

Day 5 ~ Friday 25 July, Denali National Park.



The alarm is set for 5:00 am but the hotel subtracts 15 min. We are going to Denali. Breakfast is family style, and the only inferior meal we have on the whole trip.

Today is beautiful. Our driver, Cassie, has not seen the sun in weeks. The first 15 miles are paved and open to anyone. The remainder, 62 miles in total, are only open to licensed tour busses and green Park Busses which stop on demand for hikers.

In 1908 researcher Charles Sheldon recognized the importance of this natural area and lobbied Congress to set aside 2 million acres. In 1980, 4 million acres were added to the *Wilderness* designation. 6 million acres makes Denali the third largest National Park in the USA.



Ptarmigan.



Snow Shoe Hair.



Red Fox and Cubs.



[Mt. McKinley.](#)

At the end of the road 92 miles away is Kantishna, founded as a gold mining town before the park was established in 1917.

Cassie, who has degrees in Natural Science and Botany, tells us to shout *stop* if we spot anything interesting. Then describe its location using a clock for reference. The front of the bus is 12 o'clock. We can lower the windows to take photographs.

We have barely started when a cow Moose says hello. This is the Taiga forest (*Land of little sticks.*)

A suicidal hair runs across the road.

Around a bend Mt. McKinley comes into sight 70 miles away. The view is incredible, no clouds. The south peak at 20,370ft and north at 19,470 are glinting pink and gold. Fewer than 5% of park visitors enjoy this view. The base is at 2000 ft, above this the peak rises 18,000ft making it the greatest vertical rise on earth. (*Everest is stepped.*)

A ptarmigan, state bird of Alaska, stares up as we pass. A section of the park is off limits. We glimpse a Red Fox and her cubs.

We cross Tom Savage River. At the 15 mile marker a Ranger boards the bus to welcome us. Another spectacular view of alpine scenery and Mt. McKinley.

The coach is fitted with a new video camera and drop-down TV's. Cassie zooms in (100:1) on mama Grey Wolf and two cubs.

There are 22 types of willow but at 3000ft the trees stop and scrubby tundra starts. In the distance is Mt. Fox.

The Teklanika River has *little water, much gravel*. Near Igloo Creek, Arctic Ground Squirrels feed by the side of the road. High above us a few white dots move, they are Dall Sheep. About a mile away a Grizzly hunts for berries.

Their diet is 86% vegetarian.



Denali Panorama.

The Brown Bear is divided into three groups, all the same species. The Grizzly, 600lb, lives inland, the Coastal 1200lb and the largest, the Kodiak 3000lb. There is a small chance of a bear encounter, so we learn how to behave. Make noise, never run, walk backwards. Their vision is poor, so they rely upon hearing and rapid movement to differentiate prey from uninteresting humans. Bears are not true hibernators because their metabolism does not slow. In preparation for winter they will eat 200,000 berries a day.

Four Caribou hide in a stream bed.

The Snowshoe Hair population has peaked, so too has the wolf population. A Grey Wolf trots by. She has been tagged with a radio collar. As the Alpha female, she is the only one allowed by the pack to breed. In the park, there are 95 wolves in 17 packs.



Dall Sheep, the white dots.

Polychrome Pass shows off its bright colors. At Sable Pass, on a hairpin bend, Cassie slides by an oncoming bus. "I just close my eyes," she says.

Kettle ponds are left over from the last ice age. At Stony Dome, mile 62, we stop and turn around. It is 3500ft. The trees are stunted. To show significant growth they need 50 days with temperatures above 50°F.

We have enjoyed the *Grand Slam*. That is, we have seen the four major animals *and* Mt. McKinley.



Arctic Ground Squirrel.



Polychrome Pass.



Sable Pass.