

Ptarmigan Tracks

The Newsletter of Camp Denali

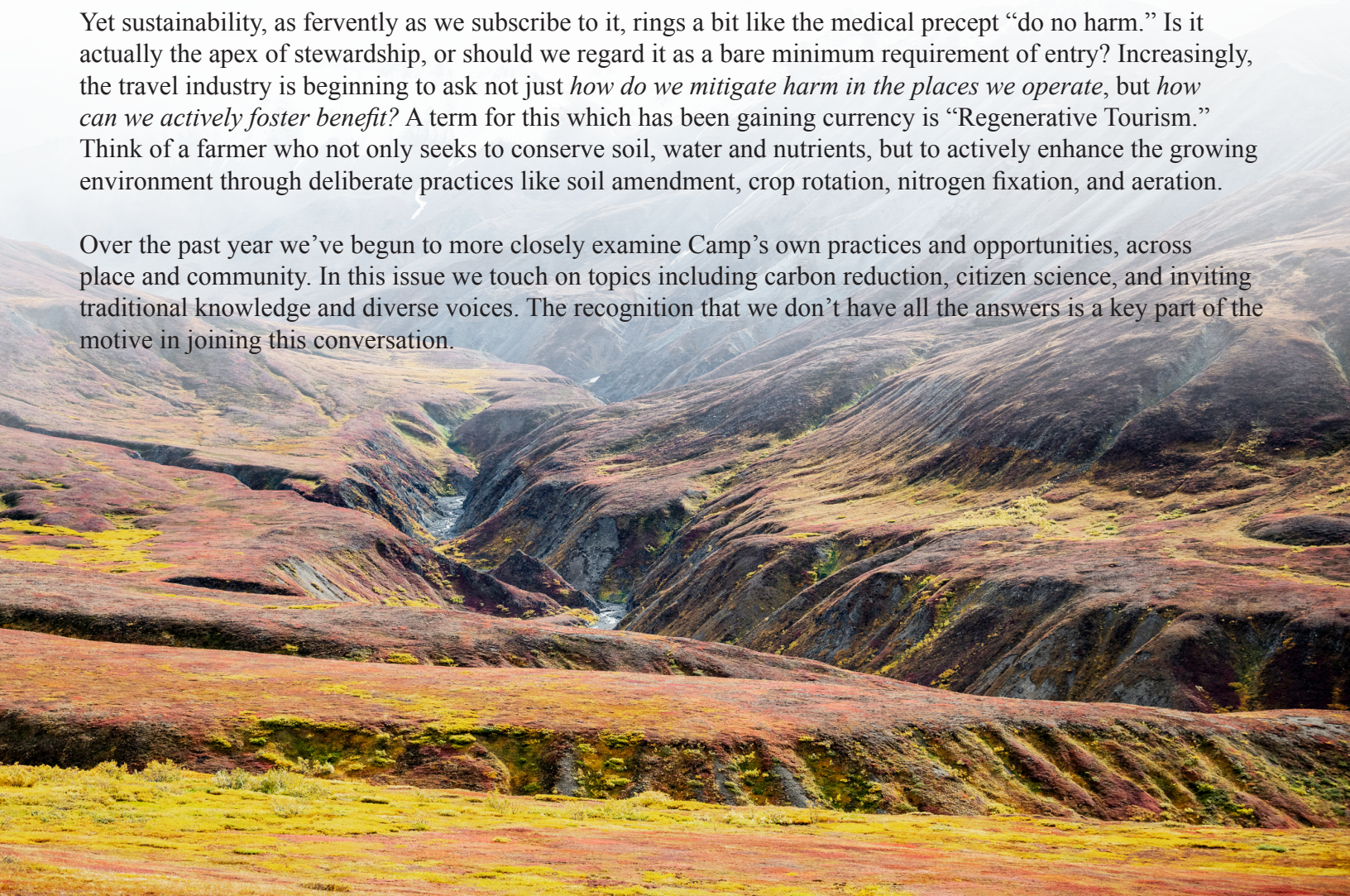
Beyond Sustainability

The amble from Upper Camp toward the Taiga Trail passes through a faint but unmistakable swale in the tundra-covered hillside. This feature is almost as old as Camp Denali itself. When our founders harvested local trees for the construction of Camp's first structures and winched them down the slope to Nugget Pond, they unwittingly breached the natural insulation of the tundra, inviting thaw, subsidence, and unintended disturbance of the land. From this early lesson, Camp Denali has aspired to advancing its understanding and practices of sustainability.

