

One of the world's first eco-lodges, **CAMP DENALI** is an ideal jumping-off place for exploring America's greatest wilderness, with wolves, bears, and caribou, all in the shadow of our grandest peak. BY JEFF FAIR / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOAO CANZIANI

# mountain.



A high-altitude mountain landscape, likely Mount McKinley (Denali), featuring snow-covered peaks and a bright sun creating lens flares. The word "high!" is written in a stylized font across the upper portion of the image.

# high!

Top of the world: The awe-inspiring ram-parts of 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, also known as Denali.

**W**olves. Wild, legendary Alaskan wolves. Four of them, just a couple of hundred yards downslope near Caribou Creek. No, five. Six! Eleven, eventually, when we see them all. The entire Grant Creek Wolf Pack is gathered here, at rest, noses in the wind. Sniffing for caribou, perhaps, or more likely Dall sheep, hiding down near the creek as they attempt to cross between higher ridges. Indeed, all 20 of us, including our driver, a trained naturalist, at first thought the alpha female was a sheep carcass, so light is her coat. But in the binoculars we see instead a wolf, blonde from nose to tail tip, soaking up the September sunshine. We have entered a land of high drama in Denali National Park.

From the park entrance we have crossed the Savage River, where the pavement ends and private vehicles are turned back by park regulations. Within the hour we climb out of the boreal forest onto the tundra. Huge open valleys spread before us, winding miles back up into the high and rugged Alaska Range, gray and snow-laden. Today is the first of September, autumn colors at their peak and the landscape aglow, a thick rolling carpet of carotene red accented here and there by the yellow, gold, and amber of paper birch, aspen, and willow.

Along our way we have spotted golden eagles, Dall sheep, and a pair of grizzlies foraging by the road. ("Oh, my God," a woman sitting near me whispered, "they're right there!") Several bands of

## Leave all antlers and wildflowers where you find them; eat a few berries for communion but leave some for the spruce grouse; respect the natural quiet; and don't get the bears in trouble.

caribou wander about as well. But caribou and bears are not so elusive as wolves, and our encounter with these wild canids delivers the surest proof that we have entered the wild heart of Denali.

Satisfied by our wolf sighting, we climb back into the little Camp Denali bus and return to our rolling seminar, led by our guide, knowledgeable, it seems, in all facets of Alaskan lore and natural history. Our destination lies hours away, some 90 miles into the center of six-million-acre Denali National Park and Preserve, a protected area larger than Massachusetts. This epic wilderness includes the tallest and most massive mountain in North America. Once called Mount McKinley (20,320 feet), it is better known locally by its Athabascan name, Denali: the "High One," or simply "The Mountain." Back in there near the dead end of the park road, on a bench overlooking Moose Creek and with a full view of The Mountain, we will find our shelter in the cozy cabins of Camp Denali, our base of operations for the next several days.

The term *ecotourism* had not yet been coined when Camp Denali was conceived more than a half-century ago, but this tiny lodge may well be the nation's—if not the world's—first ecotourism establishment. As many who have visited it will attest, it may also be the finest. Founded in 1952—which is to say, homesteaded, in the true Alaskan sense—Camp Denali was and remains a cluster of cabins in the open boreal forest where friends and visitors have an opportunity to venture forth and actually experience the countryside. While most park sightseers are ushered into buses to "see" the park in a day or two, Camp Denali guests stay in this tiny backcountry community for three, four, or seven nights—

long enough to shed their frenetic schedules, touch the land, and discover again the intimate relationship between wild nature and human nature in a most inspiring, extraordinary landscape.

We arrive at camp in the gathering twilight, weary from the relentless grandeur. Denali itself is obscured by clouds, but a smiling staff welcomes us out into the brisk mountain air and assigns us to our accommodations. I walk downhill from the lodge past Nugget Pond and find mine, "Little Maude" (named after a local, historic gold mine), nestled in a copse of spruce. Inside, a handmade quilt covers the bed and a volume of Robert Service sits on the nightstand. Service, a Yukon Gold Rush poet from a century ago, was among the first to notice that many a prospector who failed to find gold in the area fell in love with the land instead. *"Yet it isn't the gold that I'm wanting,"* he wrote from the wild North. *"It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder / It's the forests where silence has lease / It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder / It's the stillness that thrills me with peace."*

Here, in that stillness, we will sleep tonight.

