. You must store all food, garbage, and scented items in a BRFC when camping overnight in units where they are required. Their consistent use has resulted in a bear population that does not associate humans or their property with food sources. A small BRFC weighs 3 lbs. and holds 3-5 days of food for one person, and the larger BRFC weighs 5 lbs. and carries 7-10 days of food. BRFCs are issued free of charge with backcountry permits and must be returned within 48 hours following a trip. If the BRFC is lost or damaged, you may be held responsible for its replacement. Kevlar or bear-resistant bags are not permitted.

Wildlife

Denali is home to sheep, caribou, wolves, foxes, bears, moose, eagles, ptarmigan, and other wildlife that you are very likely to encounter in the backcountry. Please keep Denali's animals wild by following these guidelines when encountering wildlife:

- Do not feed or allow wildlife to obtain human foods.
- Maintain a minimum of 300 yards (274 m) distance from bears.
- Do not approach or follow wildlife. Maintain a minimum 25 yards (68 m) distance from all other animals.
- If your presence alters an animal's behavior, you are too close.

Critical Wildlife Closures

There are both permanent and temporary wildlife closures every year in Denali. These areas are restricted to all entry and exist for the mutual protection of humans and critical wildlife species. It is your responsibility to recognize and respect the boundaries of these closures. Ask a ranger at the Backcountry Information Center for recent closure information. Failure to avoid closures may result in a citation.

Getting a Permit

Permits are available at the Backcountry Information Center (BIC) located adjacent to the Wilderness Access Center (WAC).

Allow approximately one hour for the permit process, which consists of five basic steps:

Step 1: Plan Your Itinerary

Visit www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/backcountry, and use this guide, maps, as well as other available references to preplan several alternative itineraries prior to your arrival in the park. Building flexibility into your plans is very important because certain units may be unavailable at the time you wish to obtain your permit. Remember to be conservative when predicting your daily mileage. There are no trails, and travel can be slow and difficult in brushy areas or when fording glacier rivers. Upon your arrival at the Backcountry Information Center, several additional resources such as unit description guides, local maps, and knowledgeable staff will be available to assist you in planning your trip.

Step 2: Watch Backcountry Video

This informative 30-minute video is presented at the BIC and before and after BIC hours at the WAC and answers many questions you might have about negotiating the Denali backcountry. It covers topics such as campsite selection, bear and wildlife encounters, river crossings, Leave No Trace principles, Bear Resistant Food Containers (BRFCs), and much more. All members of your party must view this program.

Step 3: Attend Safety Talk

Following the video, all party members must be present for a brief safety talk to receive the backcountry permit and BRFC required for proper food storage. You must sign your permit in recognition that you understand all backcountry rules and regulations. Violations of the conditions of the permit may result in adverse impacts to park resources and legal consequences.

Step 4: Delineate Your Map

Unit boundaries and wildlife closures are not marked in the backcountry. It is your responsibility to know their location. Fifteen minute (1 in = 1 mile) USGS topographic quad maps are strongly recommended and are available for purchase at the BIC or Alaska Geographic Bookstore. After obtaining the proper map(s), delineate unit boundaries and wildlife closure boundaries so that you will know where to hike and camp during your trip.

Step 5: Obtain Camper Bus Ticket

Access to most park backcountry units requires use of the Visitor Transportation System (VTS) of buses. Special Camper Buses that are built to accommodate people and their large backpacks depart the WAC several times a day. To secure space for your party, you should purchase tickets at the WAC soon after obtaining your backcountry permit. This bus system will take you to the start of your hike. When your trip is finished, or if you wish to move to another part of the park during the course of your trip, simply return to the park road and the next available VTS bus will pick you up.

