




DENALI

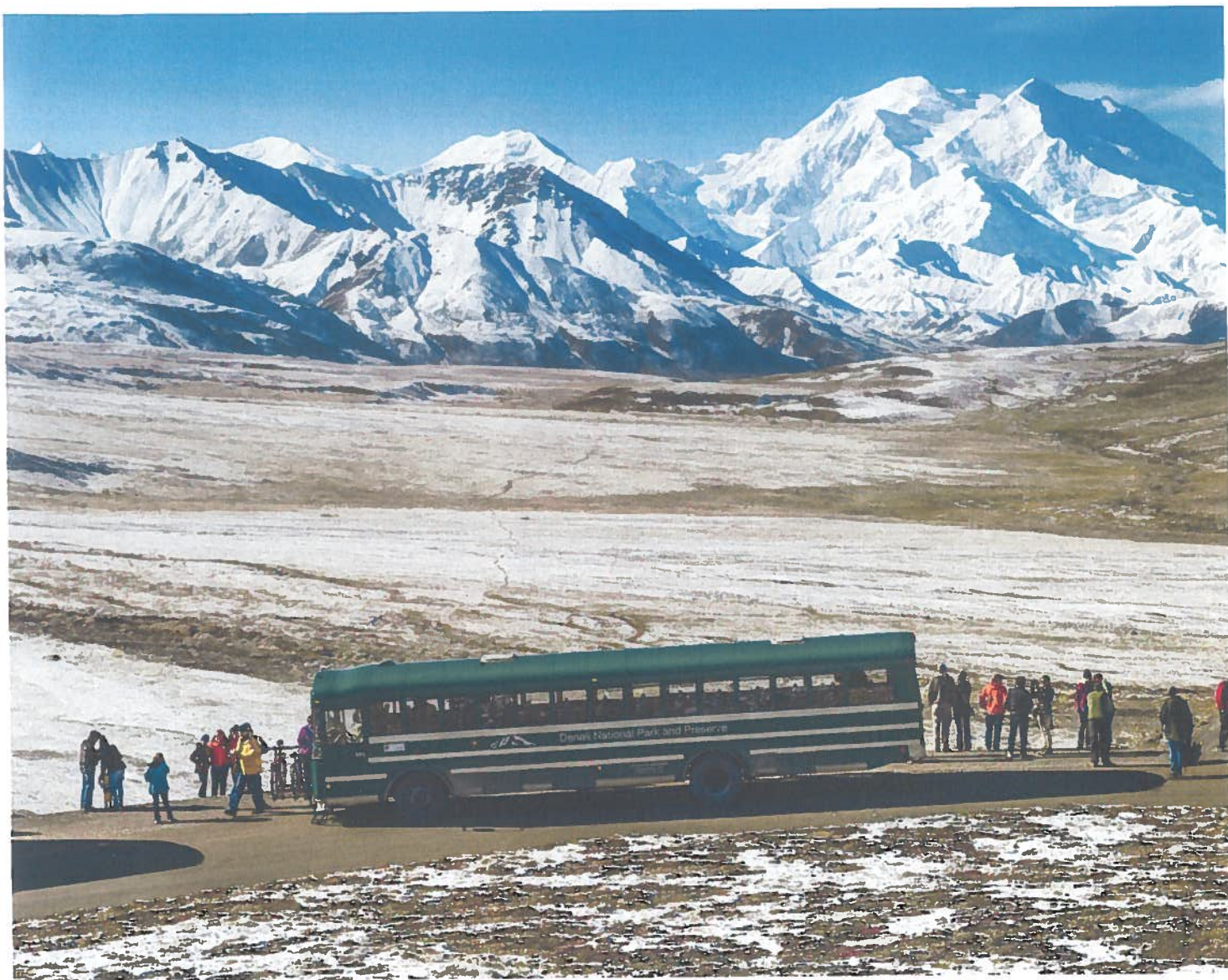


How can six
million acres not
be enough?

A mother grizzly and her cubs cause a "bear jam" on Denali's 92-mile-long Park Road, open to private vehicles only five days each summer. Most visitors travel the route by Park Service bus (following pages), frequently spotting wildlife but rarely catching a cloudless glimpse of the park's namesake peak (preceding pages).









THE POWER OF PARKS

A YEARLONG EXPLORATION

By Tom Clynes

Photographs by Aaron Huey

Park rangers here call the high season—from June through early September, when Denali National Park and Preserve hosts the majority of its 500,000 annual visitors—the “hundred days of chaos.” Indeed a midsummer morning at the park’s Wilderness Access Center, located at the start of Denali’s fabled 92-mile-long Park Road, can feel a bit like rush hour at Manhattan’s Port Authority Bus Terminal. Loudspeakers announce bus boarding times, and visitors from many nations crowd the ticket counter.