**I**n the morning Denali continues to hide behind the weather. After breakfast in the dining hall the staff encourages us to get busy exploring the countryside with the camp guides. I opt to join a handful of companions for a moderate hike up Cloudberry Ridge, a shrubby knoll that provides a front seat to the High One. Along our way, just a few hundred yards downslope from camp on the bank of Moose Creek, we visit the migration station, a bird-banding lab supported until recently by the lodge (it is now closed). Here we meet a handful of young biologists who monitor 12 mist nets scattered through several creekside habitats and gently disentangle any ambushed wayfarers to take immediate measurements and attach a numbered leg band. Only one dark-eyed junco, now sporting a new bracelet, has volunteered this morning, but more than 10,000 birds have been banded here over nine years by researchers doing surveillance on avian flu in the wild bird population.

We cross the creek and begin to climb, sidestepping ripe stands of cranberries and crowberries down at boot-sole level, and soon gain the rhythm of the trail and our own heartbeats. In the mud beneath a cover of willows, we pause to observe the recent imprints of grizzly bear feet, a notable discovery and a reminder of our place in the wild world. We take our lunch (sandwiches we made ourselves with the best homemade bread I've had in years, fresh from the camp's oven) on a knoll near the ridgetop on the lush red tundra among the single blossoms of tiny violet-blue mountain harebells, poking their heads three inches above the rocky soil. Aside from the sound of our voices, all is quiet. We look across the way to the Kantishna Hills and down the local creeks of miners' dreams a century ago. The rufous meadows are steeped with solemn spruce and sprinkled with the promised gold of autumn aspen. A mile or so north of us, front and center, we see our humble string of little cottages in the scattered timber above Moose Creek.

**Clockwise from top left: Camp visitors spy a grizzly bear at the side of the road while riding on the bus to the lodge; Moose Creek flows down the hill from Camp Denali; the Coles' daughter, Jenna, and son-in-law, Simon Hamm, have taken over as managers of the camp, continuing the tradition of sustainable tourism with a focus on preserving the view.**

One rainy summer afternoon in 1951, three adventuresome souls had wandered there, searching for a piece of land with a view of The Mountain. Celia Hunter and Ginny Hill, both Women's Air Force service pilots in World War II, and Morton (Woody) Wood, a pilot, mountaineer, and McKinley Park ranger who married Ginny in 1950, had hiked the Alps in Austria and Switzerland,



sleeping in huts built along the trails. When they found themselves in Alaska they pondered the idea of opening a backcountry camp where other adventurous travelers could rest in comfort and easily set out to see the country. That cloud-ridden day the trio left wondering whether there was a view of The Mountain from Nugget Pond. They asked the local park ranger to check it out when the weather cleared, and to let them know. His postcard reply read simply, "Wow!" That September they staked their claim here for a trade and manufacturing site under the Homestead Act, which included a provision that made it possible for them to build a "resort" within a mile of what was then the boundary of the park, which was created in 1917. Before snowfall they had built two tent-cabins. Camp Denali accepted its first guests in the spring of 1952.

Now 90 and living in her longtime cabin in Fairbanks, Ginny recounts, "The land told us what it wanted to be—and what we shouldn't do." She and her companions listened. They kept the camp small, so as not to overtax the wilderness. "We wanted to offer a quality experience as opposed to mass production," Woody, 84, told me from his home in Seattle, where he still splits his own firewood. Seventeen cabins seemed enough, and camp simply stopped growing at that point.

After 11 years Woody ventured off. By 1975 Ginny and Celia were busy with conservation work and decided to sell Camp Denali. One interested buyer shared his plans for a 200-room hotel on the site. But when he came to visit and experienced the close-to-the-earth spirit, he told Ginny and Celia, "If I were you, I wouldn't sell to me either."