For more information on the bus system, visit www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/visiting-denali.htm

Terrain of Denali

There are five major terrain categories in the Denali backcountry. Here's what you can expect:

- Gravel River Bars: these flat, rocky surfaces characterize most major rivers in the park and provide good travel routes.
- Wet Tundra: this terrain is marshy and interspersed with hummocks. Travel can be slow and tiring.
- Dry Tundra: dry tundra generally exists at higher elevations and affords good, solid footing and limited brush.
- Brushy Tundra: typically occurs in bands or thickets between 2500-3500 ft, and often limits visibility and travel speed.
- Glacial Moraine: located at the base of glaciers and often denoted on maps by stippled areas, a moraine consists of ice covered with dirt and debris. Travel is rough and time-consuming.

Understandably, many of the most popular units are predominately dry tundra terrain. However, permits for these units are also the most difficult to obtain, and sightings of other hikers are more common. We recommend you consider other less requested units that may require an initial extra effort to climb above the brushy tundra, but then offer large areas of dry tundra, as well as exceptional opportunities for solitude.

River Crossings

There are no bridges across rivers in the backcountry. You must negotiate your own river crossings and pack gear accordingly to keep dry in the event of an accidental swim. Water temperature is approximately 36° F (2° C), and immersion may result in hypothermia. Try to cross where the river is braided and dispersed, rather than concentrated into a single deep, narrow channel. Due to the high silt content of the water, it is often difficult to ascertain the true depth of the water. River depths can also vary widely during a trip depending on rainfall and temperatures. Glacial rivers generally run lower in early morning hours, so plan accordingly. Trekking poles or walking sticks are recommended for crossing.

Kennan Ward Photo

Glacier Crossings

Glaciers present numerous hazards, and any form of glacier travel will require extra preparation. If you plan to traverse the upper ice and snow portions of a glacier, carry appropriate equipment, such as ice axe and crampons and know how to use them. Crossing glacial moraines also presents many potential hazards, such as debris slides, ice caves, and uneven terrain.

Other Information

Bicycle Camping

If you wish to travel the Park Road by bike and camp outside of an established campground, you must obtain a backcountry permit at the Backcountry Information Center (BIC) and camp at least 0.5 mile (1.3 km) from the road with your tent out of view of the road. If you leave your bicycle overnight, it must be left 25 yards from the road and out of sight from road traffic. Bikes also must be adequately marked with the group name, backcountry permit number and date that they will be picked up. Reservations are required if you wish to stay overnight in campgrounds along the park road. To make reservations, call 1-800-622-7275 or 907-272-7275. Each Camper Bus can accommodate two bicycles.

Kennan Ward Photo

Caching

For extended backcountry treks, you may cache food and supplies in bear-proof food lockers located at any established campground area, the Wilderness Access Center, Toklat Road Camp, or Eielson Visitor Center. Label food/supplies with party name and date you intend to retrieve it. Denali National Park is not responsible for caches.

Mountaineering

If you intend to ascend Denali or Mt. Foraker, contact the Talkeetna Ranger Station at 907-733-2231 or visit www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/mountaineering. Applications for permits must be received at least 60 days in advance of your expedition date. Registration is also recommended for other climbs.

Camping in Southern Denali

Hiking and camping south of the crest of the Alaska Range requires additional preparation and skill. This area contains ice fields, sheer rock, heavily crevassed glaciers, extremely large rivers, and very dense brush. To obtain permits to camp in these areas, contact the Talkeetna Ranger Station at 907-733-2231.

Winter Camping

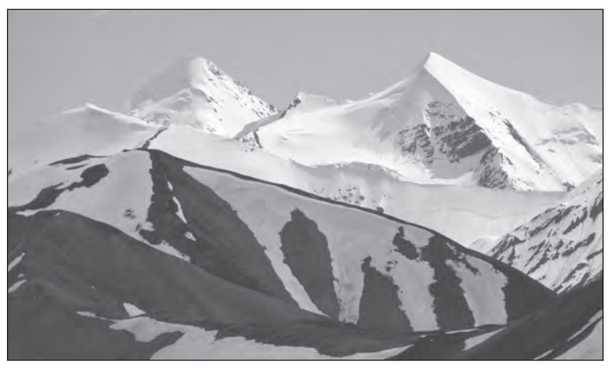
Denali is an amazing place to enjoy winter activities such as snowshoeing, skiing or dog mushing. During any of these activities, folks are welcome to camp overnight in the park, though they must acquire a (free) backcountry permit in person at the winter visitor center.

