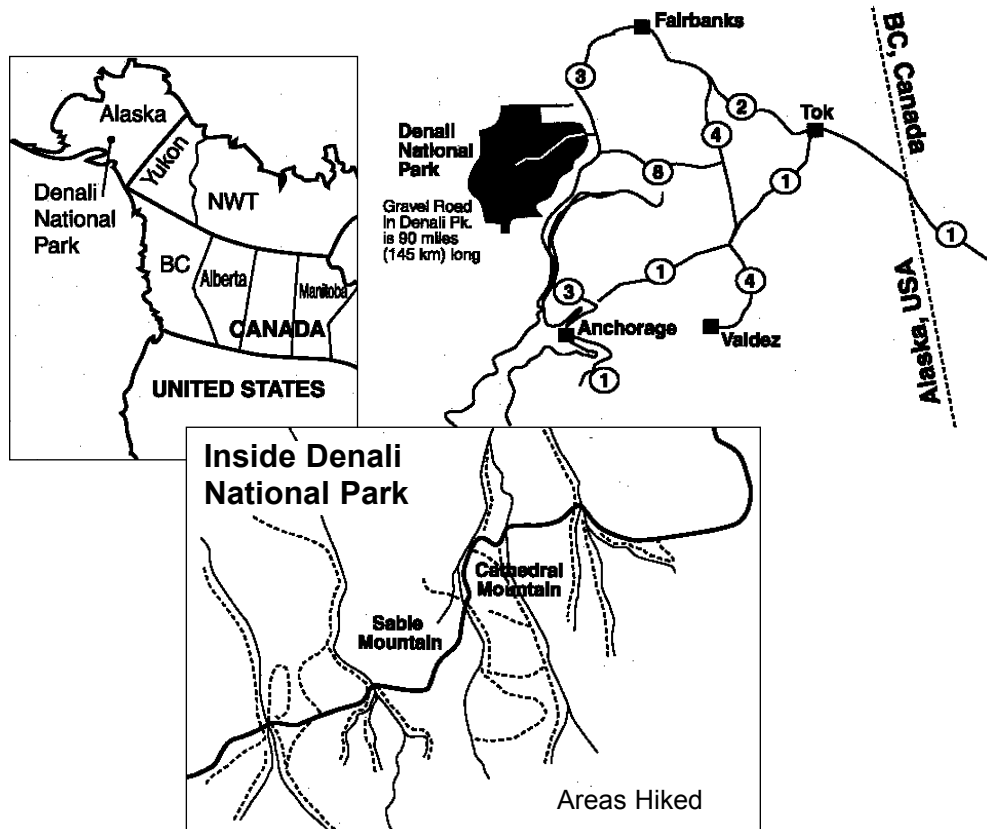


The Main Areas I Hiked in North America

Denali National Park, Alaska

Denali National Park is just West of Highway Number 3 between Fairbanks and Anchorage, Alaska.

Denali National Park

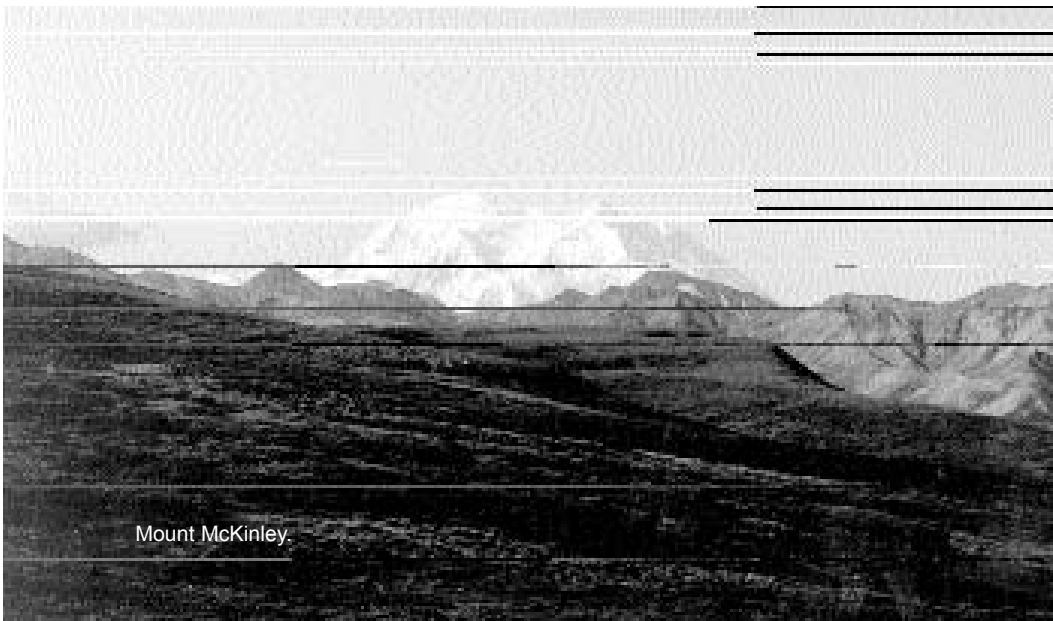


Denali is a very picturesque region of Alaska, and a National Park, which is situated inland between the cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks, is well known for its large bear population.