The goal of sustainability will always afford room for improvement, yet we can celebrate a few achievements. Composting, reuse/recycling, line-drying, greenhouse production, bulk-purchasing, and in-state procurement have been Camp hallmarks since the time of our founders. The only single-use guest amenity in our history, plastic or otherwise, was likely N-95 masks. And this past summer, 96% of our electric power came from our recently-completed 90 Kilowatt solar array.

Yet sustainability, as fervently as we subscribe to it, rings a bit like the medical precept "do no harm." Is it actually the apex of stewardship, or should we regard it as a bare minimum requirement of entry? Increasingly, the travel industry is beginning to ask not just *how do we mitigate harm in the places we operate*, but *how can we actively foster benefit?* A term for this which has been gaining currency is "Regenerative Tourism." Think of a farmer who not only seeks to conserve soil, water and nutrients, but to actively enhance the growing environment through deliberate practices like soil amendment, crop rotation, nitrogen fixation, and aeration.

Over the past year we've begun to more closely examine Camp's own practices and opportunities, across place and community. In this issue we touch on topics including carbon reduction, citizen science, and inviting traditional knowledge and diverse voices. The recognition that we don't have all the answers is a key part of the motive in joining this conversation.



Summer Roundup: Beavers, Art Heists, & Road Rallies

The opening crew arrived via skiplane on May 8th to above-the-waist snow. Fortunately a ski mountaineering party soon happened along that, in return for a hot meal and a night on the lodge couches, grabbed shovels and unearthed the lawn so spring could play catch-up. Other opening projects included upgrades to solar inverters, and a new cabin porch. With the start of the season came further energy-saving upgrades, including an electric baking cabinet and more induction cooktops to better harness our abundant solar power, as well as a passive-solar water heater for the laundry.

As summer got underway, all that snow seemed to give rise to an abundant green-up. Going on three-years without a trim, the Kantishna airstrip was starting to feel a little narrow, so Camp partnered with Alaska D.O.T. to airlift in a brush-mower and beat the jungle back. In hindsight, we might have missed a golden opportunity there. Our operations crew waged a daily, season-long campaign to keep beavers along the park road from damming culverts and washing out the roadbed. Next season we might see if we can persuade our beaver friends to gnaw back the runway overgrowth and not the roadside drainages.



Serendipity struck in August when dear friends and past staff Ree Nancarrow and Sharyn Gerhardt paid us a visit. Ree is known to many as the artist behind the commissioned art quilt, *Seasons of Denali*, in the Eielson Visitor Center. It came up in passing that since the road closure, Ree’s quilt had been securely crated and stored away inside the shuttered visitor center, much like the closing scene of Raiders of the Lost Ark. The Park was very much wanting to recover it and restore it to public display, but had no easy way to do so. Having the artist, and road access, and the blessing of the Park, it was suddenly clear what that day’s mission was to be. Following a mirth-filled heist and getaway which we’re calling Eielson’s Eleven, we’re pleased to report that *Seasons* will once again be, deservedly, on public display.

As summer entered the home stretch, word came that there might possibly be a window of mere hours to transit the construction site at Pretty Rocks as the contractor blasted and constructed ramps to bring a crane across the slump. The Camp team immediately swung into gear and within a fantastically short time had a new, 4WD passenger van, outfitted for the Paris-Dakar rally, and staged for the crack of the starting gun. Huge thanks go out to Land Cole who made the delivery drive on a perfect late-September day, incidentally becoming the first person to drive the length of the park road in over two years. Sincere thanks also go out to the Park Service, Federal Highways, and the contractor, all of whom came together to enable this one-time opportunity. And as for the colors of available vans in Anchorage on hours’ notice? Well, we’re accepting nominations for a suitable bird-themed name!



Photo Credits
Cover: Gorge Creek (R.Clevenger) | **Summer Roundup:** Jenna taking a ride (S.Hamm), “Eielson’s Eleven” (S.Hamm), New sprinter van (S.Hamm) | **Special Sightings:** Grizzly bear (M.Cohen), Calypso orchids (J.Hamm), Gyrfalcon (M.Cohen), Pika (S.Kertys) | **Special Emphasis Series:** Stony Flats (M.Meyer) | **Page 6:** Fall riverbed (B.Bezalel) | **Back cover:** Staff photo (S.Hamm)



A Sense of Place, Reexamined

Spend much time in Alaska, and you are likely to notice a cheeky form of one-upmanship based upon “how long have you lived here?” Indeed, spending one’s first winter, or one’s 50th, can feel like an earned badge of honor. On the positive side, perhaps that contributes to the respect that Alaskans widely accord to our Elders. On the other hand, it’s perilously easy as a three-generation, pre-statehood, original wilderness lodge in Denali, to think that Camp Denali has some clout in this regard.