Packrafting

Travel by packraft can be both fun and rewarding. Denali's backcountry offers many possibilities for combining a day or overnight hike with packrafting. While there are many opportunities for beginners, the hazards and risks of any whitewater travel are great. You are responsible for understanding these risks and acquiring the skill and experience to be self-reliant. Never packraft alone.

Website

Visit Denali National Park's backcountry website at www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/backcountry



Bob Butterfield Photo

Leave No Trace and Safety

Camping

There are no established campsites in the Denali backcountry. Use the following guidelines when selecting your campsite:

- Your tent must be at least 0.5 mi (0.8 km) away from the park road and not visible from it or other developed areas.
- Camp on durable surfaces whenever possible such as gravel river bars, and avoid damaging fragile tundra.
- In pristine areas like Denali, avoid camping where others have camped.
- Do not move rocks, plants, antlers or artifacts; leave the area as you found it so that future hikers do not see signs of your use.

Kim Heacox Photo

Cooking

Campfires are not permitted in the Denali Wilderness. Fuel for portable camp stoves is available for purchase at the Riley Creek Mercantile, located next to Riley Creek Campground. When cooking, remain alert for bears; be ready to pack up and move quickly.

Drinking Water

Giardia and Cryptosporidium are bacteria found in unfiltered water and present serious health risks. Take one of the following precautions before drinking water from a natural source:

- Heat water to rolling boil.
- Use a water filter.
- Treat with iodine tablets.

If you use a water filter, remember that many of Denali's rivers carry glacial silt. This silt will quickly clog your water filter and render it inoperable. The addition of silt-stopper devices is highly recommended for any water filter.

Sanitation

Neither pit nor chemical toilets are available in the backcountry. You must follow these rules for proper waste disposal:

- Dig a hole at least 6 in (15 cm) deep and at least 100 ft (30 m) away from water for fecal waste disposal.
- Pack out all sanitation products, including used toilet paper.

Minimum Impact Hiking

To keep the Denali backcountry in pristine condition for others, please take care in how you hike.

- Hike on durable surfaces whenever possible, such as gravel river bars.
- Avoid hiking single file; spread out and disperse to prevent the formation of social trails.

Gear Checklist

The following equipment is highly recommended when venturing out into the Denali backcountry:

- Hiking boots (waterproofed) and wool socks.
- Trekking poles and gaiters for river crossings.
- Rain jacket and pants (ponchos not recommended).
- Polypropylene, nylon, or wool clothing (avoid cotton). Be prepared for temperatures ranging from 30° to 80° F (-1° to 27° C) in the summer months.
- Stove, fuel, cookware and water bottles.
- A way to treat water.
- Compass and map (maps available at BIC).
- Toilet paper and trowel.
- Tent with rain fly and waterproof floor (bivouacking is not recommended).
- Sleeping bag and pad (for any overnight summer trip, protection to 20° F (-7° C) is suggested).
- Insect repellent and/or head net.
- Emergency gear, such as first aid kit, knife, and a signaling device such as a whistle, signal mirror, or flare.
- Large plastic or waterproof bags to protect the gear inside your pack.

