

## **Day 1, Tuesday, July 28: San Francisco to Fairbanks**

Denali. The name itself is poetic. Hearing it conjures a spectrum of images; one is instantly intrigued. Literally, it is “the High One,” a translation of the Athabaskan name for the massive mountain, the highest in North America and, from its base to the summit, the highest in the world. Denali is also the name for a national park originally created as Mt. McKinley National Park in 1917, despite the park’s principal proponent wanting it named Denali. In 1980, Congress and the park service finally agreed to Denali, though the mountain was still officially designated Mt. McKinley until August 30, 2015, when the name was officially changed to what the first group to successfully reach the summit desired—Denali. During our trip (before the official name change) most locals used Denali or simply said “the mountain.”

For many years, my wife and I have wanted to go to Denali, drawn to the place by its astounding beauty and abundance of wildlife. In November 2014, we declared no more next year. So here we are flying to Seattle and then Fairbanks where we will take the train to Denali for ten nights of camping. After nine months of research in guidebooks and on the internet, I feel I need to pinch myself to make sure this is actually happening. We booked the trip on December 1, 2014, the first day to grab reservations for the summer season, and, thus, ensure our places to camp in the park.

If one wants to spend the night in the park, one must camp at one of the six campgrounds on the park road or backpack (advanced backpacking reservations are not possible). Staying outside the park was not a serious option to us. We want to experience the place itself in all its locations, times, and moods, not be shuttled in for a few hours to look out a window from a bus and take a short hike. We could only reserve four of the campgrounds and we have reservations for all four, including three nights at Wonder Lake, the farthest campground on the road and nearest to “the mountain.” On clear days, the view from there is beyond description.

During our flights, I try to not think too much of what’s ahead and focus on the views out the window and review the description of traveling the park road in Bill Sherwonit’s *Mountaineers Books* guide to Denali. We arrive in Seattle and have an over three hour layover. The Seattle airport is well signed as to how to get to the various terminals, unlike SFO. A frequent shuttle train goes to the various terminals. We arrive at N terminal with lots of time to waste. Various restaurants are situated around a large set of tables like a food court. We sit and while away the time

playing cards and people watching. The corridors are long and wide so the children run around, burning off energy and excitement.

The flight to Fairbanks is full due to an elderly tour group, each with individual name tags inside a clear plastic placard hanging around each person's neck. The tour leader is seated in the row in front of us. We become aware of something amiss closer to the front of coach. There is a request for an EMT. The tour leader gets up, checks it out, and returns to her seat with a concerned expression. The flight attendant informs the leader they gave the man anti-nausea medication and he seems stable. We have visions of the plane turning around or landing in Anchorage. About an hour outside Fairbanks, the flight attendant tells the leader the man remains stable and paramedics will meet the plane to take him to the hospital.

When we land and reach the gate, we are instructed to remain seated until the paramedics remove the man. The leader accompanies the paramedics. When we get off the plane and go to baggage claim, I phone the free shuttle for Springhill Suites in downtown Fairbanks. To our relief, our packs arrive (no lost luggage). We wait outside, the sky still light, and our van arrives. We are the only passengers. Our driver is friendly and tells us about Fairbanks, encouraging us to visit the University Museum and Pioneer Park. When we check-in at the hotel, I remind the clerk we will need a shuttle to the train station on Thursday. Our room is spacious, overlooking Soapy Smith restaurant, a gift store whose sign announces ivory sales, and, in between, the Mecca, a bar whose sign is missing a couple of light bulbs and whose patrons exhibit difficulty walking on exit. Though it is late, we stay up to unwind from the trip. It remains daylight outside.

## **Day 2, Wednesday, July 29: Fairbanks**

It is a cloudy morning, threatening rain. After our complimentary breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, and fresh fruit, we explore the city park opposite the hotel along the Chena River. The park's centerpiece is a large statue of a "pioneer" family. Throughout the park, numerous placards highlight Fairbanks history. Along with a few fellow tourists, the park is populated by a few people sleeping on the benches or awake enough to try and shake off the hangover. We cross the bridge over the river to see the lovely Immaculate Conception Church in front of the multi-story Denali Bank building, an encapsulated juxtaposition of the past's beautiful

simplicity and the present's crass corporate commercialism. We follow the bike path along the river to Pioneer Park, over a mile away. The rain begins about quarter mile into the walk, quite heavy at times. We walk by a gigantic building that is a community recreation center. The huge parking lot is empty; in winter I suspect this is where Fairbanks's residents spend their time when it is twenty to forty below zero outside.

When we arrive at Pioneer Park, only the museum is open. We go inside to escape the rain. A film is playing on the building of the Al-Can Highway during World War II. It is quite interesting due to the actual color footage of the hazards inherent in constructing a road through a wilderness. Watching footage of people pulling ice-bound trucks out of deep ditches and clearing the way for a road conveys the hardships endured and tenacity of the flesh-and-blood individuals who constructed what became a highway. The rest of the museum is a hodgepodge of exhibits, some amusing, some fascinating, some poignant, some bordering on silly, an obvious community effort.

The rain stops and we go outside to see the rest of the park. Since there is no entrance fee, Pioneer Park combines elements of a tourist trap, historic park, and community gathering place. Lots of local families with their children come to spend the day. Settler cabins from Fairbanks' pioneer past have been moved from their original locations to here, where they become shops or exhibits. All of the food kiosks have outdoor seating. We order sandwiches at a place named Mama Grizzlies. The sandwiches are large and quite good. We spend much of the afternoon exploring the park and are especially taken by the exhibit of local artists on the second floor of one of the modern buildings along with a historical diorama of the riverfront villages inside the steamboat that resides in the middle of the park. The anomaly of a full size steamboat plopped onto dry land encapsulates the charm and whimsy of Pioneer Park.

We enjoy the walk back in full sunshine along the river bike path, joining many joggers, walkers, and bicyclists. Barbara notices a sign says "Walk with a friend" so we surmise this isn't always as idyllic a walk as we're finding. Still full from lunch, we buy a take-out dinner to take back to our room. After dinner, we walk through the riverside park again, avoiding the panhandling drunks on their benches before returning to our room for an early night. We need to catch a 6:50 a.m. shuttle to the train station tomorrow

## **Day 3, Thursday, July 30: Fairbanks to Riley Creek**

The shuttle drops us at the train depot a little after 7:00 a.m. This is the final leg before Denali. The anticipation is palpable. I need to enjoy the four hour train ride and try not to worry about what will happen when we arrive. We know this may be the most difficult day of the trip. We must catch the Riley Creek Shuttle from the Visitor Center to the Wilderness Access Center (WAC). There we will pick up our camping reservations and bus tickets for the next ten days. Once we are settled in our campsite, we walk first to Riley Creek Mercantile on the edge of the campground. After buying what we can at the Mercantile, we walk to “Glitter Gulch,” the commercial area more than a mile down the road from the park entrance where Sled Dog Liquor/Canyon Market will hopefully supply the rest of what we need.

We board the train at 8:00, climbing the narrow winding stair to the Gold Star Dome car B. In Gold Star Dome everyone has an assigned seat on the upper level with excellent views of the passing landscape. Dining is on the first floor as meals are part the price of the ticket. If we’re only doing this once in our lives, we saw no reason not to pay a little more for the better seats, especially since with free food and drinks, the cost difference is not that much. This is the way travel should be: large comfortable seats with a wide view in all directions. Amtrak could learn some lessons from the Alaska Railroad.

