

Ptarmigan Tracks

The Newsletter of Camp Denali



Last spring, with COVID-19 increasingly upending the world as we knew it, Camp Denali made the difficult decision to sit out what would have been our 69th operating season. We shared our deliberations at the time in an essay titled “From the Cockpit”- a title inspired in part by the WWII piloting experiences of Camp Denali’s founders. Reflecting further on the global turmoil faced by that generation, it seems downright remarkable that this has been Camp Denali’s first disruption in seven decades.

In lieu of business-as-usual, 2020 was a season in which the goalposts became “Do the best you can with what you’ve got.” As always, Camp’s most precious resource was a deeply committed, if much reduced, staff. How reduced? Well, we had to go all the way back to 1976 to find a staff photo that had as few faces as the 2020 staff photo (see back page). Nevertheless, the days passed in a flurry of camaraderie and hard work, and by September we found we had quite a lot to show for a “non-season.”

Chief among 2020’s accomplishments was the furtherance of our solar energy conversion. Having installed 18 tracking solar arrays in 2019, we dedicated much of our efforts this summer to expanding our power building and installing all-new batteries, inverters, charge controllers, wiring, and a new backup generator. Only a few more connections remain to be made this spring, and Camp Denali, we are pleased to announce, will develop virtually all of its electricity from the sun.

Elsewhere, we remodeled staff cabins, chain-sawed firewood, dug up buried utilities, and generally focused on the many things that would constitute major disturbances in any other season. And when the workday was over, we turned to diversions that would similarly be too disruptive in a normal summer: paddleboards and kayaks strewn on the lawn, volleyball net strung across the upper yard, and musical instruments laid out on the dining room tables. At times we felt like one another’s life raft companions, and we could not have wanted for finer.

In a very material way, the solar project, other maintenance and upgrades, and even the decision to retain staff, reflect our commitment to getting back to what truly makes Camp Denali a fulfilling enterprise, namely, sharing it with others. While the world is still a long way from normalcy, we’re encouraged by advances in tools and knowledge to combat the pandemic, and by the will to do so. After the past year there is greater need than ever for the balm of parks and wilderness and human interaction – things which, despite Camp Denali’s decades of celebrating, we appreciate even more keenly after a year off.



Summer Roundup



A Season Without Guests

I thought there would be many benefits of a season with no guests, but I was wrong! The coronavirus pandemic did offer many recreational opportunities for the dozen or so staff working at Camp Denali, such as days off together each week so we could all go hiking, biking, kayaking, rafting or canoeing. There was more unencumbered time in the evenings to play volleyball, board games (“Wingspan” was a big favorite this summer), go for evening hikes and bike rides, or to watch a movie together. What I didn’t think about beforehand was how much I would miss sharing the Camp Denali experience with the guests who come from all over the world to visit Denali National Park.

Have you ever seen a rainbow over a snow-capped mountain? Perhaps a new bird or flower? These are all wonderful experiences, but even more magical when they can be shared with others. As a Camp Denali employee, I have had the good fortune to meet globetrotters who bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience. As you share the tales of your day at dinnertime and you look like a kid who just got a cookie from the cookie jar, I am living that moment with you. As you see the aurora borealis for the first time and your eyes brighten and face smiles, I smile with you and feel the joy of that moment. Pandemic be gone and let the guests return to Camp Denali, for I miss them dearly!

- Andrea Ambros, Camp Denali staff

Photo Credits

Cover page: Fall colors (Jess Miller). **Summer Roundup photos** (Andrea Ambros). **Looking Back photos** (Camp Denali photo archives). **Solar Spread:** Inverters (Simon Hamm), Alaska Range (Andrea Ambros), Power building (Andrea Ambros), Fastening hardware (Andrea Ambros), Battery room (Simon Hamm). **Back page:** Staff photo (Eric Nancarrow).

Looking Back



2000 - 20 Years Ago

Construction of Pika Hut, an octagonal timberframe cabin on property belonging to the Cole family atop Camp Ridge, began this summer- a labor of “many hands” and a small amount of helicopter assistance.

Bear shenanigans this summer included those of a black bear that had acquired a taste for human food elsewhere in the valley. This “turkey bear” nearly derailed the Camp staff end-of-season Thanksgiving feast with a pantry raid conducted in the wee morning hours, during which the bruin consumed “...one and a half turkeys washed down with four dozen eggs!”

1990 - 30 Years Ago

The early crew of 22 staff flew in on May 7th to complete construction of North Face Lodge staff room dormers and two guest cabins, Eureka and Last Chance. Camp Denali’s Pelton wheel hydroelectric generator ran for the entire summer, only the second time in eight years of use.