LEAVE NO TRACE OUTDOOR ETHICS
www.lnt.org

For more information contact:

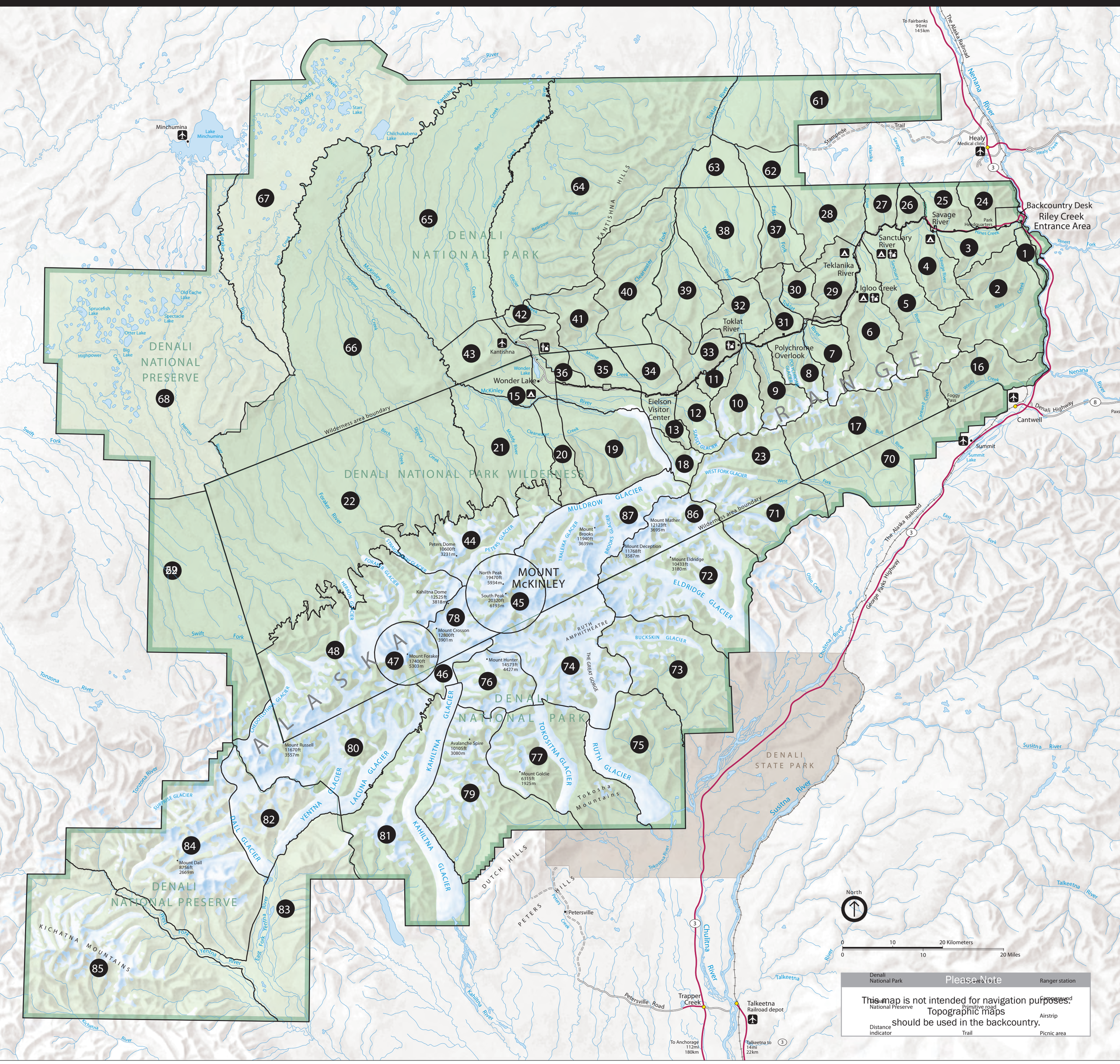
Backcountry Information Center
Denali National Park and Preserve
PO Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Phone: May - Sept. 907-683-9590
Oct. - April 907-683-2294

E-mail: denali_info@nps.gov

Backcountry Website:
www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/backcountry.htm