At exactly 8:15 the train pulls out of the Fairbanks depot and begins the journey south. The steward provides appropriate commentary along the way, such as pointing out the University of Alaska Botanical Gardens and large mammal research station with its herd of reindeer and caribou. The train moves along at varying speeds, depending on the conditions, sometime crawling along the tracks and sometimes at 50 m.p.h.

The boreal forest is on both sides, providing an ever-changing view of birch, aspen, and black spruce, the height of the trees from two to twenty feet. The trains passes many boggy marshes, a few with aquatic birds, but not the moose we are hoping to see. An area north of Nenaana is farming and ranching country; a group of sandhill cranes scampers over a field. We have our first views of fireweed, the tall distinctive magenta-pink flower that blooms along most roadsides and trails, providing a colorful accent to the landscape. From the perspective of the train, it is beautiful; in Denali we find it often dominates portions of the landscape we travel through.

We traipse downstairs to the dining car for breakfast as commanded. We find ourselves seated with a nice Australian couple who are taking an individualized tour of Alaska. In Denali, they are staying at the North Face Lodge at Kantishna, the former mining community slightly beyond the wilderness boundary.

When we enter Healy and then Nenaana Canyon, mountains rise on either side. We know we are near the park. The train crawls through Nenaana Canyon, the river below filled with swift rapids that offer a thrilling ride provided by guided tour operators. This is the loveliest section of the train trip. We arrive at the Denali depot at 12:30, slightly late. We get our packs and try to figure out where to go; the signs are unclear, which we later learn is something that perplexes many first-time Denali train arrivals not connected to a tour. I ask someone who looks knowledgeable and we're directed to the shuttle bus stop below the Visitor Center. Beyond the depot area we find the signs everywhere else in the park are clear and numerous, similar in size and appearance to the metal trail signs in Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Park.

Most people at the shuttle stop are in line for the bus to the sled dog kennels. We are anxious about finding the correct bus amid the various buses arriving and departing. The Riley Creek Shuttle arrives on schedule with the front sign designating it is the correct bus. The bus driver is friendly and helpful, lending Barbara a hand with her pack. He drops us at the first stop, the WAC. Inside the WAC building is a large room with an information kiosk in the center and to one side, along a wall, the campground and shuttle reservation counter. Behind and above the counter are three-day weather reports for different areas of the park; they show showers possible through Saturday.

I hand a woman the print-out of our reservations. She is friendly and also savvy with the camping and shuttle system. I ask about staying at Sanctuary River or Igloo Creek, the small non-reservable campgrounds, instead of large Teklanika on our fifth night. Yes, both are possible, she replies. Faced with an on-the-spot decision, I choose Igloo Creek due to it being further down the road and so a shorter bus trip to Wonder Lake. She switches that reservation along with changing Riley Creek from a B site to a C walk-in tent site since we have no vehicle. As we stand waiting, she remarks, "Our computer is rather slow." One of the other reservation clerks chimes in, "You're really doing the park. That's so great." We learn most Denali visitors come for a day or two, not ten. When the computer finishes

grinding away, she hands us our print-outs for each campground, running over the litany of rules regarding food storage, a familiar recitation. I initial all the proper boxes and thank her for all her assistance. So far, so good, we think

At the backcountry office we ask about bear spray and receive the typical non-committal response of “probably” not needing it. We thank the ranger and follow his directions to Riley Creek Campground, taking a bike path that will soon become familiar. The path runs alongside the park entrance road then veers right to the Riley Creek Mercantile parking lot. There it becomes a foot path and crosses the Bear, Wolf, and finally Caribou loop roads. Of course, the walk-in tent sites are the farthest ones in the campground. Walking up the Caribou loop road, we see a closed gate and sign designating bear storage boxes and walk-in tent sites. (It is still okay to store food in one’s vehicle in Denali.) There are many empty sites. We find one good site and then a better one with further distance from neighbors and clip our sign to the post at site 129. We set up the tent and eat lunch before walking to Riley Creek Mercantile.

We discover that a path connects the various bathroom buildings from loop to loop, providing a more direct route to the Mercantile. We enter the Mercantile with low expectations and are still shocked by how little we find on our shopping list. Though it sells firewood for the campground, they do not sell matches. While it sells bread (Orowheat even), there is no instant coffee, Parmesan cheese (despite selling a small selection of pasta and lots of versions of canned spaghetti), or fuel canisters even though four of the six campgrounds and all the backcountry require one to cook on a portable stove and canisters are prohibited on airplanes. We leave with little, return to our campsite, put the food in the storage locker, and head off to Glitter Gulch hoping for better luck,

We find the shortcut of the Jonesville Trail, a pretty walk through boreal forest down to the Nenaana River. We emerge from the forest and intersect a wide paved bike path by the Georges Highway that runs from Fairbanks to Anchorage. A large pedestrian bridge parallels the highway bridge over the river. This section over the river with a view of the rushing water below is beautiful despite the highway. We climb a short rise beyond the bridge and see the tourist area strung out on both sides of the highway, dominated on one side by the Denali Princess Hotel, a huge complex of singular tackiness. The Sled Dog is on the other side of the highway. When the traffic is stopped for the stop light further down by the hotel, we cross the highway.

Inside the Sled Dog I ask an employee about the camping supply store so I can buy canisters and bear spray. At first, he doesn't remember it, but then recalls walking past it on his way to work and directs me to the far end of the row of small shops and restaurants lining the east side of the highway. I leave Barbara to navigate the Sled Dog while I head down past the many shops before I find Denali Mountain Works. I buy two larger canisters and one can of bear spray. The owner is friendly. She says she always carries bear spray on her hikes. She's a bit surprised the Mercantile has no canisters. "That's great for your business," I remark. Her large supply and smiling reply tells me she knows it.

I return to the Sled Dog and find Barbara frustrated by what's available. She's found matches, green peppers, zucchini, potatoes, angel hair pasta, large sausages, but no hamburger, Parmesan cheese (despite lots of fresh pasta and jars of spaghetti sauce), instant coffee (but there is instant tea), bagels (despite lots of other baked goods) but eight varieties of gourmet olives—are olives that popular around here? Navigating the narrow aisles to the liquor store half, I undergo sticker shock for the prices except Alaska-brewed beer. We put down the credit card and ignore the total; some things are better not knowing since there is no alternative. Outside, I load the food in my day pack and we walk back to our campsite, resigned to our fate when it comes to food and drink for the next several days. We bought a lot of things with us (bars, oatmeal, four freeze dried dinners, trail mix, home-made jerky, and some instant coffee)—too much we were thinking until now.

When we arrive back at our campsite, it begins raining. I erect the tarp I purchased at REI before the trip just for this occasion. The area above the picnic table is completely covered with the tarp corners tied to nearby trees; it's Barbara's inspired idea to prop up the center with our trekking poles, the pointy ends stuck in the groove of the table. Instead of huddling in the tent, we are able to sit at the table and stay dry playing cards and drowning our frustration with the Mercantile and Sled Dog with a couple of drinks.

The rain stops after about an hour; we will learn bursts of rain are a common aspect of Denali weather. I start a fire and we cook sausage, potatoes, green pepper, and zucchini wrapped in foil—the rules explicitly prohibit cooking meat directly on the grill and demand all food be cooked in foil. Dinner ends up being excellent, a nice reward after a long day. Afterwards, we walk down to the bus stop to sit in solitude and enjoy the view of the nearby mountains. We made it here, we have our campsites settled, and tomorrow we can begin discovering Denali.