Most of Denali’s visitors are cruise ship passengers who see the park and its prolific wildlife largely through bus windows. “But if you’re seeking solitude, it’s not hard to find,” says ranger Sarah Hayes, who helps backpackers and hikers prepare for their adventures. “We’ve got six million acres of mostly trailless lands where wild animals roam undisturbed. And it’s accessible to anyone who hops off the bus.”

As my bus rolls out, noses press against windows, hands clutch cameras, and people speaking half a dozen different tongues excitedly speculate about wildlife sightings. I ask several passengers what’s on their wish list. “A moose!” “A grizzly!” “Caribou!” “A wolf!”

At the five-mile mark we spot our first animal.



“Squirrel!” a kid yells, bringing the bus to laughter. After the 15-mile mark, the road turns to dirt and empties of cars. A few miles farther along the trees disappear. As the distant peaks of the Alaska Range come into view, the scale of this kingdom of nature becomes apparent. The driver slows down.

“It’s been hiding for two weeks now,” he says, wheeling the vehicle through a tight turn. “But there’s a pretty good chance that today...” As the towering mountain comes into hazy view, a dozen voices sing out, “Denali!”

Rising 20,310 feet above sea level, North America’s tallest peak is a stunning sight,



although in warm weather its slopes are often shrouded in clouds. The mountain was a big part of the legend and lore of the Athabaskan-speaking people who gave it the name Denali, meaning Tall One. In 1896 gold prospector William Dickey renamed it Mount McKinley in honor of Ohio politician William McKinley, a staunch champion of the gold standard who one year later would become the nation's 25th president. For decades Ohio's congressional delegation successfully blocked attempts to rename the mountain. Then last summer the Obama Administration used its executive power to restore the original name.

Hefting cameras and calling out in a multitude of accents, park visitors entreat bus drivers to stop when wildlife comes into view: moose, bears, caribou, sheep—and, ever more rarely, wolves.

Seeing the mountain, spotting a grizzly, or catching a glimpse of a wolf are the top three reasons people give for coming to Denali. As recently as 2010, a visitor stood a better chance of seeing a wolf in the wild than seeing the elusive Tall One, which is visible on just one in three summer days. But since 2010 the number of wolf sightings has plunged. According to a study of wildlife viewing opportunities along

the Park Road, observers recorded wolf sightings on only 6 percent of trips in 2014—down from 45 percent in 2010. Park biologists report that the number of wolves inside the park has dropped from more than 100 a decade ago to fewer than 50 last year. I came to Denali, in part, to discover why.

"I HATE TO CALL the weatherman a liar, but there's no way it was 30 below zero down there," pilot Dennis Miller says, as our ski-plane climbs away from the snowy airstrip at park headquarters. Bundled in half a dozen layers and wedged behind him in the tiny cockpit, I watch Miller shake his head. "I'll be surprised if it gets that warm all day," he says.

A few minutes later we hear the day's first radio-collared wolf in our left headphones, as an antenna on the plane's left side picks up its signal. Miller turns the aircraft and the beeps equalize, left and right. The chirping gets louder as we cross the park boundary and fly over the Stampede corridor, a notch of state, borough, and private land also known as the Wolf Townships.

"That'll be the female in the East Fork pack," Miller says. "Back in November we counted at least 15 wolves, but we found the collared male dead two weeks ago, on March 6. I've only seen a single set of tracks since then."

Following the signal, Miller descends and zigzags through a river valley where a lone wolf track heads into the trees. He throws the plane over on its left wingtip and peers down. "I'm just going to make one pass," he says, pulling the plane tighter into the turn and squinting toward the ground. "Some of the guys in these houses here, if they see me circling, they'll come out and try to find what I'm looking at and shoot it."

I've spent the previous four days flying with Miller and National Park Service biologists, whose focus turns to wolves during the snowy, light-filled days of March. Each time they've spotted a wolf inside the park that they want collared, they've called in a helicopter team to swoop down and dart it. With the animal tranquilized, biologists fit it with a collar. They also take blood and hair samples, hoping to fill

some of the many gaps in what we know about the health, behavior, and genetics of one of the world's most misunderstood animals.

The research is an extension of the pioneering work of ecologist Adolph Murie, one of the first scientists to study Denali's wolves in the wild. In 1939, when Murie made the first of his many expeditions to what was then Mount McKinley National Park, wolves were considered vermin, and Park Service rangers had a history of shooting them on sight. Murie's research showed that wolves and other top predators play an essential role in healthy habitats, and he argued that we should manage parks to protect entire ecosystems rather than individual species.

