

# NATIONAL PARKS TRAVELER

## A Springtime Visit to Denali National Park and Preserve: Is It For You?

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*Trying to open Denali's main road starts early in spring. Last spring the conditions were particularly challenging, as this shot taken at Mile 7 clearly shows. NPS Photo.*



Denali National Park and Preserve, with its soaring mountains, rushing rivers, and wildlife menagerie of moose, wolves, caribou, wolves, bears and more, is one of those tantalizing destinations within the national park system.

Rooted in Alaska only 300 miles south of the Arctic Circle, it can seem almost mythical to those in the Lower 48 who don't normally roam far afield. Covering 6 million acres and containing North America's tallest mountain, 20,320-foot Mount McKinley (aka Denali), the park preserves a rugged slice of the northlands that so fascinated and inspired Jack London.

Those who trek to Denali do so to hike, backpack, fish, raft, watch wildlife, and simply relax in a wilderness atmosphere that is slipping away in the Lower 48. During 2006, 415,935 folks made their way to Denali, with most showing up, predictably, in June, July and August.

In an effort to boost early-season traffic during the months of May and June, the folks at Denali Park Resorts, the concessionaire that operates lodges just south of the park entrance, are offering lodging packages at a considerable discount from the typical peak-summer rates.

For instance, the "Spring into Savings" package starts at \$276 per person (based on double occupancy) for a two-night stay at either the McKinley Chalet Resort, McKinley Village Lodge, or Grand Denali Lodge. This package also includes two tickets to the Alaska Cabin Nite Dinner Theater and Teklanika Tundra Tour. It's available May 15-May 23, but only if you book online by this December 21.

The concessionaire's "Twice as Nice" package runs \$209 per night, based on double occupancy, with the second night free. Lodges open for this package, available May 13 through June 6, include the McKinley Chalet Resort, Grande Denali Lodge, McKinley Village Lodge, and Denali Bluffs Hotel. As with the first package, this offer is good only online and you have to book by December 21.

What might you see in Denali during this time of year? Well, in the Rocky Mountains of the Lower 48 this time of year typically is referred to as "mud season" because the melting snow makes quite a mess of the landscape. In Alaska, they call this time of year "breakup," a term deriving from the break up of ice on the rivers.

Breakup usually arrives sometime in April when the melting snow makes it tough to ski and creates rather large puddles. Hiking at this time of year generally is frowned upon because there's still quite a bit of snow on the ground. The rivers can breakup anytime between late April and early May. The landscape doesn't green-up until late in May,

usually around Memorial Day weekend, and rafters, unless they're true die-hards, don't break out the paddles until June.

The main park road usually opens to Mile 30 sometime in April. Of course, a spring snowstorm can close it back down. But if it's open to Mile 30, you can expect to spy moose, caribou, wolves, bighorn sheep and perhaps even a bear along that stretch.

If you're into cycling, in May a good number of folks typically peddle beyond Mile 30 (before the road is officially opened to vehicles) to get further into Denali.

Is this season right for a visit to Denali? That's for you to call. You can't get far into the park, but lodging rates are down anywhere between 31 percent and 60 percent from peak rates, and wildlife is visible.