Fortunately, there was a young family interested in running Camp Denali in its traditional way. Wally Cole, a solid man with a ready smile and an appreciation for conservation values, had worked at the park hotel and frequently hitchhiked out to camp to help out. He and his wife, Jerri, a nurse and naturalist with a similar love of the wild, had tea with the owners in 1975 and discussed their interest. The Coles had few assets at the time, so Ginny and Celia accepted two of Wally's handmade rocking chairs as a down payment.

**T**oday Camp Denali is run by the Coles' daughter and son-in-law, Jenna and Simon Hamm. Simon, a mountaineer with Christopher Reeve handsomeness who has summited The Mountain, is now general manager. (He also serves on the board of Audubon Alaska.) While continuing as a strong force in the family business, Jenna devotes most of her time to raising the couple's 16-month-old daughter.

Camp has changed little in spirit over the years. Guest lodging is now comprised of wooden cabins (the tents were moved upslope for staff housing)—but there are only 18 of them, housing the same maximum number of guests as in the early days. Every cottage has a striking, unblemished vista of The High One, as well as its own private detached outhouse, which also has a view of Denali through a strategically placed heart-shaped cutout in the door. Each cabin has a woodstove (temperatures can range from 30 to 80 degrees

**Clockwise from top left: Paddling on Wonder Lake, with Denali in the distance; intern Yoel Kirschner holds a dark-eyed junco as he bands birds at the Camp Denali Migration Station; camp accommodations are rustic cabins with stunning surroundings; (from left) interns Tiffany Harvey and Yoel Kirschner and station manager Trish Rodriguez talking about the day's work ahead at the banding station.**

Fahrenheit on a summer day); if you want heat, you kindle your own fire. An endless supply of dry spruce in the wood box, along with a tin of magic fire starter, make the job easier. Water for tea or coffee must be carried in from a spigot outside.

In the spirit of its founders, Camp Denali is reducing its impact on the wilderness it celebrates. Since the early 1980s the Coles have used a hot-tub-sized impoundment on No Name Creek for everything from small-scale hydropower to water for drinking, laundry, and even a modest

shower house with flush commodes. Today, under the Hamms' direction, even more environment-friendly features have been added. All camp buses and generators now run on biodiesel. The hydroelectric generator has been fine-tuned and supplemented with solar panels that are used to power fluorescent and LED lighting. Solar energy also runs a heat exchanger in the shower that turns 45-degree groundwater into comfortable shower temperatures. Beneath the solar cells, the Potlatch, a brand-new dining hall, serves fresh baked goods and epicurean breakfasts and dinners. Lettuce, herbs, as well as many lovely daisies, snapdragons, sunflowers, and nasturtium blossoms are grown in the camp greenhouse, which is warmed by waste heat from the generators.

**A**fter lunch we fan apart to cross the trackless tundra; where there is no trail, we avoid creating one by traveling single file. Soon we wander across an invisible boundary into federally designated wilderness, which constitutes one-third of the park and preserve and for which all others require a special permit to visit. In 1980 the protected area was expanded to six million acres while the original two million acres were designated as wilderness to sustain the integrity of its populations of wolves, bears, caribou, and bighorn sheep and their ecosystems, the park's original mission. Because guided hikes within park boundaries were a part of the founders' business, that right was grandfathered only to Camp Denali (now a private inholding).

Additional camp etiquette: Leave all antlers and wildflowers where you find them; eat a few berries for communion but leave some for the spruce grouse; respect the natural quiet; and don't get the bears in trouble by surprising, crowding, or enticing them. At the apex of our journey we are rewarded as the clouds evaporate and the mighty Denali shows itself at last, high above us and lording over the train of 7,000-footers at its base, metamorphic rock glowing like polished ivory and surprisingly massive, even from 30 miles away.