Other influential scientists and thinkers would follow Murie to Denali, whose wide-open and mostly treeless mountainscapes are ideal for observing wildlife. This sprawling swath of still wild America would inspire and anchor many of the lofty ideals now considered part of the DNA of the National Park Service and incite great shifts in thinking on the role of parks and their protectors. It was here that many of the now accepted values of environmental protection and science-based decision-making gestated. The Wilderness Act has roots here, and the seeds of some of the nation's most influential environmental initiatives were planted here.

Denali has also had an outsize impact on the hundreds of thousands of nonscientists who arrive each year with dreams of a thrilling wildlife encounter and depart with a much deeper connection with the natural world. "We see it all the time," says Park Superintendent Don Striker. "They come here to snap a few pictures and get some bragging rights about being 50 feet from a grizzly. In the course of experiencing this natural drama, something clicks. They go away wanting to protect places like this."

Yet Denali has always been an uneasy paradise. The park was created in 1917 as a refuge for Dall sheep and other game animals, and its first rangers found themselves chasing poachers who supplied meat to miners and railroad builders. This tug-of-war between use and preservation would become the fundamental tension

of the national parks. Even today there are few places where it's felt as intensely, or dealt with as creatively, as it is here. The tension extends from Denali's sometimes crowded summit to its remote traplines. It reaches from the skies surrounding the mountain, which often buzz with sightseeing flights, down to the ears of solitude seekers in the trailless valleys below.

"A lot of things about this park are confusing to people," says ranger John Leonard. "It's wilderness, but then people are landing planes in some places and hunting and trapping in

around it. When he returned a few days later, he'd trapped a pregnant female belonging to the East Fork pack. The kill, documented by a neighbor and later confirmed by Wallace, landed him in the *Los Angeles Times* and generated both death threats and a boost for his guiding business. That same year Wallace caught the only remaining breeding female in the Grant Creek pack, which often roamed just outside the park boundary. The pack consequently produced no pups and fell from 15 members to 3.

"That was the third time I ruined millions of

THIS TUG-OF-WAR BETWEEN USE AND PRESERVATION WOULD BECOME THE FUNDAMENTAL TENSION OF THE NATIONAL PARKS.

others. That's the difference with Denali—it's not locked up. And that's what makes it so challenging to manage."

"WAS THAT YOU FLYING around the other day in a red-and-white Super Cub?" Coke Wallace asks when we meet outside his home on Stampede Road. "We thought maybe you guys were radio tracking a wolf. I almost went over to see if there was anything I could shoot."

Wallace is a trapper, hunter, guide, and self-described "extreme right-wing redneck." As he shows me his extensive collection of traps and snares and a very large wolf hide stretched over a drying rack, he gets a call on his mobile phone. Its ringtone is a wolf's howl.

"Contrary to popular opinion, I don't hate wolves," he tells me. "In fact, I think they're cool as hell. Only problem is, every five to seven years I catch the wrong wolf."

In 1999 Wallace shot a collared alpha female in the Grant Creek pack, which had been highly visible to visitors on the Park Road. In 2005 he caught the East Fork pack's alpha female in a trap set just outside the park boundary. In 2012 he dragged a horse carcass to a site where wolves were active and set traps and snares

people's Denali National Park viewing experience," Wallace quips.

Until a few years ago a wolf that strayed near Wallace's turf would have been off-limits. But Denali's most vulnerable wolf packs are at the center of some ugly politics. In 2000 Gordon Haber, the celebrated and outspoken wolf biologist who continued Adolph Murie's research, observed trappers laying snares along the park's boundary. He joined with others and persuaded the Alaska Board of Game to establish a no-kill buffer zone along the Stampede Trail and in the Nenana Canyon area. After Haber died in a plane crash in late 2009, the Park Service requested an expansion of the protected area. The board responded by eliminating it completely, making wolves vulnerable to trapping and hunting all around the park boundary.

"We increased it twice, but it was never big enough," explains Sam Cotten, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "The last proposal was for another significant increase, and the feeling was that the federal government created that border and that's the line. So we went back to a harder boundary."

Although the Park Service halted its predator control decades ago, (Continued on page 82)

Gliding toward one of the hundreds of untouched mountainsides in Denali's high backcountry, a climber skis past sapphire pools atop upper Ruth Glacier.









