



Mesa Verde Fire History

Wildfire plays a major role in shaping the ecology of Mesa Verde National Park and southwest Colorado. It has an important ecological influence on Mesa Verde's vegetation growth, change, and renewal. Historically, over 95 percent of all recorded wildfires within the park have been started by lightning. The remaining five percent have been human caused. Seventy percent of the park has been burned by wildfires since the park was established in 1906.

Each summer monsoon season often starts with "dry" lightning. Because the lower atmosphere and ground are so dry at the beginning of some monsoon seasons, little to no rain reaches the ground. But lightning still does. Dry lightning, combined with drought conditions has sparked all of the recent large wildfires throughout the park.

An average of 19 lightning wildfires has occurred each year since the Balcony House Complex Fire in 2003. But none of these fires grew to a large size due to factors such as fire suppression, favorable weather, lack of vegetation from recent fires and fuel reduction efforts.

Major Fires (larger than 30 acres) at Mesa Verde since 1906

Year	Fire	Park Acreage	Cause	Vegetation Burned
1934	Wickiup Point	286	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
1934	Wildhorse	1,943	Lightning	Mountain Shrub
1951	Park Entrance	36	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper/Sage
1959	Morefield	1,188	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
1972	Rock Springs	680	Lightning	Mountain Shrub
1972	Moccasin Mesa	1,080	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
1989	Long Mesa	2,600	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
1996	Chapin 5	4,781	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
2000	Bircher	19,607	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
2000	Pony	1,352	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
2002	Long Mesa	2,601	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper
2003	Balcony House Complex	450	Lightning	Pinyon/Juniper

[Click here to find a link for a fire map](#)

Recent Large Wildfires At Mesa Verde

Over the last fourteen years, five large wildfires have burned in Mesa Verde National Park. Just over 28,750 acres (more than 50 percent of the park) burned within park boundaries in these fires. Large wildfires such as Chapin 5, Bircher, Pony, Long Mesa, and the Balcony House Complex Fires threaten park infrastructure, cultural and natural resources and human safety. They are also expensive to fight with suppression costs often exceeding one million dollars.



Chapin 5 Fire (1996)

The Chapin 5 Fire burned in August of 1996. The fire grew to 4,781 acres, all within the park. There were 649 firefighters, five helicopters, five airtankers and 16 fire engines assigned to this fire at its peak. The final cost for suppression was \$2 million.

View of the Chapin 5 Fire from the Far View Visitor Center.



Bircher Fire (2000)

July, 2000 was a hot month with almost no rain. Wildfire conditions were extremely dangerous in SW Colorado.

About 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, July 20th, fire from a lightning strike was spotted on the Bircher farm, private property near the entrance of the park. Because of the rapid spread of this fire toward the park entrance, the only road out of the park, an immediate evacuation of the park was declared. Nearly 1,000 visitors were evacuated in a timely and orderly manner. Firefighters from around the nation worked for nine days to contain the most destructive fire in the 94 year history of the park.

The fire burned 23,607 acres including 19,607 acres in the park. There were 1,016 firefighters, five helicopters, six airtankers and 61 fire engines assigned to the fire. 110,000 gallons of water were dropped from helicopters along with 427,670 gallons of fire retardant dropped from airtankers. One structure was lost and one was severely damaged. The final cost of suppression was \$5.6 million.

Bircher Fire behind Park Point in Morefield Canyon and beyond. Photo taken from Hwy 160, north of the park.



Pony Fire (2000)

At 6:00 a.m. on Friday, August 4th, 2000, Mesa Verde National Park was opened to visitors for the first time in two weeks following the devastating Bircher Fire. A near record number of visitors came that day, but at 6:00 p.m., the park was evacuated again because the Pony Fire threatened visitor safety.

On the previous Wednesday, a lightning strike near Pony Canyon on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation started a fire that blew out of control on early Friday. Mesa Verde National Park suffered heavy damage from this second fire within a month. The park remained closed until Monday, August 14th. The final size of the fire was 5,420 acres. Of this total, 1,352 acres were within the park. 508 firefighters, four helicopters and 24 fire engines fought the fire. 605,750 gallons of water were dropped from helicopters along with 232,057 gallons of fire retardant from airtankers. Three structures were lost along with four that were severely damaged, valued at one million dollars. The final cost of suppressing this fire was \$2.86 million.

Pony Fire in Rock Canyon.



Long Mesa Fire about six hours after start up. Wide angle view of plume from Far View.

Long Mesa Fire (2002)

The summer of 2002 brought extremely dry conditions and record breaking fuel moistures. Firefighters spent a great deal of time and effort reducing hazardous fuels in the developed area of the park, which included park headquarters, the museum, offices, and park employee homes. When the Long Mesa Fire started about 2:00 p.m. on July 29th, winds pushed the fire directly toward this developed area. Steep canyons with extensive rim rock and vertical slopes presented major obstacles to firefighting efforts. On Friday, August 2nd monsoonal rains helped to bring the fire in check. By Monday, August 5th, the fire was 100 percent contained. Because of the extensive hazardous fuels reduction work that was completed and the preparedness of park staff, only two buildings were lost and all park employees and visitors were safely evacuated. The final size of the fire was 2,601 acres.



Balcony House Complex Fire.

Balcony House Complex Fire (2003)

On July 15, 2003 at approximately 5:30 p.m., a dry thunderstorm cell passed over Mesa Verde National Park with multiple lightning strikes. Due to the extreme drought conditions, fuel moisture, and record breaking high temperatures, a series of small fires erupted along the southern ridgetops in the park and on the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Reservation. Park visitors and employees were evacuated by 7:30 p.m. that evening. By the next morning, the fire was estimated to be 400 acres in size. Since the Balcony House Complex Fire burned in steep terrain, the initial attack was by air with limited ground support. Additional aerial support and ground crews arrived early on the evening of July 16th. Multiple federal agencies and local fire departments assisted in the effort. There were no threats to the alcove archeological sites (cliff dwellings) or structures within the park. The Balcony House Complex consisted of five fires, burning 450 acres in the park and approximately 2,500 acres on the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park.