

# WILDERNESS RECREATION

## Resource Brief

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Wilderness Stewardship Division

### Background

The National Park Service (NPS) is responsible for the stewardship of 61 designated wilderness areas. Per agency policy, the NPS also manages eligible, proposed, recommended, and potential wilderness. In total, over 80 percent of all NPS lands are managed as wilderness, from Alaska to Florida.

### Recreation Opportunities in Wilderness

Section 4(b) of the Wilderness Act - Use of Wilderness Areas - states "except as otherwise provided in this Act, wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use." This means recreation is fundamental to NPS wilderness, and wilderness recreation opportunities are available to everyone.

The options for getting out and exploring NPS wilderness are as diverse as the landscapes these places help to protect. From hiking, climbing, and paddling, to fishing, hunting, horseback riding, skiing, and snowshoeing, wilderness offers recreational opportunities for everyone. In these activities, wilderness provides space to seek personal fulfillment like mental and physical health, artistic inspiration, and adventure.

Below are examples of outstanding wilderness recreation opportunities available in national parks:



#### Camping

The Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness at **Fire Island NS (New York)** provides a seaside wilderness experience for communities within the New York City metro area and beyond. The seashore offers dispersed camping opportunities within the wilderness dunes, the area's namesake, where nearly 1,400 people camped in 2017.

The proposed wilderness of **Voyageurs NP (Minnesota)** protects a network of lakes and terrestrial habitat near the Canadian border. Here, campers can hike or paddle to several remote campsites, including a series of wilderness lakeside camping spots in the park's Kabetogama Peninsula. Between 2014-2017, the six wilderness lakes on the peninsula served as a camping destination for almost 800 people, or about 1,400 total visitor camping nights.

#### Hiking

The recommended wilderness of **Glacier NP (Montana)** offers over 730 miles of hiking trails, weaving through mountain valleys, along lakeshores, and beside some of the park's most iconic glaciers.

The 2,600 mile Pacific Crest Trail passes through seven national parks with wilderness: **Sequoia-Kings Canyon NP (California)**, **Devils Postpile NM (California)**, **Yosemite NP (California)**, **Lassen Volcanic NP (California)**, **Crater Lake NP (Oregon)**, **Mount Rainier NP (Washington)**, and **North Cascades NP (Washington)**. In 2017, almost 500 people registered as having completed the entire trail. To date, over 5,400 people have done this, which is an achievement and wilderness experience worthy of superlatives.

Two other north-south long distance trails also pass through NPS wilderness. The Continental Divide Trail, 3,100 miles of terrain traveling along the spine of the Continental Divide, passes through NPS wilderness in **El Malpais NM (New Mexico)**, **Rocky Mountain NP (Colorado)**, **Yellowstone NP (Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana)**, and **Glacier NP (Montana)**. The East Coast's Appalachian Trail traverses the wilderness of **Great Smokies NP (North Carolina and Tennessee)** and **Shenandoah NP (Virginia)** along the 2,200 mile trail that extends from Maine to Georgia.

## Horseback Riding

At **Theodore Roosevelt NP (North Dakota)**, the Roundup Group Campground, about one mile outside of wilderness, serves as a popular starting point for horseback riders who want to explore the Theodore Roosevelt Wilderness. In total, riders can enjoy more than 80 miles of equestrian-friendly designated trail in wilderness.

## Paddling

The wilderness of **Gates of the Arctic NP&Pr (Alaska)** is home to six designated Wild and Scenic Rivers. These rivers are known for their outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition -- protected for the enjoyment of present and future generations, making them excellent destinations for canoers and kayakers.

With over 250 miles of designated canoe and kayak trails, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness in **Everglades NP (Florida)** is a paddler's paradise. A meeting ground of marsh and mangrove environments, these trails weave through lush habitat where paddlers may see wading birds, turtles, fish, and even alligators.

The **Buffalo National River (Arkansas)** flows freely for 135 miles and is home to renowned paddling opportunities in this Ozarks setting. The river flows through the Buffalo National River Wilderness, where more than 150,000 visitors have canoed and kayaked since 2014.

## Rock Climbing and Mountaineering

Many of the country's most iconic rock climbing destinations are inside NPS wilderness including **Yosemite NP (California)**, **Joshua Tree NP (California)**, **Rocky Mountain NP (Colorado)**, and **Zion NP (Utah)**. These locations boast a variety of rock climbing options available for novice and technical climbers.

**Mount Rainier NP (Washington)** has more than 20 mountaineering routes, all of which are in wilderness. Three routes receive the majority of annual use: Disappointment Cleaver (Muir), Emmons-Winthrop, and Kautz Glacier. More than 11 thousand people attempted to summit Mount Rainier in the last few years, which represents 40% of all overnight wilderness and backcountry use in the park.

Denali, North America's highest mountain in **Denali NP (Alaska)**, offers some of the most rugged and remote mountaineering in the country. The mountain's West Buttress Route travels almost exclusively through the Denali Wilderness. As many as 600 climbers attempt the wilderness route during the peak of the climbing season from late-May to early June, making it the most popular summit route in the park.

## Wilderness Recreation Ethics

Is it possible to feel connected to a wilderness area that many other people love too? Yes! Wilderness offers many means for connection and appreciation. To help ensure that everyone has a positive and inspiring experience in wilderness, visitors are encouraged to practice wilderness-friendly behaviors, as developed by the [Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics](#).

## Contacts

Roger Semler  
NPS Wilderness Stewardship Division Chief  
[roger\\_semler@nps.gov](mailto:roger_semler@nps.gov)

To learn more about NPS wilderness visit:  
[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

[Picture yourself here]

