

# PhotoFile

---

A MINI-MAGAZINE FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLES BY  
John R. DeLapp

---

Number 3  
July 2013



**Denali**

*Photographs and experiences  
visiting Denali National Park  
and Preserve, Alaska*



Publisher/Editor

**John R. DeLapp**  
13101 Elmore Rd.  
Anchorage, Alaska 99516

jrdelapp@gci.net  
www.delappphotography.com

**PhotoFile** is published and printed on an irregular basis. Printed copies are available for purchase from the editor or from [www.magcloud.com](http://www.magcloud.com). A PDF version of this publication is also available for download from the same source.

Copyright ©John R. DeLapp  
July 20, 2013

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission.

Photographs are by the publisher/editor and are protected by copyright, all rights reserved.

**Cover Photo:**  
**Mt. McKinley, or simply Denali, as most Alaskans call it, and Wonder Lake on a cold fall morning.**

## PhotoFile #3 - Denali

This issue of **PhotoFile** is devoted to Denali, not just the mountain but all features of this incredible national park. Living in Anchorage has given me reasonably easy access to the park (about a 5 hour drive from my house) and I have been able to spend many days visiting the park and photographing its landscapes, animals, and plant life. When I am at home driving around Anchorage, I often look for the mountain to see if it is "out". Surprisingly, even though Denali is about 150 air miles to the north of Anchorage, it is possible to see it and the much of the Alaska Range on cloud-free days. Most of the time we are fortunate to have air free of man-made pollutants and dust, but we often have clouds obscuring any long distance views of the big mountain. But when the clouds do part, we are usually treated with compelling views of Denali's unmistakable, towering profile on the northern horizon.

Compared to other parks that I have visited, I find Denali to be without equal when it comes to wildness, raw beauty, wildlife, and easy access. Yes, there are better places in Alaska to observe bears in greater numbers, such as Katmai National Park or McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, but none compare to Denali for its magnificent landscapes, variety of wildlife, and easy access.

For those of you who have visited the park, I hope that this issue of **PhotoFile** will remind you what a jewel of a park we have just a short drive from Anchorage or Fairbanks. For those who have not visited Denali, I hope that you will be compelled to see what you have been missing.

Enjoy.

---

Other Publications by John R. DeLapp

### Mini-magazines (available for purchase from [www.magcloud.com](http://www.magcloud.com))

PhotoFile #1: *Chinitna Bay Bear Camp*, October, 2012.

PhotoFile #2: *Redpoll Rally*, March 2013.

### Books (available for preview or purchase from: [www.Blurb.com](http://www.Blurb.com))

*Rock, Rock Art, and Ruins*. Black and white photographs of travels in the southwest U.S. April 2012.

*Road Trip, Colorado to Alaska, May 2011*. Photographs and notes from my solo road trip from Grand Junction, Colorado to Anchorage in the spring of 2011.

*Norah, With Her Family in Connecticut*. Photographs and commentary celebrating the birth of my granddaughter. April, 2011.

*Stories from My Early Years*, by Warren DeLapp and John R. DeLapp. Stories and photographs of Warren DeLapp's early years with additional biographical notes about his later achievements and life. December, 2008.

*Animals, A Portfolio of Photography*. A presentation of my favorite wildlife photographs. November, 2007.

*People, A Retrospective of Photography: 1968-2007*. October, 2007.

### Others

*Sam and His Earliest Moments*. Photos and notes commemorating the birth of my grandson. October, 2006. ([www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com))

*Reaching, The Story of a Young Minnesota Girl and Her Dream to Fly*, by Mary DeLapp. Published 2005 by John and Tina DeLapp (out of print).



Denali's north peak, Pioneer Ridge, and the Wickersham Wall.

## Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska

### Denali, The Mountain

I will always remember the first time I saw a clear, close-up view of Mt. McKinley – Denali, as most Alaskans call it, using the Athabascan name which means “The High One”. It occurred at about 4 am one morning in late July, 1971 when my wife and I and our dog Samson were camped at the Wonder Lake campground. “Wow!” was my reaction when I looked out of our tent that morning and seeing the side of Denali bathed in that beautiful, early pink light. It was so *tall* and imposing that it nearly took my breath away. Denali had been covered by clouds during our drive into the park the previous day, and since we only had one night at Wonder Lake, I was especially happy to get such a nice, early morning view of “The Mountain”.

Until that morning, I had only seen Denali from Anchorage or the road system leading to the park, all much more distant views than from Wonder Lake. Once in the park, visitors hoping for a close view find out that it is often covered by a blanket of clouds and, somewhat surprisingly, that it is not visible from the

park entrance even when the weather is good.