In reality, neither our 70 years, nor for that matter the National Park Service’s 100 years in Denali, hold a candle to more than 10,000 years of Indigenous Alaskans’ care for the land, water and wildlife of Alaska. We recognize that we inhabit the homelands of the Koyukon and Upper Kuskokwim Dené of Interior Alaska. It is their stewardship that is to thank for the bounty that we enjoy daily, and which we are able to share through Camp Denali. We take inspiration from the example of our region’s original and enduring stewards. We further commit to uplifting Indigenous Alaskans’ voices through our Special Emphasis Series of guest speakers and to promoting understanding and respect for Indigenous knowledge, wisdom and values.

Special Sightings

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| 5/10 | Two teenage grizzly bears, curious but wary, post-holing through soft snow along the far edge of Nugget Pond. | 6/14 | Yearling grizzly cub found dead (eviscerated) on Wonder Lake campground road, likely attacked by an adult male bear. |
| 5/18 | Wood frogs chorusing by afternoon, ice still covering 25% of the pond. | 7/23 | Grizzly bear on beaver lodge and chasing ducks in tundra pond. |
| 5/23 | A single caribou cow and (very) new calf near the north end of Wonder Lake. | 7/27 | Two wolves scared off a caribou carcass by a large, male grizzly in Highway Pass. |
| 5/26 | Ice-out on Nugget Pond; first alpine azaleas, diapensia, and woolly louseworts in the alpine tundra of Cranberry Ridge. | 7/28 | Gyrfalcon fledglings seen flying around the east end of Thorofare Pass. |
| 6/2 | Woke up to snow! First flights of guests delayed several hours. | 7/30 | Songbirds on the move in the thickets around Camp. Fall migration is beginning! |
| 6/7 | Ice-out on Wonder Lake, a late one, but surpassed by a June 11 ice-out a decade ago. | 8/18 | Three caribou swimming across Wonder Lake. |
| 6/9 | American Dipper along Moose Creek, feeding nestlings in cliff nest. | 8/20 | A collared pika at Camp! |
| | | 8/29 | First moose seen shedding velvet. |



2024 Special Emphasis Series

Throughout the summer, we invite specialists to share their expertise with our guests and staff, both in the field and through evening presentations.



Jon Atwood, PhD | June 3-7
Conservationist & Ornithologist
Full-life Cycle Bird Migration & Changing Bird Names
A practicing ornithologist and conservation biologist for more than 40 years, Jon recently retired from his position as Director of Bird Conservation for Mass Audubon and currently works as a guide for Naturalist Journeys.



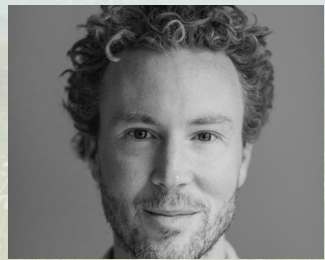
Susan Paskvan | June 10-17
Former Native Language Coordinator
Connections to the Land through Indigenous Language Revitalization
For the last 15 years, Susan (K’etsoo) Paskvan was the Native Language Coordinator of Yukon-Koyukuk School District where she worked with many elders to document Native place names, genealogy, traditional songs, and stories.



Sarah Roeske, PhD | June 24-July 1
Research Geologist, University of California, Davis
The Geology around Camp Denali
Sarah has more than 40 years of experience studying Alaskan geology and Cordilleran plate tectonics. Sarah is excited to return to Camp Denali and will bring geology maps into the field to help visualize the geology around us.



Carolyn Finney, PhD & James Edward Mills | July 15-22
Finney (Author & Storyteller) & Mills (Author & Journalist)
A Celebration & Continuing Conversation
Storyteller, author and cultural geographer, Carolyn focuses on issues related to identity, difference, creativity, and resilience. James is a freelance journalist who writes about outdoor recreation, environmental conservation, acts of charitable giving, and practices of sustainable living. They’re excited to collaborate as they discuss their current work.