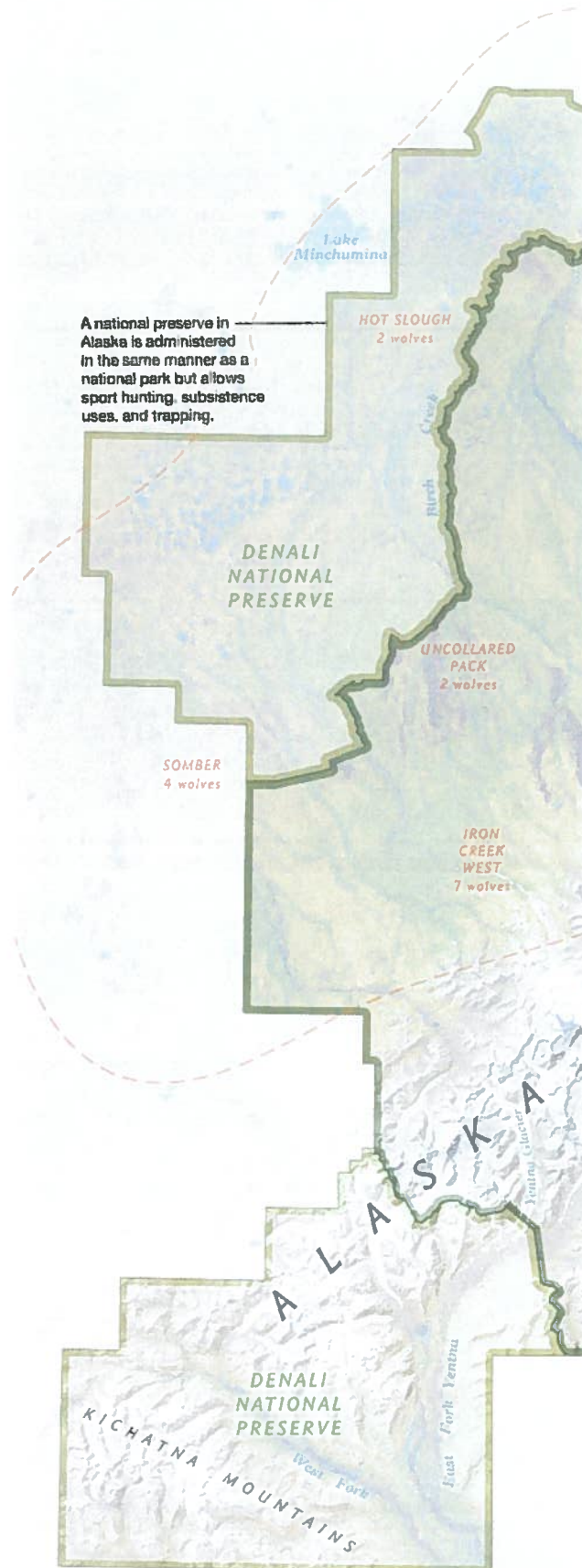
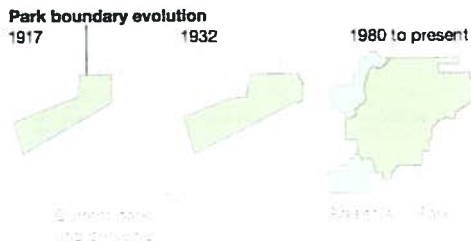
Spreading through its broad valley in ever shifting braids, the McKinley River carries meltwater and silt down from the continent's highest mountain range.