On May 17th, Camp staff came to the aid of a French and Norwegian climbing party, one of whom had fallen through the rotting lake ice while attempting to ski across Wonder Lake. The remainder of the summer saw staff in canoes on days off “fishing” in 80 feet of water for climbing gear and skis!

1980 - 40 Years Ago

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established 19 new national parks and refuges, doubling the land area of the national park system nationwide. Denali National Park was tripled in size to better protect the park’s wildlife, while maintaining indigenous subsistence rights and landowner access.

Installation began on Camp’s first renewable energy power generation system, a Pelton wheel hydroelectric generator run by high pressure water diverted from nearby No Name Creek.

The last housekeeping tent frames, Avalanche and Permafrost, were hauled uphill to become staff cabins, and new, log guest cabins were built to replace them. (The Avalanche tent frame became staff cabin Arnica, which was torn down this summer, 2020.)

1970 - 50 Years Ago

Lured by the high price of mercury, local miner Arley Taylor in the late 1960s re-staked claims at Slippery Creek, a 1930s-era mine near the very base of Denali. Ever since its establishment in 1917, the park’s enabling legislation contained a provision for mineral prospecting and extraction. Camp Denali founders were spurred to action in the fall of 1969, and again in the summer of 1970, when Slippery Creek prospectors illegally bulldozed a



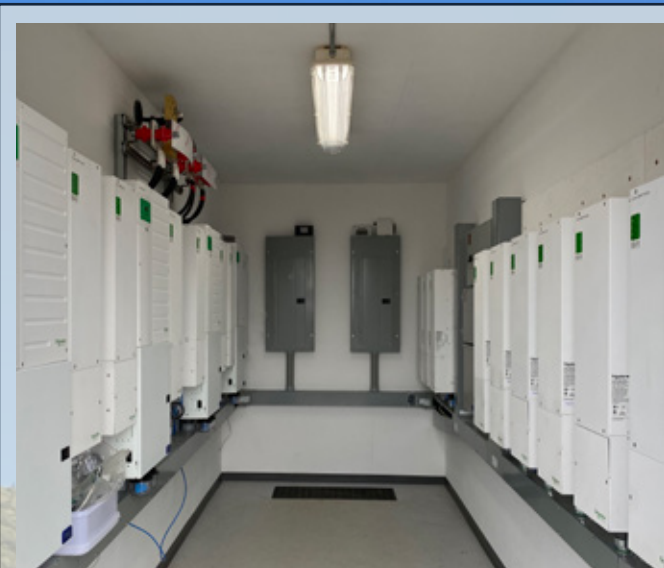
25-mile route from Wonder Lake for a permanent haul road for antimony and mercury ore. Stunned by the precariousness of the park’s land protections, our founders wrote, “only Congress, which established McKinley Park, can rescind the mining clauses. And only you, the concerned public, can bring this to their attention and urge action.” Indeed, the advocacy of our founders and others helped bring about the 1976 Mining in the Parks Act, which suspended any new mineral entry in six national parks, including Denali.



1960 - 60 Years Ago

A shift to 3- and 4-night minimum stays and week-long interpretive programs began this year, including Wilderness Workshops, Tundra Treks, and Shutter Safaris. “When we decided to cut our station wagon trips from three a week to two [...], we were warned by travel agents that this would cut down our ‘potential’ as most tourists didn’t have time for that long a visit at any one spot in Alaska. But we took the gamble. We weren’t seeking ‘tourists’ anyway. We wanted vacationists looking for an experience in depth.”





Inverters and charge controllers harness the 90KW output of the solar array, orchestrating the flow of electrons between the panels, the batteries, and the baker making fresh croissants in the Potlatch bakery.



The Alaska Range proved to be a great aid in orienting solar panels: Mt. Koven, at 12,142 feet and situated due south, is about as conspicuous and permanent of a landmark as we could ask for!



Our existing power building was doubled in size, extensively remodeled, and all its equipment swapped for new, all while continuously powering Camp Denali – a bit like overhauling an airplane engine as the plane is flying!



18 arrays, comprised of 16 panels each, works out to 288 total panels- and a staggering number of hardware fasteners to install and tighten.



18,000 lbs of Nickle-Iron batteries provide storage capacity in the new system. A proven technology, they promise decades of service, and should withstand the depths of winter, unattended.