Backcountry Units



No.	Name	BRFC	Quota	Acreage
1	Triple Lakes	X	12	6,567
2	Riley Creek	X	12	79,533
3	Jenny Creek	X	4	22,740
4	Upper Savage	X	6	32,578
5	Upper Sanctuary	X	6	67,066
6	Upper Teklanika	X	6	54,011
7	Upper East Fork	X	4	24,255
8	Polychrome Glaciers	X	6	23,379
9	East Branch Upper Toklat	X	6	26,250
10	West Branch Upper Toklat	X	6	31,432
11	Stony Dome	X	2	8,693
12	Sunset/Sunrise Glaciers	X	4	21,077
13	Mount Eielson	X	4	14,851
14	McKinley Bar East	X	4	17,432
15	McKinley Bar West	X	4	21,094
16	Windy Creek	X	8	39,076
17	Foggy and Easy Pass	X	8	88,405
18	Upper Glacier Creek	X	4	12,471
19	Pirate Creek	X	4	69,236
20	McGonagall Pass	X	4	25,079
21	Muddy River	X	8	81,830
22	Upper Foraker	rec.	unl.	371,494
23	West Fork Glacier	X	8	64,848
24	Mount Healy	X	4	20,424
25	Healy Ridge	X	4	20,403
26	Primrose Ridge	X	4	9,679
27	Mount Wright	X	4	14,412
28	Sushana River	X	8	45,457
29	Igloo Mountain	X	4	27,763
30	Tributary Creek	X	4	14,960
31	Polychrome Mountain	X	6	18,788
32	Middle Toklat	X	4	29,421

No.	Name	BRFC	Quota	Acreage
33	Stony Hill	X	4	30,119
34	Mount Galen	X	4	22,769
35	Moose Creek	X	4	19,732
36	Jumbo Creek	X	2	8,195
37	Lower East Fork	X	6	29,421
38	Lower Toklat	X	6	68,476
39	Stony Creek	X	4	45,130
40	Clearwater Fork	X	12	82,532
41	Spruce Peak	X	12	32,317
42	Eureka Creek	X	12	16,127
43	Eldorado Creek	X	12	32,542
44	Peters Glacier	--	unl.	75,233
45	Mount McKinley	--	unl.	50,011
46	Upper Kahiltna	--	unl.	24,480
47	Mount Foraker	--	unl.	32,008
48	Herron Glacier	--	unl.	177,513
61	Stampede	rec.	unl.	121,934
62	Southeast Stampede	rec.	unl.	21,864
63	Southwest Stampede	rec.	unl.	25,367
64	Kantishna Hills	rec.	unl.	322,355
65	Moose-McKinley	rec.	unl.	312,189
66	McKinley-Birch	rec.	unl.	311,395
67	Birch-Foraker Preserve	rec.	unl.	282,635
68	Heron-Highpower Preserve		unl.	410,396
69	Swift Fork	rec.	unl.	155,143
70	Bull River	rec.	unl.	84,464
71	Ohio Creek	rec.	unl.	39,887
72	Eldridge Glacier	--	unl.	177,309
73	Buckskin Glacier	--	unl.	99,896
74	Upper Ruth	--	unl.	104,656
75	Lower Ruth	--	unl.	96,070
76	Mount Hunter	--	unl.	39,752

No.	Name	BRFC	Quota	Acreage
77	Tokositna Glacier	--	unl.	144,861
78	Middle Kahiltna	rec.	unl.	11,905
79	Little Switzerland	--	unl.	121,150
80	Upper Yentna-Lacuna	--	unl.	124,748
81	Lower Kahiltna	rec.	unl.	144,403
82	Dall-Yentna Preserve	--	unl.	69,480
83	Yentna River Preserve	rec.	unl.	130,689
84	Mount Dall Preserve	rec.	unl.	197,565
85	Kitchatna Preserve	rec.	unl.	247,423
86	Mount Mather	--	unl.	41,368
87	Mount Brooks	--	unl.	97,065

X = BRFC required
rec. = BRFC recommended