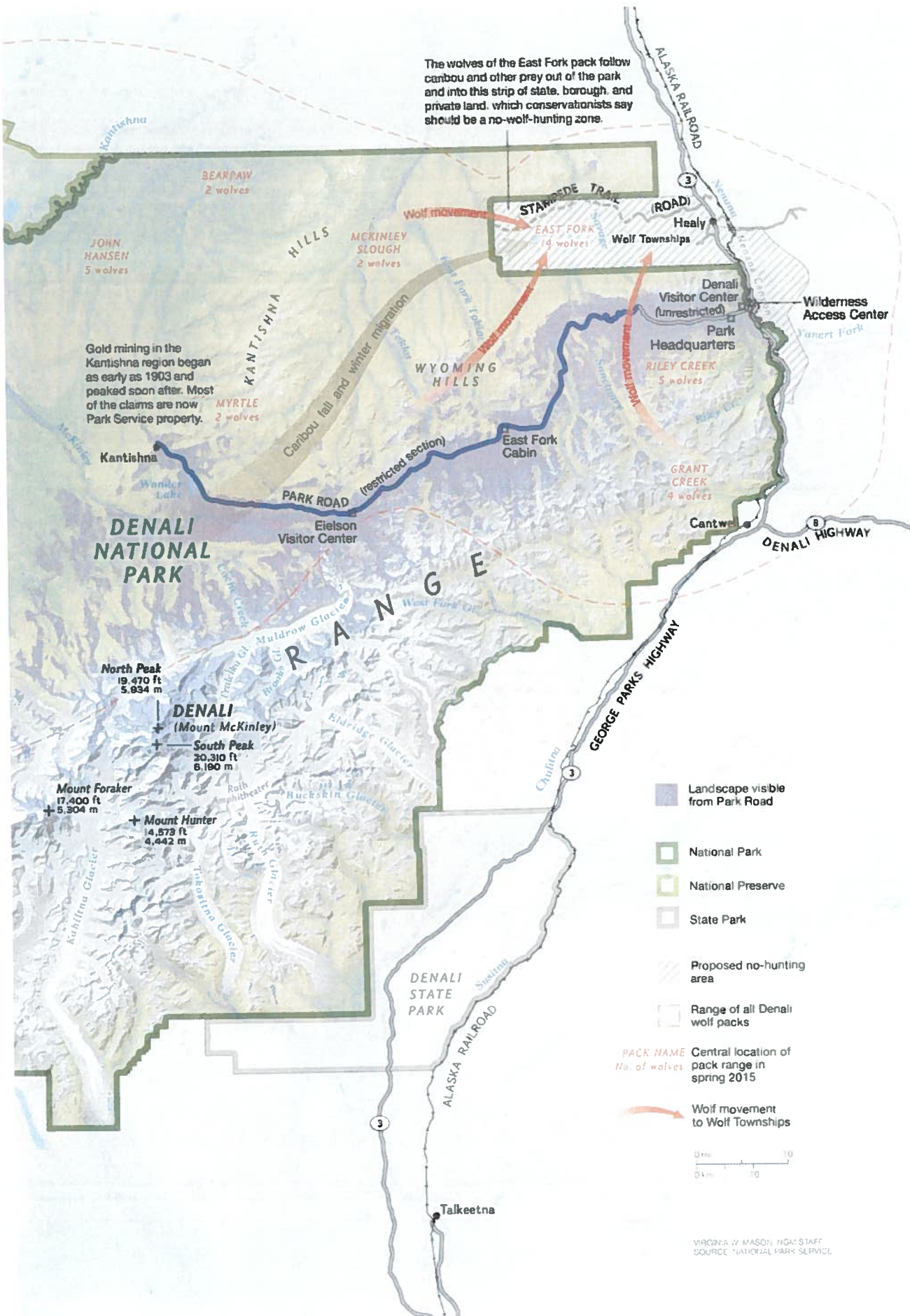
Wolf Crossing

Denali National Park is one of the few places where people can see gray wolves in their natural habitat. Visitors can try to spot them from the shuttle buses along the 92-mile Park Road, but wolf numbers have dropped over the past decade. Contributing factors could be lower snowfalls, which help prey evade wolves, and trappers just outside park boundaries.



- 1896**
Gold prospector William Dickey names the area's highest peak Mount McKinley.
- 1902**
Geologist Alfred Brooks organizes the first mapping expedition in the mountain area.
- June 7, 1913**
A team led by Harry Karstens and Hudson Stuck is the first to summit Mount McKinley's south peak.
- February 26, 1917**
Congress creates Mount McKinley National Park. 1,591,897 acres
- 1923-1938**
The NPS constructs the 92-mile Park Road.
- 1960**
Bradford Washburn publishes the first topographic map of Mount McKinley.
- June 1972**
The NPS closes Park Road to cars and institutes a shuttle-bus system to safeguard the wilderness.
- December 1, 1978**
President Jimmy Carter establishes Denali National Monument. 3,890,000 acres
- December 2, 1980**
Congress enlarges Denali National Park and creates the Denali National Preserve. 6,075,030 acres
- August 28, 2015**
Mount McKinley is officially renamed Denali.





The wolves of the East Fork pack follow caribou and other prey out of the park and into this strip of state, borough, and private land, which conservationists say should be a no-wolf-hunting zone.

Gold mining in the Kantishna region began as early as 1903 and peaked soon after. Most of the claims are now Park Service property.

Landscape visible from Park Road

National Park

National Preserve

State Park

Proposed no-hunting area

Range of all Denali wolf packs

PACK NAME
No. of wolves

Central location of pack range in spring 2015

Wolf movement to Wolf Townships

0 5 10
0 5 10

VIRGINIA W. MASON, NGA STAFF
SOURCE: NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Leading their offspring to new hunting grounds, the Iron Creek West pack's breeding pair breaks trail through fresh snow. The pair wears tracking collars fitted by biologists.