Denali is such a massive and high mountain that it generates its own weather and it is often topped by lenticular clouds, a sure sign that tremendous winds are blowing up there. At other times, the top half of the mountain is crystal clear, yet not seen by those on the ground because there is an overcast layer of low clouds hiding all or most of the mountain. Sometimes Denali entices you by showing a tantalizing, but small part of its frozen mass through sporadic and usually short-lived gaps in these lower clouds. You hope to see more, and then, on rare days, when the clouds at the upper and lower levels clear, Denali rises above all, and asserts its dominance over the landscape. “The Mountain is out, The Mountain is out!” is a common refrain heard from its admirers. Seeing the mountain emerge from its covering of clouds is an experience of which I have never tired, and I have found that clearing storms are an exciting time to photograph The Mountain.

Although I categorize the view from Wonder Lake as a “close” view, the top of the mountain is still



25 miles away. But the scale of Denali is so enormous, standing head and shoulders above the other mountains which flank it, it still looks very big from 25 miles away. Those lesser mountains of the Alaska Range which neighbor Denali, covered with their own perpetual snow and ice, are impressive in their own right. When the upper half of Denali is obscured by clouds, visitors sometimes think one of the lesser mountains is The Mountain. Another reason Denali is so imposing is that, seen from Wonder Lake, it rises from the broad, mostly flat tundra and boreal forest covered river valley, giving a clear view of the north face that is not blocked by other mountains.

In fact, Denali is actually the tallest mountain in the world. Not so, you may say - Everest is. Note that I said *tallest*, and not highest. From its base to the summit at 20,320, it rises over 18,000 feet, which makes it such an impressive sight, especially from the north side. Many of the world's greatest



Bluebells







Wonder Lake and the north face of Denali





Ike Waits enjoys the view of Denali's north face from the Wonder Lake campground

mountains top out at higher elevations but start from plains that are much higher so they do not appear as tall as Denali. Denali is considered to be one mountain although it has the two distinct and separate summits, the north peak (19,470 feet) and south peak are separated by the 18,000 foot high, two mile wide Denali Pass. Seen from the south, Denali appears to have a single summit since the north summit is hidden, and from the north side only a tiny part of the top of the south peak is visible and appears lower than the north peak. Of course, from the east side, the side most park visitors see (if they are lucky), Denali is seen as twin peaks with a high valley separating the north and south summits. I admit to being biased about Denali, and I would argue that from the north side, as seen from the Wonder Lake area, it qualifies as one of the most beautiful and impressive mountains in the world. Highest praises from me!



Lynn Wegener looks across the Thorofare River valley





A bull caribou looks for food on the tundra in the Wonder Lake area



## Denali, the Mountaineering Destination

Denali is a popular mountaineering destination and 1,223 climbers registered to climb it during the 2012 climbing season, which is normally from late April to early July. A total of 498 climbers made it to the summit that year for a success percentage of 40 percent. This year (2013), a total of 1,151 climbers registered to climb, the lowest number since 1997. The climbing season this year ended on July 16<sup>th</sup> when the last climbers were flown off the mountain. The summit success this year was outstanding, the highest since 1977, with 68% of the climbers reaching the summit, and only one fatality was reported by the National Park Service. But don't let those numbers fool you into thinking it is a cake walk to get up and down safely.

Nearly all climbers use the West Buttress route which is not particularly technical but is a long climb (usually about 20 days), requires acclimation to high altitudes, and is subject to severe winds, cold temperatures, crevasses, and avalanches. This year the weather was extremely good for climbing, with fewer storms, warmer temperatures, and calmer winds than usual. Even so, temperatures at the 14,000 foot level in late May were still mostly well below zero and it was colder yet higher up on the mountain.

Although Denali stands at 20,320 feet above sea level, well below many of the world's great peaks, the combination of high latitude and elevation make it a risky

and difficult climb because the weather often determines the outcome of the climb. Denali's high latitude makes it colder than other mountains of similar height. This cold air produces a *simulated altitude* higher than the actual geographic elevation due to the reduced barometric pressure and makes the air thinner than one would normally experience for that elevation. Following the first winter ascent of Denali by Art Davidson, Ray Genet, and Dave Johnston in the winter of 1967, it was estimated that the simulated altitude at the top of Denali was 23,465 feet above sea level. In other words, due to the extreme cold, breathing air at the top of Denali in the middle of the winter was equivalent to air that would normally be found at an elevation of 23,465 feet.

Although this phenomenon is not quite as pronounced during the summer climbing season, it is clear that the mountain's location and height produce some unique climbing conditions. All I know is that when I see snow plumes blowing off the high ridges, I am glad that I am not up there seeking shelter from the wind and fighting to stay warm.