## **Day 4, Friday, July 31, Riley Creek**

At 1:40 a.m. I am awakened by the screech of a train whistle. The rumbling of the railroad shakes the ground as it passes through the park. When I awake shortly before 6:00 it's cloudy, but no rain. By 6:45 it's raining, but we stay dry under the tarp. An hour or so later the rain stops. We catch the shuttle to the WAC to check out the lockers outside the building near the bus stops. For fifty cents, one can store anything that fits in a three foot or so high cubicle. We plan to leave a daypack with clothes and a few other items when we head into the interior of the park tomorrow. Our curiosity satisfied, we walk on the bike path to the Visitor Center complex. Inside the Visitor Center itself along with the expected exhibits including a large 3-D diorama of the park and life-size stuffed animals, are pieces from past Artists in Residence. One is a large fabric depiction of the area around East Fork of the Toklat River that is astounding in its imagination and complexity; even the individual rocks, boulders, and mountains are created in fabric and realistically colored; it looks real, not fabrication, so to speak.

Since it's only 11:00, we decide to take the McKinley Station Trail back to our campsite. At the site of the original station, signs and photos explain the history of the hotel and restaurant that once stood here. The trail gradually descends through forest, evoking a sense of benign enclosure until it reaches the more open area along bubbling Riley Creek. This is our first encounter with the plethora of various mushrooms that populate the Denali forest floor and even the tundra. The Triple Lakes Trail crosses the creek on a bridge slightly before the train trestle that towers high above in its spanning of Riley Creek. The trail ends a few yards from our campsite.

After lunch, we walk to the WAC and the trail to Horseshoe Lake, which the guidebooks all extol. The trail leaves by where the railroad tracks cross the park entrance road. Lots of people are heading both up and down the trail; Horseshoe Lake is obviously the popular hike in the park entrance area. A steep descent takes us down to the lake. Horseshoe Lake is a large lovely pond. The surrounding area is boggy and so mosquitoes are plentiful. At the far end, there is a beaver dam across the water. As we are hiking back to the near end, it begins raining. The views of the lake are prettier here than the far end. The hike back up proves much easier than expected. The trail is well engineered with cross logs about a step apart at an angle that permit a normal walking pace.

We walk back to the campsite and ready our laundry. When we arrive at the Mercantile, there are several people waiting to do laundry. Only a single dryer is working; the others are out of order. We go inside the store and get towels and tokens for showers. For five dollars, one gets a ten minute shower (incredibly long to us drought-stricken Californians) and a clean towel. We take our showers and meet outside. We decide there is no chance of doing laundry between now and closing due to the number of people waiting. We hope that in a week when we return, the situation will have improved.

While we are making dinner a couple walk by. We wave hello. They stop and ask about the tarp and remark what a good idea it is with the on-and-off rain. They mention they are going to Savage River tomorrow. I reply we're doing the same and maybe we'll see them on the bus. After another foil dinner, we pack the daypack with our laundry and traveling clothes. We walk to the WAC, buy our locker, put in the daypack, and put the locker key in a zippered interior pocket of the other daypack we're bringing with us.

We enjoy a walk before going to sleep, appreciating the light on the nearby mountains. I have a restless night in anticipation of tomorrow.

## **Day 5, Saturday, August 1: Riley Creek to Savage River**

It's another cloudy morning, but no rain, thankfully. We pack up and catch the 10:20 free Savage River Shuttle along with the couple we met yesterday. The bus ride is our first foray past the entrance area to observe the "real Denali," as some guidebooks put it. The road remains paved to the Savage River Rest Area at mile 15, two miles beyond the Savage River Campground. The Savage River Campground has two loops, A and B. The A loop is for larger RVs, the B loop for smaller RVs and tents. We and the couple from Riley Creek are the only two sets of campers who take the bus and walk in. We head for the B loop and Barbara and I go back and forth choosing a campsite since there are several to choose from. The tent areas at most sites have roots in the ground due to the spruce struggling for survival in an area with permafrost not far below the surface. We choose site #6 for privacy and erect the tent as best as possible around the roots. Later, we notice two drive-in late-comers put up their tent in their campsite's parking area to avoid the roots.

After lunch, we catch the shuttle bus to the Savage Rest Stop and Savage Loop Trail. The rest area is by a bridge over Savage River with a ranger kiosk at the far end. Only shuttle buses, tour buses, and the few cars with minimum three-day reservations for Teklanika Campground are permitted beyond this

point. We walk across the bridge, enjoying the view of the Savage River valley and distant mountains. The vista is so vast that it is difficult to judge distances—how far away are those peaks? The loop trail is a well-used foot path, at first away from the river. The rocks and cliffs of the Outer Range rise above, a fascinating array of sizes and shapes. Stunning wildflowers bloom alongside the trail—yellow, violet, and red. As the canyon begins to narrow, the trail curves down to the rapidly flowing river. No one is behind us on the trail so we walk at our leisure, pausing often. As the canyon narrows the rocks of the Outer Range are more dramatic, rising directly above us. At the end, a footbridge spans the gorge, connecting the loop. The canyon continues up the river, a rocky wilderness.

After crossing the bridge, we find a place off-trail to sit and take in a moment of solitude to appreciate the rushing water and distinctive, dramatic rocks. We rouse ourselves from our reverie and walk the mile on this side of the river back to the parking lot and bus stop. The Savage Loop Trail has been our favorite part of the trip so far.

We catch the bus back to our campsite and enjoy the rest of the afternoon in the campground. After dinner, we put the food in the small shed-like building that serves as the food storage locker and take the service road down to the river. After a few minutes, it begins raining lightly. We return to our campsite where the trees by the table provide sufficient shelter from the rain. We enjoy sharing our memories of the loop trail and anticipating tomorrow.

## **Day 5, Sunday, August 2: Savage River**

I head down to the river for photos and enjoy about ten minutes of sunshine, which set the distant mountains, river, and valley in more dramatic relief. To the south, blue sky predominates. Here it's cloudy.

Today, we are hiking the five mile Savage Alpine Trail. It begins by the bus stop across from the campground entrance road. The path winds through boreal forest, climbing gradually. After a mile or so, the path enters tundra and the climb becomes steeper on long switchbacks. The views below of the Savage River valley improve with each switchback. At the top of a long left-turning switchback, the lower peaks of the Alaska Range appear to the southwest; the higher peaks, including Denali, remain obscured in clouds. We pause to take in the dramatic view.

For the next mile or so, the trail travels through tundra and rock. The rocky terrain of the Outer Range with its distinctive formations dominates

the near landscape. Slightly below the highest point of the trail, we are treated to a 270 degree panorama of the Kantishna hills, Alaska Range, the distant mountains to the south and east, the entire valley around Savage River laid out below. We find a place to sit and admire the stupendous view. The highest peaks remain enveloped in clouds.

The descent proves more difficult than the ascent. At first, it's a simple rocky trail, not posing any problems. A mountain magpie flies in front of us and lands, it's black and white feathers especially striking. An arctic ground squirrel sits on a rock by the trail, oblivious to our presence, cleaning himself and posing for a photo. After the initial gradual descent, the trail passes through the Outer Range outcroppings, often narrow and steep. Footstep placement requires attention and care. There is a much better route for a trail, avoiding the outcroppings, but I surmise the trail builders realized that the social trails are inevitable since the tourists are drawn to explore the dramatic rock formations. After seeing only one other party on the trail ahead of us the entire hike, there are now rows of people climbing the trail. We snake down the trail meeting many ascending individuals and groups, people doing their best to make passing as easy as possible on the narrow path.