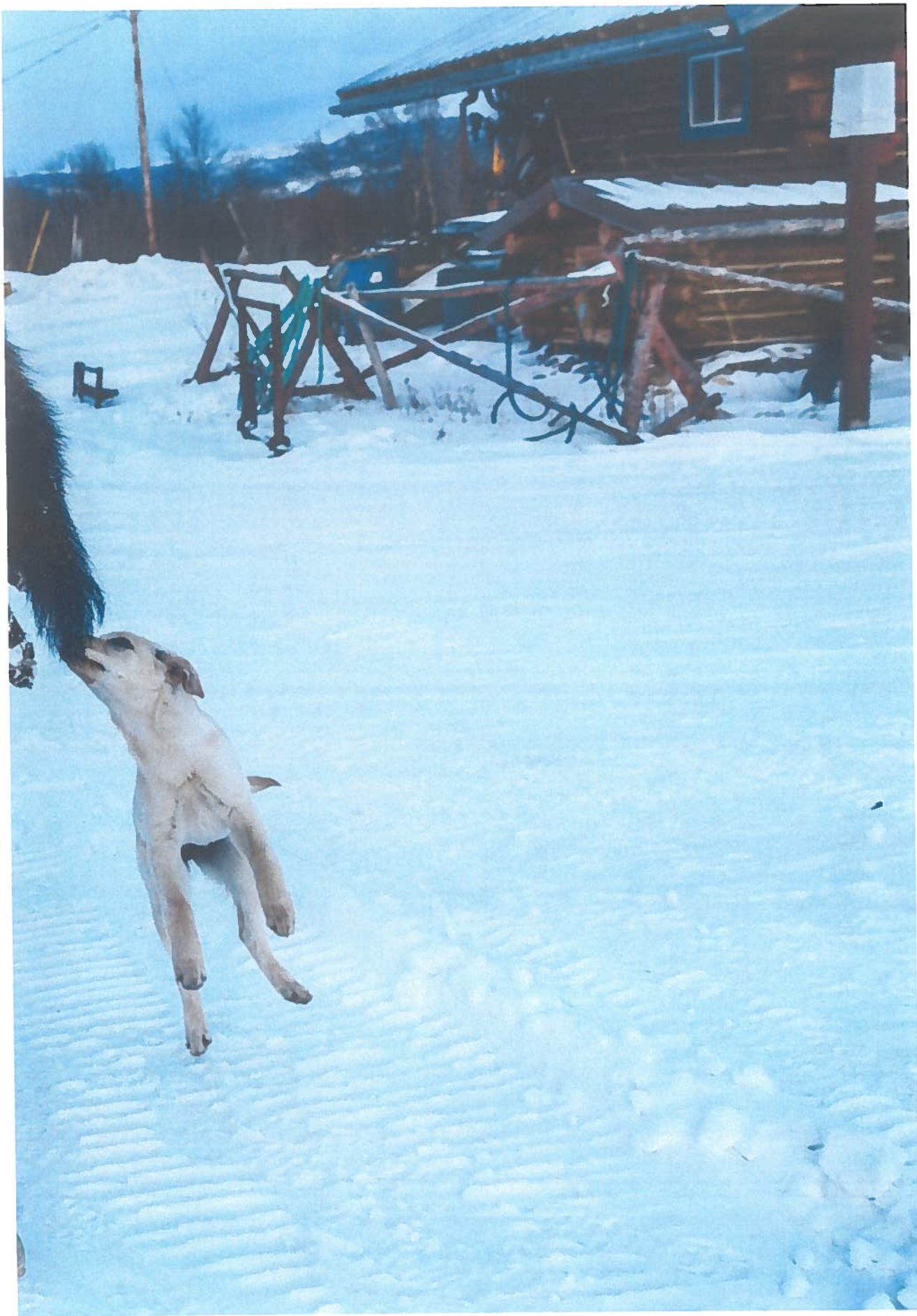
Wolves may stay near a kill site—the meal here is moose—for several days. Packs that cross park boundaries in search of prey are vulnerable to hunting and trapping.







Trapper and hunting guide Coke Wallace carries a dead wolf that he shot on his trapline just outside the park. State game officials abolished no-kill buffer zones around Denali in 2010.



the state has ramped up its wolf reduction program in some areas in an effort to boost caribou and moose populations.

“Food security for our subsistence users is a primary driver,” says Cotten. “When we don’t meet objectives for populations of ungulates like moose and caribou, we have to consider culls of predators.”

In 2013 and 2014 state predator-control agents and authorized private hunters, shooting from aircraft, killed dozens of wolves just outside Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve.

important conservation victories in U.S. history, but many Alaskans saw it as the culmination of years of federal overreach. Wallace was a teenager in Fairbanks when protesters there burned an effigy of President Jimmy Carter, who in 1978 elevated 56 million acres in Alaska to national monument status. In 1979 residents of towns near the park organized the Great Denali Trespass, marching into the park to shoot guns, light fires, and commit other acts of protest.