Not surprisingly, with these harsh conditions, climbing accidents, sickness, and fatalities occur. According to National Park Service records, from 1903 through the end of the 2006 climbing season, 96 individuals have died on Denali. In 2012 there were six deaths, and in 2011 nine climbers lost their lives. In addition to the fatalities, every year the Park Service rescues or pro-







An early September storm rages on the upper portions of Denali

vides aid to injured climbers. For instance, in 2011 a total of thirty-six climbers were given assistance or evacuation and many could have died without the intervention they received. In 2012 thirty-four were rescued. Special helicopters can now operate all the way to the top of the mountain for an evacuation, but only under ideal weather conditions. Over half of all fatalities on the mountain have occurred on the “easy” West Buttress route. Guided climbs are becoming more popular each year and the costs vary according to the climber-guide ratio and what is included, but are about \$6,000 to \$7,000 per climber.

The popularity of climbing Denali has caused environmental issues related to trash and human waste since climbers use the same camp sites year after year and rely on snow as their only source of water. The Park Service now requires all trash to be carried out and most human waste to be deposited in containers and carried out or bagged and deposited in a deep crevasse. Trash bags from climbing parties are often weighed by rangers when climbing parties return to base camp. The Park Service has also provided out-houses at the 14,200 foot level of the West Buttress route for public use to help with this problem.



Brutal winds blow over Denali's south peak creating lenticular clouds

## Denali, the Park

The year we camped at Wonder Lake with our dog was the last year that private vehicles could drive the park road beyond the Teklanika rest stop (mile 29 of the park road). In 1972, the park initiated the shuttle bus system (green buses) to limit road traffic in an attempt to protect wildlife and reduce congestion on the road. That system is still in place today and an additional bus system, the tour buses (tan buses), has been added. Presently, the tour buses are not permitted to drive any further than Stony Overlook, 62 miles into the park from the entrance. The green shuttle buses, however, can drive the entire 92 miles to the former gold mining community of Kantishna, located at the end of the road. The shuttle buses will let people get off or on the bus at any location in the park to hike, while the tour buses do not allow their passengers to get off the bus.

The park is open year round but the road is closed to vehicles when the first serious snowstorm arrives, which is often in mid to late September. Shuttle buses usually

stop their service in the second week of September or earlier if snow makes travel hazardous. Access to the park during the winter is by skis, snow-shoes, or dog sled for those willing and equipped to deal with the cold, snow, and limited daylight hours. Winter temperatures can be extreme, well below zero for days or weeks at a time.

Summer weather can also be trying. Although I have experienced 80 degree temperatures in the park, temperatures in the 40's, 50's and 60's are more common, and often accompanied by cloudy, wet weather. Summer thunderstorms are not uncommon and I have seen hail storms that lasted long enough to turn upper hillsides white. It can snow any month during the summer but is usually confined to areas where the park road goes over one of the passes. The elevation at the park entrance is 2,080 feet, Toklat is 3,035 feet, and Eielson Visitor's Center is 3,733 feet. Highway Pass is the highest road elevation in the park at 3,980. The elevation at Wonder Lake is nearly as low as the park entrance at 2,090.



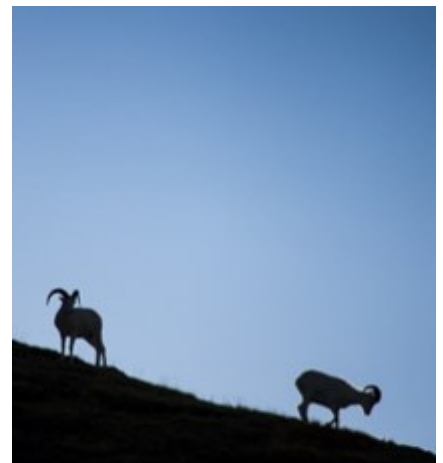
Infrared capture of Alaska Range near Polychrome Pass



Bob Glassmaker on Blueberry Hill



Fall colors on the tundra



Rams on Sable Mountain



Fall comes early in Denali, especially in the higher elevations. Fall colors usually peak in mid to late August in the higher elevations and soon after that in the lower areas. I always welcome the first hard frost of fall since it adds another element of interest to landscape photography. And, a nice byproduct of the cold is that it kills most of the annoying insects!

The Mountain is certainly an important attraction to the park but there are many other attractions which can be enjoyed in Denali. Wildlife viewing is a prime feature that draws many visitors to the Park. The mostly open, treeless alpine areas provide ideal opportunities to view animals in their natural but protected environment. Most animals go about their daily routines without fear of people and pay little, if any, attention to vehicles on the park road. Bears, wolves, and foxes often use the park road as an easy route to get from one place to another. One year, I saw a bear make a methodical 13 mile trek on the park road; he was not deterred in the least by the buses and other vehicles that stopped



A group from Taiwan celebrate a birthday at Wonder Lake campground



A grizzly sow glances at me during a June rain storm on Stony Hill.



to view him pass by. Many visitors hope to see the “big five” – moose, bears, Dall sheep, wolves, and caribou but the odds are that this will not happen during a single visit to the park.