2021 Special Emphasis Series



David Sibley
Ornithologist, Author, & Illustrator
Bird Identification & the Art of Observation
June 4-6 | June 7-10



Dr. Patrick Druckenmiller
Director, University of Alaska Museum
Denali Dinosaurs: Revealing Alaska's Ancient Life & Landscape
June 11-13 | June 14-17



Debbie S. Miller
Alaska Author & Wilderness Advocate
Safeguarding Alaska's Wilderness
June 18-20 | June 21-24



Rick Thoman
Alaska Climate Specialist
Alaska's Weather & Climate: Past, Present and Future
August 13-15 | August 16-19



Kesler Woodward
Artist, Professor of Art Emeritus, University of Alaska, Fairbanks
Painting in the North
August 20-22 | August 23-26



David Shaw
Conservation Photographer, Science Writer, & Photo Educator
Autumn Nature Photography Workshop
August 27-29 | August 30-September 2



Chris Rose
Founder & Executive Director of Renewable Energy Alaska Project
Electrifying Everything
July 2-4



Scott Weidensaul
Author, Field Researcher, & Bird Enthusiast
Bird Migration & Conservation
July 9-11 | July 12-15



James Edward Mills
Journalist
Exploring the Adventure Gap
July 16-18 | July 19-22

Park Planning

Planning for the Future of Kantishna...Slowly

On September 3rd, park planners published a summary of comments on the July 2019 Kantishna and Wonder Lake Area Plan. The NPS received 338 correspondences, resulting in 1,157 substantive comments. A hearty number of these were from our own guests and staff, and we thank you for your engagement!

The majority of comments questioned the intent of the plan and its process, citing inconsistencies with prior NPS management policy and guiding mission for the Kantishna and Wonder Lake area. Several comments noted the plan's bias towards recreation over resource protection, as if attempting to induce demand for additional recreational opportunities in the area. Many commenters suggested that a larger majority of visitors would be better served with an expansion of recreational opportunity in areas with more visitor demand such as the park entrance area.

Most comments were opposed to construction of new, long trails over much-needed and overdue maintenance of existing formal and informal trails. Regarding new campground construction, many questioned the level of demand, and most urged co-locating any expansion of camping opportunity at the existing

Wonder Lake campground versus creating any new sites in Kantishna or in the backcountry. There was general support for consolidating NPS administrative presence at existing sites versus relocating to a new area.

A revised plan is purportedly forthcoming, although no timeframe has been identified. Any actions proposed by NPS would be preceded with environmental compliance and public review. One outcome of the planning initiative yet this summer may be some formal trail designation, which would facilitate the maintenance, remediation or closure of some of the area's informal trails. Editorially, it is worth noting that the plan grew in scope from an initial focus on trail management and planning to a much more encompassing emphasis on expansion of recreational opportunity. If the current fiscal climate of the NPS and Denali, in particular, are any indication, we aren't holding our breath for much movement on this planning effort.

Pretty Rocks Update

One year ago fall, our main concern with the upcoming season was the integrity of the park road at Pretty Rocks on Polychrome Pass. A year and thousands of cubic yards of Toklat River gravel later, the NPS has identified a path forward. As a December 2020 update on the park's website solidly claims, "the NPS and Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) are collaborating to keep the road operational, resilient and safe for travel

under dynamic and changing conditions."

In the near term, the park road crew will once again begin spring road plowing a bit earlier than usual in order to begin repairing the road alignment at Pretty Rocks. Some 4800 10-cubic-yard truck loads of gravel were used last spring to fill in the slump. This spring the slide is predicted to have subsided 20 feet since last October. Regular gravel hauling and grading throughout the summer, masterfully achieved in 2020 by the NPS road crew, will remain the way to maintain the road in the interim.

Three medium-term solutions will be evaluated this summer while work is being done on a long-term solution. Building a bridge over the slump, continuing to fill in the slump, and excavating material from above the road to elevate the road bed are all on the table.

Possible long-term solutions include the bridge concept to retain a "mainline route" with the road in its current location, a "north route" constructing five miles of new bypass road over the hills to the north, or a "south route" constructing five miles of new bypass road across the flats and braided rivers to the south. The "mainline route," already recommended by FHWA, will be identified by NPS as the preferred alternative in a forthcoming planning document. We are heartened by the planning efforts underway.



Mary Pipher
Clinical Psychologist & Writer
Families in Nature
July 26-29



Dr. Natalie Dawson
Executive Director, Audubon Alaska & Professor, Institute of Culture and the Environment, Alaska Pacific University
A New Generation of Conservation
August 2-5



Dr. Laura Prugh
Wildlife Ecologist, University of Washington
Exploring Predators & Prey in Denali
August 6-8 | August 9-12



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