“Every other place I’ve been, they love their national park,” says Superintendent Striker,

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Park Superintendent Don Striker

The cull reduced the preserve’s wolf population by more than half and killed several collared wolves that had been part of a decades-long Park Service study. Although Cotten says the wolf-culling programs are based on sound science, some data undermine the premise that killing wolves leads to increased prey populations, particularly in the long term.

To Wallace, the wolf culls and the removal of Denali’s buffer zones were long overdue. “It’s the state standing up to an overreaching federal government and libtard environmentalists,” he says. “I liked the park much better as McKinley National Park, when it was for sheep. Then the feds crammed that whole ANILCA thing down our throats.”

In 1980 the U.S. Congress passed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. It designated 104 million acres as national parks, forests, and preserves and protected 50 million more acres as wilderness. Mount McKinley National Park was renamed Denali National Park and Preserve, and expanded from 2 million acres to 6 million. Property rights were retained throughout the preserve, as were hunting and trapping rights in some sections.

ANILCA is widely considered among the most

who managed five parks in the lower 48 before coming to Denali. “But here the relationship is so poisoned by the past. People don’t realize this was always federal land—it was never the state’s. It’s good politics to hate the parks and to overlook all the good they’ve done for the state, especially economically.”

THE DEBATE—and everything else—seems far away when I poke my head through the tent flap at a campsite near Cache Creek in mid-March. It’s the third morning of a mushing expedition and also the third morning with temperatures of minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit. I think about retreating back under the canvas, but Denali—visible most days in winter—catches my eye. Above the valley rays of sunlight splash the Tall One’s summit and northeastern flanks with a dazzling orange glaze.

When I finally muster the gumption to emerge from the tent, heads turn. Thirty or so sled dogs that had been yawning in their dug-out nests of snow rise and begin to yelp and howl eagerly. Dog teams are still an integral part of backcountry management here during the winter, patrolling the park’s boundaries, supporting wildlife research, and hauling supplies

for cleanups and cabin restorations. And Denali's hands-on summer kennel show is the most popular demonstration program offered by the park's staff.

"The dogs connect people to history and to an experience most people will never have," says kennel manager Jennifer Raffaeli. "In the winter they're the most reliable and reasonably safe way to move around parts of the park. Unlike a snowmobile, they're always ready to start up. They also have a survival instinct, which is something no machine can ever have."

That afternoon the cold snap breaks, and we mush in a caravan of three dog teams to the ranger station at Wonder Lake. At 2 a.m. we step outside our cabins to catch a dazzling show of the aurora borealis as the dogs sleep nearby.

"A lot of Denali is untouchable to most people, but with the dogs, traveling like this, you can touch it," Raffaeli tells me as we stare in awe at the curtains of multicolored light flowing across the sky. "The sense of peace you get here in the winter is so intense it's almost beyond belief."

THREE MONTHS LATER, in late June, I experience a completely different Denali. It's 8 p.m. on the Park Road, and I'm stuck in a traffic jam. As a moose cow and two calves make their way languidly along the tree line, drivers stop in the middle of the road to point cameras.

In the 1960s Adolph Murie fought hard against plans to pave a highway into the heart of the park. He achieved a partial victory when the Park Service decided to pave only the first 15 miles. But as visitor numbers increased, the narrow road became more crowded and dangerous, and concerns grew about the impact of traffic on wildlife. In 1972 Denali became one of the first of America's national parks to set up

a mass transit system to reduce the number of cars—an approach that has since been copied at other parks.

I spend a week roaming through Denali's summer backcountry, soaking up the clarifying power of wilderness. Toward the end of my trek I score a short stay in the East Fork Cabin, Murie's base while he researched the relationship between wolves and sheep. For the young ecologist, it was a dream come true. He had solitude and the chance to study animals with the simplest of tools: binoculars, a camera, notebooks, and strong legs. His focus was an extended family of wolves ranging near the cabin at the east fork of the Toklat River.

Murie's bosses in Washington, D.C., may have expected a dry research monograph. What he gave them instead was *The Wolves of Mount McKinley*, a classic work of natural history. Published in 1944, the book-length report brought the Toklat-East Fork pack to the world's attention. Murie described, for the first time, wild wolves' life cycles and relationships and the workings of an entire ecological network. Realizing that the interactions were more complicated than anyone had imagined, Murie began working to change policies that called for the eradication of predators such as wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes.

That stance made him unpopular both inside and outside the Park Service. But the more he wrote about the subjects of his research in magazines and journals, the more popular the "First Family" of American wolves became. Wildlife lovers began to travel up from the lower 48 to see them, and wolves became one of Denali's signature attractions.