At the bottom, we cross the bridge and take the beginning of the loop trail to the side trail along the river to sit on a bench and enjoy lunch in solitude. The crowds stick to the main trail. We take the bus back to the campground, getting the same driver we had on Saturday morning. She recognizes us and is friendly.

Back at the campground, we take an afternoon walk on the Mountain Vista Trail, which goes off to one side from the service road down to the river. The trail's title refers to that, on clear days, one can see "the mountain" from here. At the moment it remains invisible. A small village once occupied where we walk. We learn through the signs and photos that Savage Camp with its tent cabins was the park's major destination in the 1920s.

Savage River campground has a very different ambience to Riley Creek due to its smaller size and more spread out layout. It feels more relaxed. This could also be because we are far from the A loop and its larger RVs.

After dinner, we walk down to Savage River. The light shining to the east is spectacular. The clouds are moving rapidly so the light keeps changing as the sun finds niches to shine through the clouds. When the clouds increase, we return to our campsite.

So far, the Denali weather has been worse than the warnings in any guidebook. We've been here four days and had about two hours total of

sunshine. I begin to wonder if this is the way it will be for the rest of the trip. We have four days ahead, the crucial four days, the four days of being beyond civilization. There will be no RVs, no cars, only buses. Savage River may not have cell phone reception, but private cars and RVs made this campground too civilized. At Igloo Creek and Wonder Lake it will be tents and the surrounding wilderness.

### **Day 6, Monday, August 3: Savage River to Igloo Creek**

It's a sunny morning, the first one so far. A picturesque fog hangs over Savage River valley and around the mountains with blue sky above. The sun clears the horizon as I arrive at the river. I spend 45 minutes walking around taking photos of the light on the fog, river, trees, bushes, and mountains, the shifting light and fog in constant motion. I begin walking back towards the campground. The clouds and fog on the mountains to the west begin clearing. I spy a massive white presence, the clouds dissolve, and there it is, Denali. It was a minor Ken Burns moment as in the sequence in *The National Parks* of the mountain materializing from the clouds. I have a hard time maintaining my composure to take a photo.

I walk a short way up the Mountain Vista Trail to where there is a clear view to take it all in. A man comes walking along the trail, smiling. He mentions it is supposed to remain clear through at least tomorrow. I rejoice inside, hoping he is right.

This is what we came for, to see Denali, Denali the park and Denali the mountain. This is the magnificence we came for, magnificence like nowhere on Earth.

I return to the campsite and tell Barbara the mountain is out. We go down to see the view. At this point, the news has traveled and many of the other campers are taking photos, posing with the mountain in the background, and simply admiring the view.

We take our time packing up since we have a reservation for the 11:40 camper bus. We need to be out of the campsite by 11:00 so we have a long wait at the bus stop. When the camper bus arrives, there are four seats left. At the Savage River kiosk, a ranger gets on the bus and gives us a brief welcome talk and reiterates the food storage rules. The paved road ends and we climb a small hill as if to announce we are now in the real Denali where only buses travel a dirt road through surrounding wilderness where a only few people walk and wild animals wander.

The unpaved portion of the park road extends from here, mile 15, to Kantishna at mile 93. The tan buses are commercial tour buses. The green buses are park buses for people taking day trips to the interior, day hikers, campers, and backpackers. The camper buses are primarily for those with reservations in the campgrounds or backpackers though one can take any green bus with an available seat. One can ask the driver to be let off anywhere along the road except those areas with wildlife closures. One can then later catch another bus heading in the same direction or back towards the entrance area.

As we head up the road, a couple who are obviously not campers flag down the bus. The driver stops and lets them know this is a camper bus and saying, “Campers bring one pair of underwear and a \$20 bill and they don’t change either.” The couple laughs, gets on, occupies the two seats in front of us, and seem to enjoy the ride, possibly preferring the more informal atmosphere of the camper bus.

A ptarmigan is by the road and the driver pauses so everyone can get a good view of the quail-like state bird of Alaska. At Teklanika Rest Stop, we pause for a ten minute break. The driver mentions we will be at Igloo Creek in a few minutes.

When we arrive at Igloo Creek, two other sets of people depart the bus. The driver hands our packs down at the rear of the bus. The two sets race across the road into the campground to get their campsite of choice. We’re not about to do the same; we have a reserved site and it’s a tiny campground with only seven sites. There’s no reason to get competitive. We find there are still two unoccupied sites, both lovely. We choose #6, near the creek, nestled in trees and thus separated from #5 and #7. As we are setting up the tent, we decide that next to #7, we have the best site. We hear Igloo Creek bubbling. The tent area and picnic table are nestled in spruce, white birch, black birch, and bushes, screening us from neighbors. It’s a gorgeous, warm, sunny day. One can be content simply sitting at the picnic table listening and looking. This is almost idyllic.

Igloo Creek Campground is at one end of a canyon with Igloo Mountain on one side and Cathedral Mountain on the other. The creek flows under a bridge on the road a few yards west of the campground entrance. To the northwest, Sable Mountain dominates the horizon.

After lunch, we follow a dry creekbed and trail for more than half a mile, first along the creek and then through a lovely boreal forest. We are mainly on a use trail, soft, almost spongy ground winding through the forest. Flowers bloom alongside the tiny path. We enjoy the wandering exploration. Barbara

jokes there should be a bear lurking behind every tree, but we see only birds. We slowly make our way back to the campground, appreciating the sights and sounds of the forest.

We go down to Igloo Creek and find a good sitting rock by the water to enjoy the warm afternoon sun and view of Cathedral Mountain rising to the west. After awhile, we head out to the road and find an area across the road with a picnic table in a large clear dirt area. We sit at the table and try to find Dall sheep on the slopes of Igloo Mountain using the binoculars. I find one, but it moves behind a large rock before I can show it to Barbara.

We while away the rest of the afternoon and evening in our campsite or wandering near the road. The only sounds are the creek and the birds. We are far enough and sheltered enough in our campsite to not be aware of the park road. In the evening, I walk a little way up the road and find a use trail going up to the plateau above the road below Cathedral Mountain. I learn how difficult it is to walk on the spongy tundra and find a place for the tripod.

It has been the best day of the trip so far. We drift off to sleep to the sounds of Igloo Creek.

## **Day 7, Tuesday, August 4: Igloo Creek to Wonder Lake**

This is the most anticipated day of our Denali stay, our arrival at Wonder Lake after the long bus ride through the prime wildlife portion of the park. It is a perfect, sunny, warm morning. Igloo and Cathedral Mountains are especially stunning in the morning light. The setting moon is perched above the shoulder of Cathedral, Igloo Creek sparkling in the foreground

We pack up by 8:15 and walk out to the road to catch the 8:40 camper bus. We pass the time sitting on the bench across the road searching for Dall sheep on Igloo and Cathedral Mountains. I spy a group on Cathedral Mountain. They walk slowly, then stop, lying down. I give the binoculars to Barbara and do my best “below that rock formation and above that formation” description and she quickly finds them. Without binoculars, they are merely white dots on a mountainside; with binoculars, their distinctive shapes and features are clear. Several buses go by—Kantishna Adventures, Tundra Wilderness Tours, Eielson, and even Wonder Lake. The Wonder Lake driver offers to take us, but says the camper bus is a short way behind. We decide to wait for the camper bus though we are anxious about available seats.

A few minutes later, the camper bus arrives. Two people depart out the front as we load our packs in the back. There are lots of available seats,

including two in the second row on the left. These are about perfect. The left and right seats in the front row are occupied by a photographer and his wife. He has a Canon 5D with a huge zoom lens and anxiously looks out the window for wildlife.