During the next few days we continue to wander in the wilds of Denali. One group of intrepid explorers bushwhacks a couple

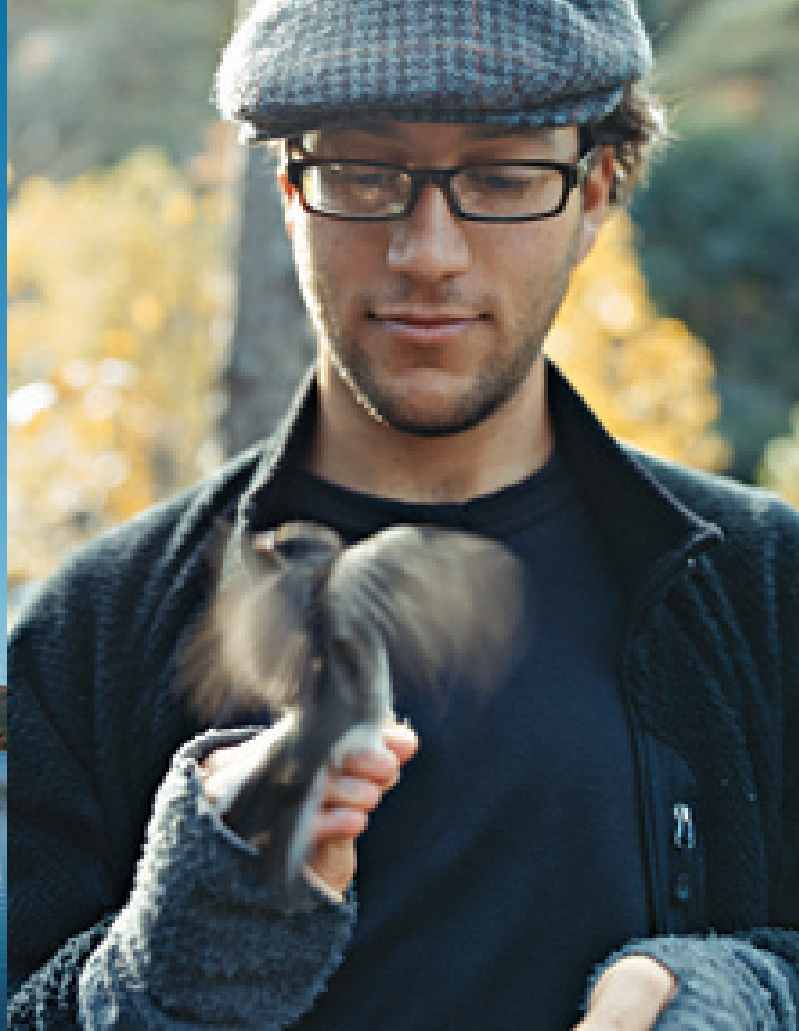
## Denali: Making the Trip

Camp Denali offers rustic cabins, June through mid-September, in the heart of Denali National Park ([www.nps.gov/dena](http://www.nps.gov/dena)), as well as guest speakers, workshops, and varied seasonal activities. See [www.campdenali.com](http://www.campdenali.com) or contact [info@campdenali.com](mailto:info@campdenali.com)

for information. Most of the estimated 1,000 annual visitors spend at least one night in Fairbanks or Anchorage prior to traveling to the camp. (Those arriving via Fairbanks International Airport must arrive in the city at least one day earlier.) From Fairbanks, ride the Alaska Railroad (reserva-

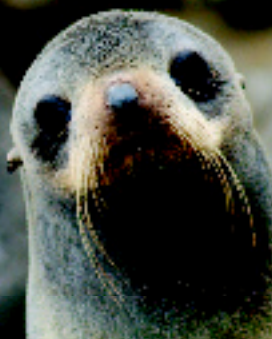
tions required: [www.akrr.com](http://www.akrr.com)) to the station just inside the Denali National Park entrance. Drivers should allow ample time to reach the railroad station (at least six hours from Anchorage; three from Fairbanks). Same-day bus service from Anchorage is also available. Travelers must meet the camp's blue-and-white

buses at the station by 12:20 p.m.; buses depart no later than 1:30, and a picnic lunch is served en route. At trip's end, all guests arrive by bus at the railroad station in time for same-day trains to Anchorage and Fairbanks. Making reservations before the New Year for the following summer is advisable.—J.F.



# ST. PAUL ISLAND TOURS

Alaska's Pribilofs



## Experience St. Paul Island Expeditions



14 Rookeries  
supporting over  
500,000  
Fur Seals

Seabird colonies:

Crested Auklet,

Red-legged Kittiwake,

Red-faced Cormorant...



