

Wrangell–St. Elias: The Largest National Park in the U.S.

Alaska's Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve is at the top of more than one list of superlatives. At 13.2 million acres, Wrangell–St. Elias is the largest U.S. national park and preserve. When combined with Glacier Bay National Park and Canada's Kluane National Park and Tatshenshini–Alsek Park, it is the biggest piece of the largest internationally protected area in the world: 24 million acres – larger than the state of Indiana.



This World Heritage Site provides a crucial refuge for grizzly bear, caribou, and Dall sheep. Nine of the 16 highest peaks in the United States, and some of the largest mountains (by volume) in the world, are located here. The largest concentration of Dall sheep in North America lives here. Enough copper and gold were found here early in the 20th century to make it one of the area's richest deposits.

The list goes on and on. And so does the land. Everything is vast. There are mountain peaks, glaciers, braided streams, and rivers. Though there is limited flora, a representative sampling of Alaskan land, marine, and airborne wildlife abounds. There is even a good taste of American mining history, preserved in the form of the Kennecott mines, now on the National Register of Historic Places.

The prime time of year for visiting Wrangell–St. Elias is from June 20 to August 20, but don't think that there won't be any backcountry hardships. Wrangell–St. Elias is a mountain wilderness unlike any other. It is almost entirely without roads; there are no maintained trails in the park, and access is only by unpaved road, boat, or plane.



Visit Kennecott and Other Historic Sites

The historic mining town of Kennecott, now a National Historic Landmark, was purchased by the National Park Service in 1998. One of the finest surviving examples of an early 20th-century copper-mining community, Kennecott is a must-see.

The high-grade copper found in the area resulted in a self-contained company town complete with a hospital, general store, schoolhouse, ballfield, skating rink, tennis courts, recreation hall, and dairy. The historic buildings in Kennecott are in various stages of collapse and disrepair.

There is a local guide company that currently has permission to lead groups through the safer parts of the buildings. Feel free to explore the outside of buildings, but remain aware of the hazards that exist. Beware of debris and unsafe structures as you explore. If early-century ghost towns really are your thing, you should also check out Chisana (pronounced "Shooshana"), where in 1913 a short but intense gold rush built "the largest log cabin town in the world."



Enjoy the Abundant Wildlife-Viewing Opportunities

If you don't see any wildlife in Wrangell-St. Elias, you are the unluckiest person alive. With approximately 13,000 Dall sheep and plenty of mountain goats, caribou, moose, brown/grizzly and black bears, transplanted bison, lynx, wolverines, beavers, marten, porcupines, foxes, wolves, marmots, and river otters on the ground, all you have to do is step into the wild and open your eyes. Try to get above treeline in alpine areas for best spectating.

Hikes to Goodlata Peak pass through an area with one of the highest concentrations of grizzlies in North America. Make the trip to the Orange Hill and Bond Creek Area for moose and Dall sheep. The Dixie Pass Trail, one of the only road-accessible backcountry walks, is a natural wildlife corridor.

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