Park officials at Denali are very safety conscious, and they always urge campers to use the triangle method of camping. With this advice in mind, I began my first hike up Tatler creek. School buses supplied by the federal government take tourists up the 50 mile (80 kilometer) on a gravel road through the park every hour or two during the summer. The round trip takes more than 8 hours.

I got off the bus about one-third of the way along the road, directly north of Cathedral Mountain, and hiked up Tatler Creek. The scenery is spectacular, especially because the area is above the tree line. Most of this park is in the alpine zone, so this is one of the best areas in the world to see grizzlies, caribou, and dall sheep. There are few trees in the area, and I could easily see dall sheep on the high-mountain tops. Blueberries were abundant on the hill-sides, and I knew I was camping where grizzlies would be roaming. I set up camp that evening on a ridge with a marvellous view. I placed my gear well away from my tent and campfire.

The next morning, I woke up to the pattering of a light rain. Dark clouds were blanketing the mountain tops. By noon the sun had beaten the clouds away and I could see the tallest mountain in North America which is Mount McKinley at 20,320 feet (6,194 meters). This mountain is spectacular to look at.



The mountain makes its own weather and a normal summer in Denali consists of rain or snow with the sun appearing every sixth day or so. I hiked down to the stream and followed a trail parallel to a small creek. An adult grizzly emerged from behind a hill and immediately charged me. I stood still, hoping he was just testing me. When the bear was about 70 feet (20 meters) away, he veered off to my right. The charge had been a bluff.

It is not unusual for a bear to come running towards an unwanted visitor, then abruptly stop and retreat. Bears do this to see if the intruder will run, which would be futile, because bears are extremely fast. If I had run, the bear would have become even more excited and would soon have had me for lunch. It is difficult to remain calm as you watch a charging bear, but this is the key to survival.

The grizzly was now beside the stream, and behind him I noticed a caribou carcass. This explained why he had charged. My presence was perceived as an intrusion into his feeding spot, and he was trying to scare me off. I had interfered with him as he dined, and I, like any other animal that might have inadvertently wandered into his territory, had to be dealt with.

I slowly backed away to a nearby ridge, where I could safely observe the bear and his meal. I noticed blood on the caribou. This meant that the bear had probably killed the animal within the past few hours. A few moments later, a silver fox strolled along the shoreline of the creek. The bear saw it and charged. I sympathized with the fox. Nevertheless, the fox quickly retreated and the bear returned to his food.

Fifteen minutes later, the fox was back once again. Apparently it had not understood the first message-or else it was too hungry to care. The grizzly, unaware that the interloper had returned, continued to eat. The fox moved around the grizzly and began to approach from the opposite side. This foolish fox was trying to sneak up on the carcass, but all that he managed to do was get himself into a face-to-face encounter with the grizzly. This time, all the bear had to do was glare at the pesky would-be thief, which finally clued in and retreated, making its way upstream through the bushes. Tired of being disturbed, the grizzly laid down and went to sleep. The sun was dipping below the mountains, so I returned to my campsite.

The next day, the familiar looking clouds were back. I kept an eye on the threatening sky as I began to hike along the bank of the Toklat River. I was now 11 miles (18 kilometers) from Tatler creek with spectacular alpine meadows in any direction I chose to hike. I was on a steep, grassy slope when I noticed a grizzly standing on his hind legs about 100 feet (30 meters) away. He looked at me for a moment, then dropped down and headed out of sight. This encounter was not as exciting as the day before, but better than nothing.

I continued hiking and was in front of a grassy knoll, when I heard a grunting noise. Two young grizzlies appeared and began walking towards me. I slowly began to move to my left, but even this controlled movement excited one of the bears, which broke into a run. When he was 40 feet (12 meters) away, I realized he was not bluffing. This bear was going to come all the way.

I immediately dropped to the ground and protected my head with my hands and arms. This was more excitement than I had counted on. The bear was right beside me, and I was an easy target. I didn't smell very appetizing perhaps, because after the bear had sniffed most of my body, he ran to the hill-side to join his companion. I was very nervous, but I sat up. The 2 bears were still within sight, but in a few moments they had both disappeared. It took me several days to stop shaking.

Later that week, while I was hiking near the Sable Mountains, I spotted a grizzly sow with 2 cubs. Fully recovered from my previous encounter, I watched the family with keen interest. They were feeding on some nearby grass and berries, but the sow appeared agitated and began pacing rapidly, her nose close to the ground. Then she got extremely excited, stood on her hind legs and looked intently at some rocks. The quick movements of the mother bear got the cubs excited too, and they began to circle their mother.



"Stay here and I will try to catch that squirrel".