The bus driver, J.J., is friendly, offering appropriate and sometimes humorous commentary as he drives. As the bus climbs Sable Pass, J.J. mentions grizzlies frequent this area. The area around Sable Mountain is closed to hikers due to being a prime grizzly migration route. Someone spots a caribou in the distance. J.J. stops the bus and the man in front of us along with a couple of others point their cameras out the open tops of the windows, shutters clicking away. J.J. turns the engine back on and we proceed over the top of the pass. A magnificent view of Denali appears. After a couple of turns, J.J. pulls off to give everyone an opportunity to get off the bus for a five minute photo break.

Riding the bus is even more interesting than expected. The hiking guides extol the buses as ideal transportation for day hikes, backpacking trips, and wildlife viewing. What the guides don't capture is how fascinating the journey can be. I thought a four to five hour ride on a bus would become tedious and uncomfortable; instead it is fascinating, the time quickly passing. The view changes constantly. By being high up, one sees over roadside vegetation. Wildlife appears roadside or on the road itself. Arctic ground squirrels seem to play their version of chicken, racing across the road in front of the bus.

One gazes on wide-open, expansive views of rolling hills of tundra with mountains rising behind in a unique captivating landscape. Without the wildlife, this would still be a glorious journey. The wildlife transforms it. The best way to see Denali's wildlife up close is from the bus. Safety requires one maintain a minimum distance when hiking of 25 yards for most animals and 300 yards for grizzlies.

After our break, someone spots a grizzly by the road. The bus stops, engine turned off. The bear is only a few yards off the road, gobbling blueberries. I don't think I want to get any closer to a live grizzly. (My best photos are of its rear end, its face buried in the scrubby blueberry bushes.) The bear ambles across the road in front of the bus into bushes on the other side. The photographer in the front row goes to the right side and the grizzly complies, climbing up the bank and small hill in plain view. Once the bear is out of sight, the bus moves on.

At Polychrome Pass we take another photo break. Colorful volcanic rock formations give the pass its name. Once again, I am astonished by the vastness of the landscape. On our descent from the pass, we see a couple of

buses stopped and a row of photographers by the side of the road, each with a humongous zoom lens, one of whom was our neighbor at Igloo Creek. A male caribou is lying a few feet from the road in the shade, chewing his cud, oblivious to the buses and photographers. Our bus stops and everyone enjoys the photo op.

The road at this point is extremely narrow with precipitous drops to one side. I am impressed by J.J.'s skill negotiating this section, though he keeps any commentary to a minimum. The road descends gradually to a bridge over the East Fork of the Toklat River. Adolph Murie's cabin sits near the river, now used primarily by artists in residence. The fabric piece we saw at the Visitor Center seems even more remarkable when seeing the actual area depicted. A typical Denali braided river, the East Fork is the center of a wide expanse. Denali's braided rivers consist of a series of shallow waterways separated by dry land, sometime barren and sometimes with bushes, willows, and other vegetation. Hiking along the river is usually easier than trying to walk over the tundra so the rivers are common backcountry routes. The East Fork descends from a mountain range through a broad valley. On this sunny, summer day, the setting is magical. Murie lived in the cabin year-round while undertaking his seminal study of the East Fork wolf pack (even adopting a wolf as a pet).

Partway up the next pass, a female caribou stands on the road. She begins walking along the road in front of the bus. She feints going off the left side into the bushes, then trots over to the right side. This zig-zagging continues for at least five minutes, the bus chugging behind waiting for an opportunity to pass. Every time she seems to want to get off the road, she reconsiders. There are collective laughs from us bus passengers at each one of her feints to one side or the other. Finally, she makes a decision and heads down left into the bushes. Everyone cheers and applauds as the bus accelerates up the road.

We take a longer break at the Toklat Rest Area, joining several other buses. The Toklat River forms a beautiful valley with distinctive cliffs on both sides. Several people search the cliffs with binoculars for Dall sheep. After the break, we begin a long climb of Highway Pass, the road's highest point. On the way down, someone spots a grizzly in the distance making his way over the tundra. Someone remarks he seems small for a grizzly. J.J. explains Denali grizzlies are smaller due to their main diet consisting of various berries, not salmon as the Kodiak and Katmai grizzlies. Denali grizzlies are in the 300-500 pound range; the Katmai are over 1,000 and the Kodiak up to 1,400-1500 pounds. At Stony Creek, we drop off a couple of backpackers who head off in the opposite direction of the grizzly.

We ascend to Stony Overlook. J.J. tells us that we are about to get the “postcard view” on this clear day. At the top, there is a collective gasp at the view of Denali and Alaska Range, one frequently featured on websites and tourist brochures. This view is truly awesome (for once, a proper use of this now cliché term). The mountain is an overwhelming presence, the road picturesquely winding into the distance.

At a pullout, we are granted a photo break. At this point, I am trying to take in this overwhelming vista and still manage a good enough photo. There are probably thousands of photos each year from this spot. I do my best and get back on the bus.

We descend to Eielson Visitor Center where several buses are parked and lots of people are milling about. Eielson is recently redone, the building constructed into the hillside and totally sustainable. We decide to skip the exhibits inside on this sunny day and admire the views of the mountains while also people watching. The Alaska Range, especially Denali, and nearby peaks are clear and distinctive. Several people are at the top of Thorofare Peak, having climbed 1,700 vertical feet on the trail. Many others populate the nearer and easier Tundra Loop Trail. At 11:45 we board the bus for the final segment to Wonder Lake.

It’s a long ride and I begin to feel anxious as the road curves and undulates along the ridge above the McKinley River. The Alaska Range rises high above, white peaks gleaming in the sunlight, Denali high above all, it’s north and south peaks thousands of feet above the 12,000 and 13,000 foot summits on either side. Wonder Lake comes into view below. We come to the “Y,” the intersection of the road to the campground and the continuation of the main road to Kantishna. A mile down the Wonder Lake Road, J.J. points out the McKinley Bar Trail trailhead. A half mile later we are at the bus stop for Wonder Lake campground. A small crowd is gathered. The camp host helps with crowd control so J.J. can park the bus. We disembark with the other campers and get our packs from the rear. Some campers have wheeled luggage; as one remarks, it’s “glorified car camping.”

The camp hostess gathers us together and marches us up the road. At an overlook of the campground, she explains the two foot shelters where we store all our food and odorous objects. She encourages us to cook dinner at the shelter’s covered picnic tables so the food odors will be away from campsites. The left side shed is nearer to more sites so I opt for the less populated right one. I spy at least three vacant campsites that look promising and head off. Barbara says she will follow. I pass the shelter and head down a narrow path to the sites I’d spied. One looks good and I clip our sign to the

post. Denali gleams in the afternoon light, clear from the campsite's picnic table. I search for Barbara and see her coming down the path. The camp host and hostess arrive about the same time. They are very friendly. I think we achieve an affinity due to our age. We discover over our three nights here that we are the oldest people in the campground by at least five to ten years; the vast majority of campers are in their twenties and thirties. The hosts tells us about hikes and how easy it is to hop on and off the bus for sections. I ask if they know when the site below is leaving—it sits out away from neighboring sites, screened by a row of pines on one side. The hostess remarks it's her favorite one in the campground.

We set up the tent, have a late lunch, and head to the McKinley Bar Trail. Though it is later than we'd hoped, we've learned that it does not get dark and so there is no reason to worry about burning daylight. The trail begins with a walk across a tundra plateau with the Alaska Range shining in the distance. The trail makes a short descent and winds through a rocky area that is essentially a dried creekbed. Walking on the rocks is annoying and a bit tedious. Another short descent brings us to a series of small kettle ponds with a stream meandering through. Plank bridges over the creek and ponds keep our feet dry. A man is relaxing a little ways off the trail. I wave a hello and he waves back.