On my way to the cabin the bus driver asked her passengers, "Back home, how many of you feel like every hour is rush hour?" I didn't raise



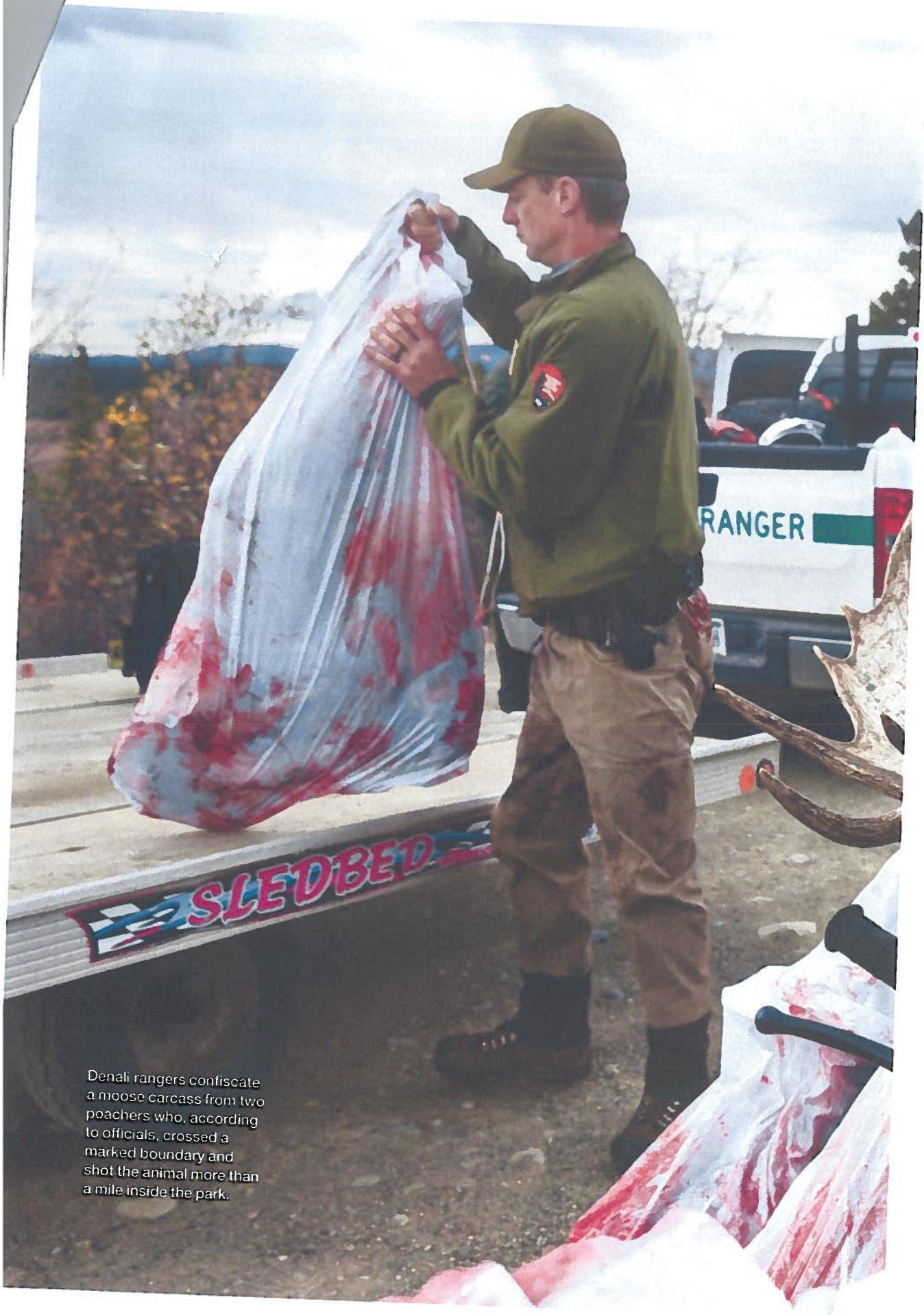
BEF, MOON

A frequent *National Geographic* contributor, photographer **Aaron Huey** has trekked up Mount Everest, visited the Georgian Caucasus, and explored Indian reservations in the United States for the magazine.

While photographing in Denali, did you face any precarious situations?

We skied across Ruth Glacier, which meant going over fragile snow

bridges and occasionally avoiding deep ice tunnels filled with water. For safety the team was tied together with a rope for all of our travel.



Denali rangers confiscate a moose carcass from two poachers who, according to officials, crossed a marked boundary and shot the animal more than a mile inside the park.



Julie Collins feeds her dogs at the homestead she shares with her twin sister, Miki. The women have led mostly subsistence lives near the park's edge for more than 50 years.