Ben Rawlence | July 22-29
Writer, Activist & Educator
The Treeline in Alaska: Seeing Change in the Landscape
Ben teaches at Black Mountains College, an institution committed to exploring new ways of thinking and learning in order to address climate change. His most recent book, *The Treeline: The Last Forest and the Future of Life on Earth*, chronicles the human and ecological impacts of climate change at the circumpolar treeline.



Nikoosh Carlo, PhD | July 29-August 2
CEO of CNC North Consulting
Indigenous-led Climate Solutions in the Arctic & Beyond
Nikoosh has worked across political divides for state senators, governors and international ambassadors on Arctic governance. A Koyukon Athabascan, her passions are working with organizations that support climate equity and the well-being of Arctic residents and Indigenous peoples.



Princess Daazhraii Johnson | August 9-12
Writer, Actor & Producer
Narrative Sovereignty: The Power of Telling our Own Stories
Former Creative Producer of PBS Kids, *Molly of Denali*, Princess is humbled to serve on the boards of Native Movement, NDN Collective and SAG-AFTRA’s Native American Committee. Princess will draw upon her experience as a screenwriter, actor and filmmaker to tell compelling stories about Indigenous sovereignty.



Ronn & Marketa Murray | August 19-26
Aurora Borealis Experts & Photographers
Northern Lights Exploration
For over a decade, Ronn & Marketa have been a team, both in life and in business. They will be discussing the science behind the Aurora Borealis, when and where to observe it, and how best to photograph this spectacular northern phenomenon.



Ralph Clevenger | August 26-September 2
Photographer
Autumn Photography Workshop
Ralph Clevenger holds degrees in both zoology and photography and was a senior faculty member at Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, CA for 33 years. His 9th trip to Camp Denali, Ralph will emphasize the importance of pushing your boundaries to create unique ways of seeing.



Offsetting the Impacts of Travel

Locally-directed charitable giving is not new to Camp Denali. In the last year, however, we were very pleased to find a new way to leverage it for a climate initiative right here in Interior Alaska. Beginning last spring, all new reservations include an option to support the recently-established Fairbanks Carbon Reduction Fund.

One of only two such community-based programs in the state, the fund supports energy-efficiency upgrades for low-income homeowners in Fairbanks, both reducing heating oil consumption and helping to curb particulate emissions that regularly plague Fairbanks' winter air quality. In addition to offering a tangible carbon offset opportunity to our guests, we are also committed to contribute as a business, in recognition of staff travel, and Camp's own shift to fly-in operations during the closure of the Park Road.



An Opportunity for Citizen Science

In 2023, Camp Denali worked with the Road Ecology Crew at Denali National Park (DNP) to collect wildlife observation data along the western portion of the Denali Park Road. Naturalist guide staff used NPS-developed software and an iPad to record wildlife observations, including species, behavior and distance from the road. Camp hopes to continue this partnership in 2024, engaging guests in data collection and discussion of wildlife monitoring and ecology.

Additionally we partnered with the Forest Health Program at the State of Alaska Division of Forestry and Fire Protection to deploy two spruce bark beetle traps on-property in Kantishna. As evident in Southcentral Alaska, spruce bark beetles are proliferating further northward as our climate warms. Specimens collected in the traps will be analyzed by Forest Health staff over the winter and can provide a snapshot of conditions in our area. We look forward to monitoring again next year and having conversations with our guests about the tangible impacts of climate warming in Denali.

For decades, Camp Denali has kept an informal record of phenological events such as when the ice goes out on Nugget Pond, when the first wood frogs are heard in the spring, and when the Sandhill Cranes fly over in the fall. One of our winter projects is to begin cataloging these observations in order to build a more formal long-term record and create a database for future observations. Additionally, we plan to use a NPS repeat photography database, as well as Camp's collection of historic photos, to identify locations that we can revisit and add to the photo record, helping to document landscape change in Denali.



Particularly while the Park Road remains closed at Pretty Rocks, we are well-positioned to assist with such monitoring. The opportunity to support ongoing research in the Park has been rewarding for staff and guests alike. It's also providing a catalyst for us to tap into our own archives and to institutionalize some monitoring efforts of our own.