We enter a thick boreal forest. The path is relatively straight passing among the trees. We begin anticipating emerging at the McKinley River. The trail goes on and on. On this hot day, we are tiring and we need to pay attention to how much water we have. We are beginning to wonder when the forest will end, then see a break in the trees and a slight change in vegetation. Abruptly, the McKinley River is before us, the water rushing by. Supposedly, people will wade the river, but the current looks far too dangerous. Maybe it's easier at a different juncture. We pause for photos and a drink of water, taking in the magnificent scene.

The man I saw sitting off the trail emerges from the forest. He's carrying what appears to be a .357 Magnum tucked in his belt—is this his grizzly defence? He's friendly and despite feeling uneasy—he must have followed us—I try to be polite and conversational. Two backpackers emerge from the forest. They are to camp in the zone to the right of the trail while the man is camping in the zone to the left. They begin discussing their permits and the backcountry zone system. Barbara and I use this as an opportunity to wish them all great trips and head back.

The return hike through the forest passes more quickly now that we are no longer anticipating it's end. Indeed, the entire hike back goes more easily,

despite our weariness after a long day on the bus and over six mile hike. We arrive back at our campsite at 7:00. Instead of having dinner, we enjoy the view for awhile. We are content and happy to be where we are.

When we head up to the shelter, we have the area to ourselves. The view from the table at one end of the shelter is fabulous, the clouds passing over the Alaska Range in a magical kaleidoscope, indeed the most amazing kaleidoscope in the world.

When we return to our campsite, the two backpackers who were at the McKinley River traipse down one of the myriad of use trails towards us. They have been searching for a suitable campsite for hours and are frustrated and nearly exhausted. I sympathize with their plight, having sought a campsite at the end of a long day. I direct them to check with the camp hosts and mention there are at least two empty sites in our area. We never learn their exact outcome though we see them the next day from a distance.

At around 9:30, the light begins to change and alpenglow begins to shine on the mountains. I find an outcropping nearby and take the camera and tripod. At 10:00 or so, the alpenglow is magnificent. We stay up until almost 11:00, watching the light on the clouds, the Alaska Range and Denali.

## **Day 8, Wednesday, August 5: Wonder Lake**

When I get out of the tent a little before 6:00, the neighbor with the great campsite has left. I take our sign off our post and walk down to the site. We eat breakfast in our campsite (we decide boiling water for coffee and oatmeal and eating bars is okay). Afterwards we move the tent and our things to the other site. We immediately appreciate the extra privacy and view of Denali, Alaska Range, and kettle ponds from the campsite.

Wonder Lake Campground consists of 28 sites spread over a large hillside overlooking kettle ponds, the McKinley River, and, most breathtaking, Denali and the Alaska Range. Most sites have magnificent views of “the mountain.” The spacing between sites varies. Due to the amphitheater-like setting, noise carries well so one often hears voices conversing even if exact words are undecipherable. The noise begins a little after 5:00 a.m. from people getting up to catch the 6:00 bus and continues until 11:00 p.m. when there are still people talking in the food shelters. Over our three nights, we find this is the most annoying aspect of camping here.

Once we are settled in our new campsite, we walk to Reflection Pond. The mile-and-half walk to the “Y” is interesting. Only one bus comes down the road. Otherwise we walk in solitude, taking in the view down to Wonder

Lake and, to the southeast, over the tundra, kettle ponds, and forest we hiked yesterday. At the “Y” we turn left. A couple of buses and a van to and from Kantishna go by. Since they create a cloud of dust on the dirt road, we can see them coming from far away. The view down to Wonder Lake from the road is marvelous.

We round a small bend and to the left is a lovely kettle pond. A sign announces this is Reflection Pond, a popular place for photographers to get shots of Denali mirrored in the water. The mountain remains in clouds but Barbara gets a couple of photos before the wind picks up while I’m setting up the tripod. The pond is quite pretty, a peaceful place, so we linger for a few minutes despite the lack of a reflection.

We walk back along the road a short way and find a path taking us to a stunning overlook of Wonder Lake with a large kettle pond in between the lake and the ridge where we sit. It is a warm, sunny day, even if clouds obscure the mountain. We enjoy a very long, leisurely lunch. We sit on a bare, rocky area in the middle of large blueberry patch. One only needs to reach out to pick a few. Barbara fills a bag with blueberries to take with us. We also eat our fill. We lose track of time enjoying our solitary idyll above Wonder Lake.

Eventually, we rouse ourselves and walk back to the campground. We decide to go down to Wonder Lake. Unfortunately, a bus is parked there with many people at the lakeshore tables and benches. One man is especially holding forth, speaking with a Slavic accent. From the conversation we learn he is Bulgarian. Indeed, much of the group seems to be from Bulgaria and going to stay in Kantishna.

We go back to our campsite and enjoy watching the clouds on the Alaska Range, the kaleidoscoping patterns of light and shadow, portions of mountains disappearing and emerging. The clouds increase. We see sheets of rain in the distance. A rainbow briefly appears over the ponds to the southeast. At dinner, we sit at our favorite table in the shelter and watch a lightning show over the Alaska Range, unexpected thrilling dinner entertainment.

The clouds seem to be decreasing after dinner so I head up the service road to an overlook with a magnificent panoramic view extending for miles and miles of the Alaska Range, Denali, McKinley River, forest, tundra, and ponds. To the southeast, the mountains shine. A sheet of rain covers the northeast, heading in this direction. I take a photo of the light on the mountains and meadow to the southeast. A few drops fall. I pack up the camera and walk quickly down the road. The drops become steady, then a

downpour. I pass through the covered shelter and head down to the campsite. Barbara unzips the mosquito netting as I unzip the vestibule. I fall backward into the tent, sit up, zip shut the rainfly, and remove my damp clothes, placing them in the vestibule. We crawl in our sleeping bag and soon doze off to the sound of rain.

## **Day 9, Thursday, August 6: Wonder Lake**

We wake up to foggy haze blanketing the area around us. The smell of smoke permeates the air. It is not a good morning for photos. It is a good morning for getting off early.

After enjoying blueberries in my oatmeal, we catch the 8:00 bus to Kantishna. Several other people from the campground join us. Our driver, Gary, has a low-key, pointed sense of humor. He mentions there must be fires caused by last night's lightning due to the smoke, but he has no idea where they are. The haze, he says, is entirely due to smoke. Just before the Ranger Station, a moose stands in the middle of the kettle pond to the right of the road, a large rack of antlers dipping in and out of the water. Some people get off the bus to photograph the moose. Gary pointedly reminds them to keep their distance, especially since a female is also in the pond.

We are in awe of Gary's skill negotiating the narrow, winding road up to Kantishna, even being forced to ford a running creek where the bridge is being repaired. He drops off three hikers at the Skyline Trail, goes past the tiny airstrip, and loops back to park in front of the Quigley cabin. As the signs tell us, the Quigleys, especially Fanny, deserve a book (there probably is one). They came to Kantishna during the gold rush and never left, living here year-round, achieving legendary status.

After our rest stop, we pick up a couple at one of the lodges and head back down the road. We ask Gary to drop us off at the far end of Wonder Lake. No one is there. We follow a path to the lakeshore where a creek enters the lake. A small pond on the other side of the road is serenely beautiful. A group of ducks feed at the end of the lake. We enjoy the lake views despite the smoke. We hear voices coming down the road. A group follows a naturalist on a morning hike. There is a small dock with canoes. A couple takes a canoe out on the lake. When we investigate, we find the canoes are chained and locked; they are only for resort guests.