Arctic Fox and Reindeer



Brilliant Showcase  
of Wildflowers

Historic Russian

Church and

Native Aleut Culture



ST. PAUL ISLAND TOURS

877-424-5637  
www.alaskabirding.com

We cross the creek and begin to climb, sidestepping ripe stands of cranberries and crowberries down at boot-sole level, and soon gain the rhythm of the trail and our own heartbeats.

of miles to the lower Muldrow Glacier, a strenuous trek culminating with the cerulean hues of glacial snow, packed solid and carried some 30 miles from the snowfields on Denali itself. Others take the uphill romp and climb the 2,000-foot ridge behind camp to have tea on top with the ptarmigan.

The best-known lake in the park, Wonder Lake, was named not for its reflection of The Mountain but for its mere presence. A Gold Rush miner, surprised when he saw it for the first time, marveled, "I wonder how we missed this before." Curious about the fate of a pair of loons down there, I offer to lead a canoe expedition to check on them. I have studied loons for 30 years, including the rare yellow-billed loons of Alaska's Arctic. As a small group of us climbs into the canoes waiting on shore, we hear a wail from down lake. Minutes later we see the pair—dark, satiny heads, shell-white necklaces, chess-board plumage on their backs—moving easily across the lake toward us. They have no chick with them but remain close together as a mated pair. No question they're the Wonder Lake pair. Why do they have no young? Perhaps they refrained from nesting this year, or maybe their attempt failed. Their traditional site is precariously close to the busy Wonder Lake campground, but there are predators here, too. Perhaps the pair hatched chicks and lost them to an eagle or an owl. I look where I had seen their nest five years earlier but find no sign. Still, the couple seems to be in good spirits. So are we.

On one of our last afternoons several of us hike to an overlook with views of Wonder Lake and the Muldrow Glacier and, as always, the panoramic mountain backdrop. We stumble across the tiny white blossoms of bell heather—a denizen of the high Arctic—drooping above its thick mat of evergreen foliage. Our guide points out the fine-haired pellet of a short-eared owl, coughed up by the entrance to a ground squirrel's burrow. (We have seen several of these owls this week, tilting low across the meadows on silent wings.) When we hear a cacophony of what sounds similar to a large flock of geese emanating from down below, we glass the lake but cannot spot any flock on the water or the nearby

tundra. Finally we look up. Sure enough, high overhead pass several vees of migrating sandhill cranes, lankier than geese, with long legs trailing. They rattle and gargle up there, seeming to argue over their direction despite the arrow-sharp lines of their momentary formations. We watch as the vees begin to waver and then slowly disintegrate while the volume of controversy grows. Cranes turn and swirl in many directions, struggling for consensus, continuity, tradition. They croak and screech more loudly, form several wavering wedges moving eccentrically, only to break apart and boil among themselves again in guttural dissent.

Perhaps it is difficult for them to break their southward momentum and turn eastward here to navigate around the vaulted mountains. Yet somehow they will find their way to their wintering grounds far to the south. On this late afternoon, under a broad Alaskan sky, the cranes pass in front of the huge face of Denali, glowing golden under a lowering sun, and become one of the voices of the autumn landscape. When all that's left is the wind and the sound of our own breath, we move again, northward across the tundra toward Moose Creek and our supper.

On the final evening of my visit, I sit on the cabin porch with Robert Service for company, gazing through the quiet spruces to the High One, now bathed in the platinum light of an oblate moon. With the darkness, the wilderness itself seems to flow back into camp and right across my porch, touching my face like the chill on the night air. Alluring and exciting at once. This, I'm thinking, is why we come here. Camp Denali was never meant to be a destination. It is simply a place to listen, to rest, to hear the wild calling—a jumping-off point for our reconnection to the primeval wilderness, fresh and sweet as ever, beckoning from just over yonder. My companion felt the same pull from the timeless North 100 years ago: *"Let us probe the silent places, let us seek what luck betide us / Let us journey to a lonely land I know / There's a whisper on the night-wind, there's a star agleam to guide us / And the wild is calling, calling . . . let us go."* ■

Jeff Fair won the Eric A. Friedheim Travel Journalism Award for his article "Power Lunch," July-August 2007. He has lived in Alyeska, the "great land," for 13 years.

