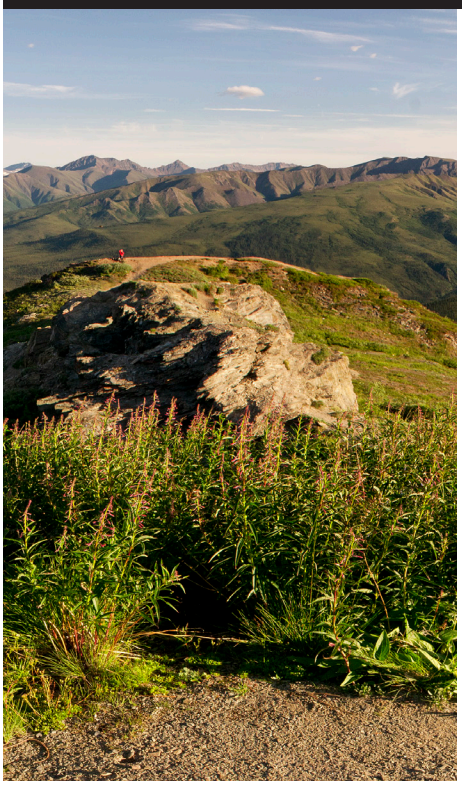
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska



Mount Healy Overlook TRAIL

Wild CHALLENGE

Hiking the Mount Healy Overlook Trail can involve both mental and physical challenges, but the rewards are worth it. Take time to reflect as you climb this steep trail. The challenges can be compared to those experienced in the park's creation and management.

What does this language mean to you, and how would you uphold it?

"…to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." — The National Park Service Organic Act, 1916

As you enjoy the initial meanderings along this trail today, and cross a creek on a wooden bridge, imagine this setting in the park's infancy.

Funding AN IDEA

What are the immediate challenges to providing for the protection and preservation of this place?

When the former Mount McKinley National Park was founded by Congress in 1917, no funds were provided to establish it, much less attend to its operation. As construction of the Alaska Railroad approached the park's unenforced boundaries, pressure increased from early advocates to stave off indiscriminate slaughter of wild game populations here. In March 1921, the park received $8,000 to hire a superintendent to institute and enforce regulations.

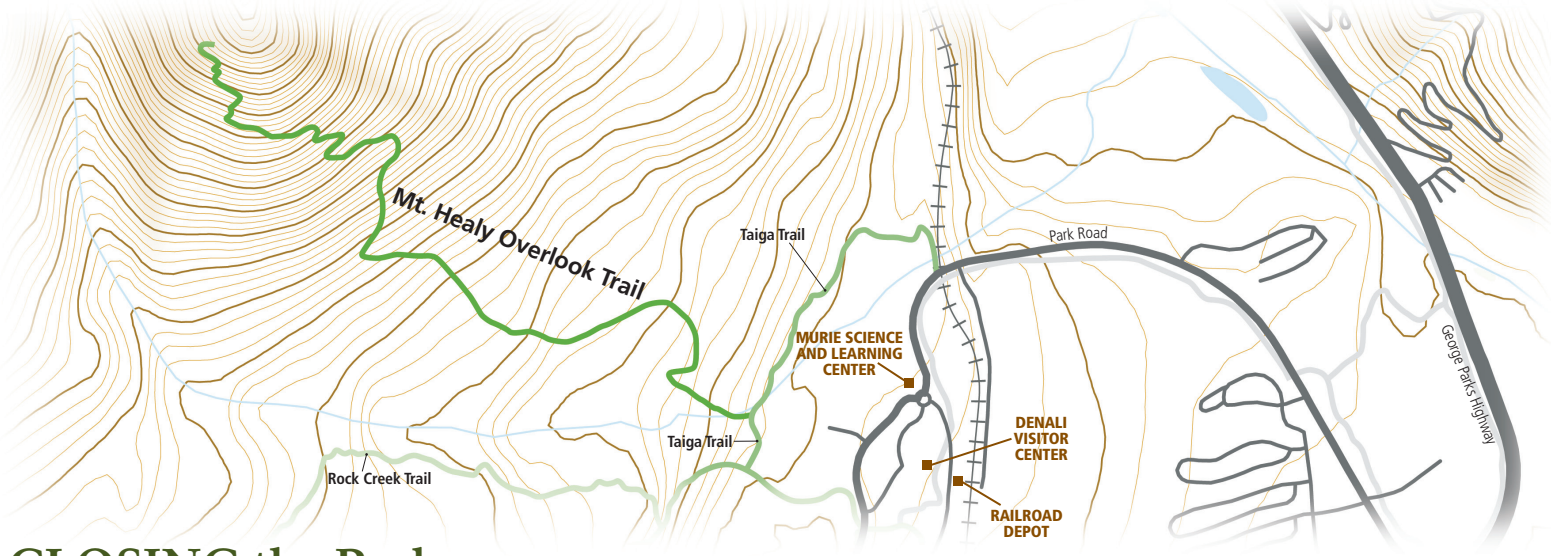
You may notice a stretch of trail that widens, flattens, and curves broadly before it narrows and turns uphill. Here you are walking what remains of a service road from early park days.