The naturalist knows the unmapped paths in the area. We notice where she takes her group and follow far behind on the use trails above the lake to blueberry hill, probably the site for Ansel Adams famous photo of Wonder

Lake and Denali, taken at 1:30 a.m. when he was staying at the Ranger Station. We have fun following the various paths, eventually making our way down to the Ranger Station. We go inside and ask about the fires and weather. The Ranger knows no more than Gary about the fires. She checks the weather and we learn it should be a sunny afternoon, evening, and sunny tomorrow.

We hike the road back to Wonder Lake Campground. We hope the moose might still be at the pond, but no such luck. We eat lunch at a different overlook of the lake, once again lingering. The smoke begins clearing out so we can see first the surrounding ridges and then the Alaska Range. We walk back to the campground, appreciating the clearing views. Once more, we decide to go down to Wonder Lake. We enjoy sitting by the lake for a few minutes in solitude until three young men arrive with a portable player blasting generic pop music. Then a bus comes down the road and unloads. We return to our campsite and appreciate the view from our picnic table. When we go up for dinner, we realize there are a different set of people staying in the campground.

By this point it is clear we are the oldest tent campers at every campground we stay at. (Only a few RV campers at Riley Creek fall into the over sixty category.) Why we're not sure. We still enjoy being outdoors and staying in a tent as much as when we were in our early twenties. Getting in and out of the tent is bit harder, but it's a minor annoyance. When one reaches their sixties, life is full of minor annoyances.

Wonder Lake Campground is an international gathering, but it is not a melting pot. There are people from at least eight different nations, spanning the globe. Most of the foreigners interact very little with others, talking among themselves in their native language. Most are friendly in the sense of acknowledging and saying hello, though a few could not be bothered with even that. What Barbara terms the norms of human behavior regardless of culture and nationality—acknowledging and respecting the presence of other people—does not exist for this minority regardless of nationality.

I suppose some sociologist could write a book on how modern technology permits us to know almost anything without social interaction and thus leads to people unable to observe the norms of human social behavior. Instead of interacting with strangers, one buries one's self in the screen of a phone or tablet. One becomes the "selfie" person, an individual so self-involved he or she does not acknowledge the presence of other people outside one's small, insular circle. A number of people at Wonder Lake sit alone in the food shelter and stare at a screen even though there is no cell phone

reception or they will jabber with family and friends while also staring at a screen, often discussing what's on the screen while facing the opposite direction from the view of the Alaska Range and Denali.

Most people are here because it is one of the most spectacularly beautiful campground locations in the world. However, some people at Wonder Lake campground behave as if this place of unparalleled beauty is simply another notch in their travel bragging rights. Most campers were only here for a single night, a few for two nights. We were the only people we saw staying three nights.

For our third evening's dinner we sit at our favorite table and enjoy home-dried spaghetti and freeze-dried corn while watching the cloud show on the Alaska Range. After dinner, Barbara decides to attend the ranger talk on moose while I go up the service road for photos.

The evening is sublime. There is an almost overwhelming presence to this place. The surrounding immensity of it all, not just "the mountain," engenders a comprehension of human insignificance. Every vista speaks to the wild's primeval connection to life's essential essence. The petty concerns of the human world diminish, even vanish in the presence of this place.

There is the contemporary world where we exist in our day-to-day lives. It is a world of mundane, often irrelevant concerns compared to the grander natural world around us. But these contemporary concerns dictate how we each live our day-to-day lives. The daily news, our jobs, sports results, office politics, national and international politics, form our daily lives.

For the past week, we've heard nothing of the outside world. Our concerns and decisions are confined to what bus to catch, what and where to eat, and where to hike. These thoughts flash through my mind as I gaze in awe of the ever-changing view. I stand by the tripod as the clouds and light shift, waiting for the right moment. Denali's summit remains clear with clouds moving around the mountain. One hovering above the summit conjures the image of a flying saucer over Denali.

Two men come walking up the road engrossed in a discussion regarding one's "business plan." Discussing business while one of the wonders of the world is taking place before you requires a consciousness untouched by those timeless intangibles of life. When they walk past me, they remark "great view" and continue walking and talking without so much as a pause. On their return twenty or so minutes later, Denali and the Alaska Range are bathed in alpenglow. The two men do not even look up or pause, continuing to babble away about the best way to market their idea. Encounters like that give me pause for the future of humanity.

The alpenglow transforms the scene around me. The beauty is staggering, beyond human language. No words encompass this immense, profound, overpowering beauty.

Reluctantly, after a couple of more photos, I walk back to the campsite in the fading light. Barbara is at the picnic table gazing at the view and writing. She enjoyed the ranger talk and fills me in on the details.

This is such a sublime place. The one thing absent is solitude. Every camper should give a quiet thanks to Adolph Murie for insisting this not be a site for a planned luxury hotel with a paved park road. The Wonder Lake area remains relatively unchanged, a unique, magnificent, magical place.

Barbara and I stay up gazing at Denali and Alaska Range until after 11:00

## **Day 10: Friday, August 7: Wonder Lake to Riley Creek**

The morning is nearly perfect, glorious Denali shining in the morning light. I heat water for coffee and walk up to the overlook. It is completely clear to the south with wisps of clouds at about 10-12,00 feet so Denali's north and south peaks are clear. The sun comes over the horizon; the foreground trees aglow in day's first light. The view extends for miles and miles in all directions. I spend ninety minutes enthralled, seeing only one person, before I return to the campsite. Barbara is writing and enjoying gazing on Denali and the Alaskan Range. We have a leisurely breakfast while laying the tent fly out to dry on the bushes.

We have been blessed with clear views of Denali and the Alaska Range on arrival, and, now, on departure. In between there have been two beyond-words evenings and sunsets, two beautiful mornings. Throughout our stay we have seen only a scattered few of Alaska's so-called state bird, the mosquito. Soon we will pack up and get on the bus back to civilization. Yes, this place is still civilization to the extent there are flush toilets, but otherwise it is easy to ignore the other trappings. I can be in this place gazing on "the mountain" in the warm morning sun, the only sounds inaudible human voices, the buzzing of insects, chirping birds, and chattering of red squirrels in the spruce trees by our campsite. The bushes, spruce, and tundra seem content, soaking up the sunlight, radiating peacefulness. It has been a three days beyond our hopes and dreams.

I feel happy, content, justified, satisfied. I don't want to leave. It's like a backcountry trip in the sense that running out of food is what pushes me to go. Reluctantly, we pack up and leave our campsite before the 11:00 deadline.

We walk down to Wonder Lake. No one else is here. We appreciate the lake, reveling in the quiet solitude, and eat an early lunch. As we finish, we hear the unmistakable sound of a bus engine chugging down the road. It parks and people get out. We hoist our packs and begin walking up to the campground bus stop. The bus sign says “Wonder Lake.” This must be the lunch break for our planned bus. “Are you going back to the WAC?” I ask the driver. Yes, picking up at 12:30 at the bus stop.

No one is at the bus stop, though two packs rest at the back. The Swedish couple who arrived yesterday show up along with a younger couple. The sound of the bus rumbles up the road. The bus pulls up a few yards away with the door closed. The driver speaks to the passengers. Barbara and I joke that maybe it’s what the driver told the couple who got on the camper bus on Tuesday: prepare to ride with stinky campers. It’s been a week since we washed anything except our hands, faces, and dishes.