Looking Back - 60 Years Ago

Camp Denali's Conservation Legacy

On July 1st through 5th 1963, Camp Denali hosted a convening of The Wilderness Society's executive council, an illustrious group of conservation visionaries, wildlife scientists, writers, and environmentalists. Among the attendees were three founding members, Ernest Oberholstzer, Bernard Frank, and Harvey Broome. Howard Zahniser, widely recognized as the author of the Wilderness Act, was also in attendance. Margaret and Olaus Murie and Adolf and Louise Murie, Alaskan conservation and wildlife advocates with deep connections to Denali and Arctic Alaska, and American writer and environmentalist, Sigurd Olson, were also guests.



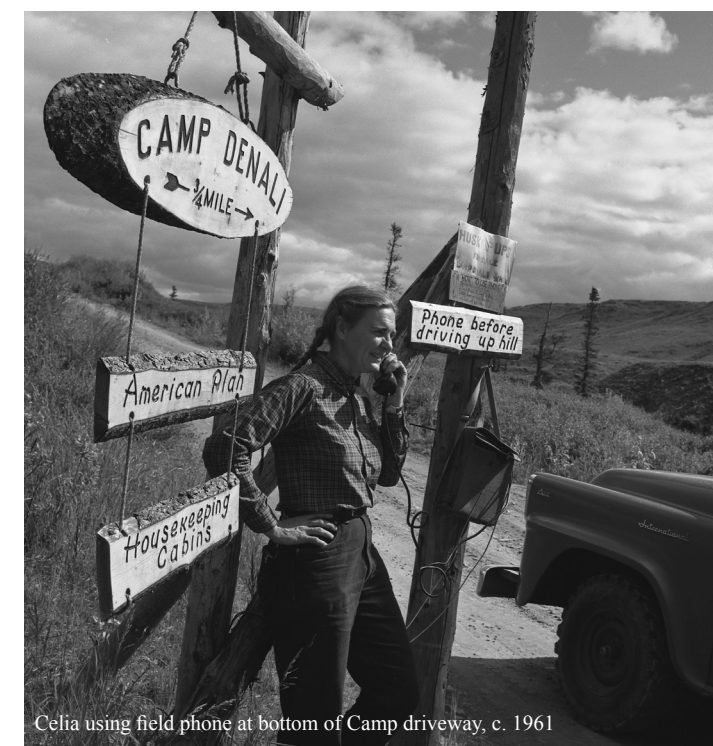
Adolf "Ade" Murie out with Camp Denali guests, c. 1963

The session was the highlight of the summer, according to the 1963 Tundra Telegram, Camp's annual newsletter. The group spent five days meeting in Camp's log lodge and exploring the wilderness of Denali. To the relief of Camp staff, "...the weather cooperated and so did the caribou migration." In Thorofare Pass one of the days, "...hikers scattered in all directions, following caribou bands or simply exploring the canyons, ridges and [...] river bar." Most meaningful perhaps was the council's welcoming of Camp guests and staff, "...for open discussions of conservation problems."



Camp Denali staff and dogs, c. 1963

The passage of The Wilderness Act the very next year in 1964 was a pivotal moment for conservation in the U.S., but also a complicated one. According to the Act, "...in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, [wilderness] is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain..." Arguably, the Act served to further a conservation ethic that excluded Indigenous people, whose intimate relationship with nature and careful stewardship had resulted in the very intact ecosystems American conservationists aimed to protect.



Celia using field phone at bottom of Camp driveway, c. 1961

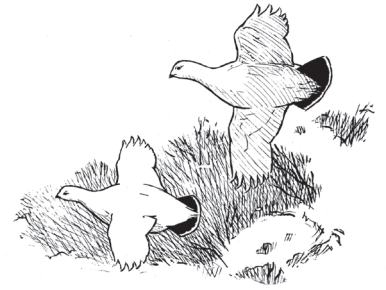
Some of the underpinnings of the Wilderness Act, however, had to do with a recognition of modern society's disconnection with the natural world and our need to rebuild a relationship with nature, much like that of North America's Indigenous stewards. Framers recognized a societal need to forge a respectful relationship with nature – one based on spiritual value and inspiration rather than land "use" and extraction. Just as it did 60 years ago, Camp Denali continues to provide an oasis of hospitality from which we can reacquaint with nature by experiencing the wilderness and wildlife of Denali. As Howard Zahniser wrote in the 1956-57 issue of The Wilderness Society's journal, *The Living Wilderness*, "wilderness vacations [...] are more likely to be joyous than merry, more refreshing than exciting, more engrossing than diverting. Their rewards are satisfactions."



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