From my own experience, I was convinced for many years that there were no wolves in the park since I had never seen one. Others had, but not me until several years ago when I started spending more time in the park and was lucky enough to see (and hear) wolves on a number of occasions. Unfortunately, winter hunting and trapping outside the boundary of the park has reduced the number of wolves and significantly impacted the likelihood of viewing wolves in the park.

In past years, the Park Service research has shown that there was a 45 percent chance of seeing a wolf while riding a bus in the park. In 2011, that number dropped to 21 percent, and during the summer of 2012, the chance of a visitor on a bus seeing a wolf was just 12 percent. The Grant Creek pack, the one which visitors would most likely see, numbered 15 wolves in 2010. Now, the pack is thought to consist of only three members. It is believed a major cause for the decline was the elimination of the no-hunting, no-trapping buffer area outside the park which provided additional protection for wolves. Since this buffer was removed by the Alaska Board of Game in 2010, the wolf population has decreased and latest research indicates that there are currently only 49 wolves



Dall sheep ram on Primrose Ridge



Pika at Savage River canyon







A curious wolf approaches me near Little Stony Creek during a light rain



Grizzly bear spring cub



Large bull caribou in velvet





Wolf from the Grant Creek pack rests on the tundra



Fox kits at play on Polychrome



Lynx



White-crowned Sparrow

living in the park. In past years when the buffer was in place, the wolf counts consistently indicated a population of around 100 animals. Incredibly, the value of viewing wolves in their natural habitat by thousands of visitors every year was not considered as important by the Board of Game as the interests of a few trappers seeking wolf pelts and the moose and caribou hunters who want predator numbers kept as low as possible throughout the state.

Aside from wildlife, the park offers stunning natural beauty at all times of the year and is a place visitors can see and experience true wilderness that characterizes much of “The Last Frontier”. The view of the snow covered Alaska Range from Polychrome Pass looking across a broad valley with its braided glacier fed streams is one of the best in the entire park. And without a doubt, Wonder Lake lives up to its name with its pristine waters and idyllic location. Wild flowers adorn

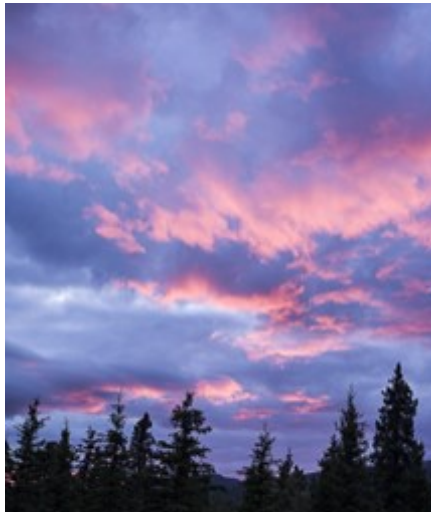
the mountain slopes during most of the summer and fall brings amazing red, orange, and yellow colors to the tundra. There are also many enjoyable hiking areas, with a few on established trails in the park, but most hikes are in areas that require adventuresome visitors to find their own routes along broad river bars or explore open, brush-free alpine areas that provide outstanding mountain views.

The park has not escaped the impacts of a warming climate. The Park Service has used comparative photos and other methods to document the change in vegetation and glaciers over the years. Areas that were treeless tundra in the past are now beginning to support brushy vegetation and the tree line is slowly rising to higher elevations. Approximately one sixth of the park is covered by glaciers, and while many are named, hundreds remain un-named. Studies of the glaciers in the park have shown, like most other glaciers in Alas-





Blueberries, Wonder Lake



Sunset, Teklanika campground



Rainbow, Wonder Lake area



Eielson Visitor's Center, mile 66, late August



The cycle of life in Denali

ka, that glaciers are shrinking in volume and/or area. The Kahiltna Glacier, which is 45 miles long, is one of the *index glaciers* that is being studied in detail. Results over the last twenty years on the Kahiltna indicate the *snow water equivalent* has experienced a net loss, meaning that more melting is occurring than is being replaced by snowfall. Overall, there is no doubt that most glaciers in the park are losing volume and retreating.

In conclusion, what does Denali National Park and Preserve mean to me? It is a gorgeous, accessible wilderness area with grand landscapes, highly visible wildlife, and dominated by one of the world's most stunning mountains. With all it has to offer, it has become my favorite Alaska destination for photography and place to relax and enjoy nature in all of its forms. I am grateful that this place has been protected and preserved for future generations to enjoy.

\* \* \* \* \*



*Highway Pass, Denali National Park  
June, 2013*