There is room on the bus for all six of us campers. While I give our packs to the driver in the rear, Barbara finds two seats in the third row on the right side, ideal. We settle in for the long ride back to the WAC. The driver turns on his mic and says, “We got the big five on the way here.” That means they saw grizzlies, Dall sheep, caribou, moose, and even a wolf, a rare occurrence.

The day riders are friendly and engaged. As the bus begins climbing the mile and a half to the Y, people begin gasping and asking to stop. We don’t see any animals. Then we realize, it’s “the mountain.” After being obscured by clouds, it has re-emerged so the summit is visible. The driver knows the best turnout and stops there for photos. Though the midday sun is glaring off the icy summit, it is obvious no one is worrying about the best light for a photo. I realize just how lucky we have been. I restrain from commenting about last night’s alpenglow and this morning’s magnificence.

Back on the main road, with no anticipation or anxiety, I enjoy this section of the ride, taking in the views of the Alaska Range and its glaciers, McKinley River, kettle ponds, and rolling tundra. As we begin the climb to Eielson, I say a farewell to this area I’ve fallen in love with, hoping to return someday.

Since this is not a camper bus, the driver has a microphone and often offers extensive commentary. He provides a history of Kantishna, points out the glaciers, and, when wildlife appears, interjects stories of other encounters along with natural history. On this return trip, we see a few grizzlies, three moose, and many caribou. At one point, a large caribou with magnificent antlers appears by the side of the road. The bus stops for the photo op. The caribou ambles onto the road in front of the bus and continues walking in front of the chugging bus for at least a minute.

We arrive at the WAC after 5:00, retrieve the daypack from the locker, and walk the familiar path to the Mercantile to see what food we can find. Barbara goes inside while I wait outside with the packs. She comes out with some suggestions and I go in to confirm. I suggest a couple of other things. We realize we are both in an addled state from our week in the interior and the long bus ride. Barbara goes in and buys dinner, breakfast, and beer. We discover there are now two dryers working at the laundry. Carrying our backpacks, two daypacks, and our food, we make our way to the tent-only C loop. We end up at #142, the one behind and through the woods from our first two nights. We are happy to get such a good campsite despite our late arrival.

After a late dinner cooked on our camp stove, we stroll around the campground area to unwind from the long day.

## **Day 11: Saturday, August 8: Riley Creek**

It is a cloudy morning. We gather the laundry and head to the Mercantile. There is an organized event taking place, a race of some sort. We remember that it is Saturday. Fortunately, there is not a line in the laundry room. We load the laundry and I walk to the WAC where I buy a banana and a couple of sandwiches. I check the weather forecasts behind the reservation counter. There is a chance of rain for the next three days. When I return, we take our first shower in over a week. Afterwards, I sit outside while our laundry dries, writing scattered notes.

The Mercantile deck is a fascinating place for people watching. There are all ages, all nationalities, all temperaments. Some people spend hours using the available electric outlets, their phones or laptops plugged in, tapping into the free wi-fi connection. They sit in front of a computer, ignoring their surroundings. This one gentleman has not moved from his seat or even looked up for well over an hour. Others sit and fidget constantly, getting up to pace around before returning to their phone or laptop. The overheard conversations cover everything from mundane logistics to colorful recitations of backcountry trips.

There are definitely gradations or classes (or however one wishes to classify) of Denali visitors. The largest group are day visitors affiliated with cruise ships and tours. They are by far the best dressed and so stand out from all others. Many may not get beyond the periphery of Denali, only seeing the entrance area. If they spend the night it is outside the park. However, enough fill the coffers of Aramark and the NPS, crowding the tan tour buses for day excursions up and back on the park road.

The campers can be divided into four distinct sections. Those here at Riley Creek see the entrance area and may take a bus trip to the interior as far as Toklat, Eielson, or even Wonder Lake. Yesterday, there were at least four people who were on the bus who were camped at Riley in their RVs.

The second group are those who camp at Savage River. Most drive to the campground. Again, some of those take the bus to the interior. Three were on the bus yesterday. The same applies to those with a Tek pass camped at Teklanika. One couple yesterday clearly had a wonderful time from their exuberant thank you to the driver as they got off at the Teklanika Campground stop.

The third group are those like us who go to Igloo Creek and Wonder Lake, intent on experiencing the park from more than a bus window and a drive-in campsite.

Finally, there are the backpackers who I confess to envy now that I've been here. I would love a day to be in quiet solitude gazing on the magnificent views. Since one only has to be out of sight of the road from one's campsite, a long hike is not necessary for a backcountry trip.

When the laundry is done, we return to the campsite. It is cloudy, threatening rain. After eating the sandwiches I purchased, we decide to hike the Taiga Trail since Mt. Healy is clouded over and thus offers no views of the rest of the park. The Taiga Trail lives up to its name, a lovely walk through the taiga (boreal) forest. We take our time, enjoying the walk. On our return, we stop at the Backcountry Office and give the ranger our unused bear spray to pass on to another camper.

We have a relaxing late afternoon and evening, sitting at the picnic table, cooking canned spaghetti for dinner, and walking around the area.

## **Day 12: Sunday, August 9: Riley Creek to Fairbanks**

It is cloudy for our last morning with rain due to arrive later. Fortunately, the rain holds off while we repack everything for the trip home on the train and plane. Since we ate all the food except a few bars and some trail mix, the packing goes relatively easy. It is a huge psychological help to have had yesterday to decompress. Waking at Wonder Lake, the long bus ride, finding a late campsite here, getting up in the morning, packing up, getting on the train and dealing with the outside world would be a severe adjustment shock. This way we were able to transition from being in near paradise to the interactions and negotiations of contemporary civilization.

Shortly before 11:00, we take the over-familiar path to the Mercantile and the WAC. With our backpacks and day packs, we make slow but steady progress to the train depot below the Visitor Center. We are able to check in our backpacks for the trip to Fairbanks even though the train departs at 4:00. As we head up to the Visitor Center it begins raining so we go inside and watch the short movie. For lunch we go to the Merino Grill, order fish and chips, and find seats outside on the deck. Either our taste buds have low standards due to days of eating camp stove meals or the fish and chips are rather good.

After lunch we pass the time by walking the loop of the Roadside Trail and Meadow View Trail. We enjoy the leisurely walk in the woods, meeting few people. At around 3:00, we head down to the depot and sit on the covered benches for boarding Gold Star Dome car B. The train arrives about 3:30. Once again, we climb the winding stairs to our seats. The ride through Nenaana Canyon is once again gorgeous. The food at dinner is not good, which leads me to think the fish and chips were as good as we thought. On one level, this return trip is a gradual journey from wild, outdoor Alaska to civilized, settled, modern Alaska. We pull into Fairbanks at around 8:00, phone the shuttle, get our backpacks, and wait outside, standing under the awning due to drizzle. We get to our room a little before 9:00 and try to unwind. We have to get up at 4:00 a.m. and catch the shuttle at 4:45.

### **Day 13: Monday, August 10: Fairbanks to San Francisco**

We manage to wake up, take showers, and get down to the lobby to catch the shuttle. For once, it is still dark outside. The driver is cheerful, but realizes we are still in a wake up daze so says little. The plane departs Fairbanks slightly late, but we don't care since we once more have a long layover in Seattle.

The rest of the trip home is a reversal of our departure trip. To our relief, everything follows its scheduled routine. Our airport shuttle bus drops us at its parking area at 7:30. We buy a take-and-bake pizza on our way home. Over a late dinner, we bask in the glow of our dream trip come true.