The FIRST JOB

Congratulations, you are the first superintendent. How will you establish this park?

In 1921, Harry Karstens became superintendent. His job was to mark and patrol park boundaries, to foster a community presence, and to eliminate poaching. He earned $10 a year. There were no amenities. Supplies and comforts were freighted in, or created locally.

Watch for a set of log benches in a dense thicket of alder. Here you are standing in what remains of a recreational ski area created for soldiers during World War II.



CLOSING the Park

How do you continue the park mission with the park closed to the public?

In 1942, the War Department declared Alaska off-limits to tourist travel. The park operated with minimal staff and budget, and became a destination for rest and relaxation trips. Soldiers used the newly built Yanert Lakes Trail (now Triple Lakes), the Horseshoe Lake Trail, as well as a ski tow here on the shoulder of Mount Healy.

Abruptly, the character of the trail shifts to a series of steep switchbacks. As you catch your breath, consider the challenges of maintaining a difficult balance between conserving park resources, and providing access and appropriate services for more than 400,000 visitors each year.

Wild RIDE

How does the character of a road affect the wilderness experience?

In the early 1960s, a nationwide initiative provided funds to improve park facilities and visitor experience. Here, plans were made to widen and pave the full length of the Park Road to allow for modern travel. Park biologist Adolph Murie spoke up. Murie by this time had published landmark research on wolves and their prey that revolutionized wildlife management across the National Park System. He argued that a completely paved road here would negatively affect the wilderness character of the park, and diminish a more deliberate, immersive experience that traveling a narrower unpaved road commands. His view prevailed, and held further sway in 1972, when access to vehicle traffic on the Park Road was restricted beyond the Savage River at Mile 15.

As you climb above treeline, take advantage of your widening perspective to note where people have left their mark on this vast landscape. Imagine how things might have looked in earlier times, and how they might change further, farther into the future.

A Way of LIFE

How would you allow for subsistence use on new park lands?

In 1980, with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the name of the park changed, its original area of roughly two million acres became legally designated Wilderness, and its boundaries expanded to include another four million acres of new park and preserve lands. With ANILCA, Congress formally recognized the social and cultural importance of ongoing subsistence use of these new park and preserve lands by Native and rural residents. (Hunting remains prohibited in the park's core Wilderness area.) While much of the guidance within ANILCA has functioned well here for more than 30 years, some contentious issues remain related to specific jurisdictional and management practices. What key issues and core beliefs do you think should take precedence?

Congratulations, you made it. As you enjoy expansive views from the overlook that you've earned, cast an even longer outlook toward what challenges the park may face into the future. Can you see, or sense, whether its wilderness character remains assured? From here, can you see for yourself what you might do to make sure that the potential for wilderness experience remains for generations to come?

Denali Trails
Mount Healy Overlook Trail
Strenuous 4.5 miles/7.3 km, 3-4 hrs roundtrip
Please stay on trails.

This trail guide was produced in partnership by the National Park Service and the Alaska Geographic Association.

Alaska Geographic