



## Community Newsletter

Fall 2023



Snow-capped Wrangell Mountains with a cloud inversion in Fall. NPS/Townsend

### Dear neighbors and community members,

December is when the Wrangell-St. Elias team finishes work from last year and starts looking forward to the next busy summer season. It's a good time to reflect on changes – people who have joined our community, people we have lost, and people who are planning to move on to other endeavors. Change is also apparent in the initiatives that are moving forward, like the Kennecott Operations and Management Plan, Gulkana to Copper River Access Study, and McCarthy Road Planning and Environmental Linkages Study (PEL). Change is also observed through research studies on salmon; glacier and ice changes; resource use patterns; and traditional ecological knowledge. Research and shared knowledge provide information for all of us to make better informed decisions. Then, through public meetings and public comment opportunities, we work together to make thoughtful decisions about what future change here looks like.

We also look to our youth and envision them stepping into roles as active community members and local employees. Initiatives like the Ahtna Youth Internship Program at the Ahtna Cultural Center, Youth Conservation Corps, and local education and outreach programs invite youth to see themselves as important participants in our communities and our shared landscapes. They will be responsible for implementing some of these planned changes for Wrangell-St. Elias and neighboring areas.

Change can be difficult at times, but it is also an opportunity to reflect on the past and find ways to move forward—thoughtfully, deliberately, and wisely. I offer sincere thanks to community members, employees, park partners, and local businesses who answered the call for public comments this year, who attended meetings, who reached out about concerns or ideas. We all care about this incredible place we call home and it will take all of us to keep this place special, for us and future generations to come.

Warm regards to all of you and best wishes for the holiday season, Ben.



## Green Team

Wrangell-St. Elias's Green Team is a voluntary multi-division park committee consisting of permanent and seasonal park employees. The committee's purposes are to inspire and foster a shared culture of sustainability; lead efforts to reduce unnecessary costs generated by waste and fossil fuel usage; reduce the park's carbon footprint in daily operations, when practicable; and partner with the community, local businesses, tribal organizations, and others who share the mission of sustainability.



In 2023, the Green Team joined community members in the Spring and Fall Highway Cleanup events and retrieved and disposed of 50 pounds of garbage along its Adopted Highway mile. The Team also supported community recycling efforts at ROAR in Glennallen by cleaning and organizing the recycling dock. Front desk Park Rangers provided QR codes for digital copies of handouts to reduce paper use and paper waste in visitor operations. Office recycling efforts were a success and diverted approximately 2,928 pounds of paper, cardboard, and aluminum waste from entering the landfill. Aluminum recycling was also offered to visitors at the Slana and Copper Center Visitor Centers for the first time.



Park Rangers assist with clean up at the ROAR recycling center in Glennallen. NPS/Cohen.



Highway Cleanup participants in action! NPS/Townsend/Fink.



In conjunction with the Green Team, the Maintenance Team completed the Kennecott Solar Panel Project, saving money in fuel deliveries this summer. They also replaced all fluorescent light bulbs with energy efficient LED lights. The old bulbs were packaged for safe disposal and transported to Anchorage, along with used batteries.



< Thomas Abraham replaces fluorescent light bulbs with energy-efficient bulbs at the Headquarters building. NPS

Installation of the solar panels in Kennecott. NPS/Underwood. >





## Interpretation and Education

The Division of Interpretation, Education, and Public Affairs brought in \$550,000 of external funding in 2023 to provide quality customer service to visitors and deliver meaningful programs for youth and local stakeholders.

### Ahtna Youth Interns Participated in Cultural Events & Camps

Ahtna Inc.'s Starr Knighten, Raedeen Neeley, and Edward GreyBear worked with three Ahtna shareholder youth to provide cultural information to visitors, school groups, and local residents. The youth also attended culture camps; learned about ethnobotany; met with local professionals; and practiced canoeing skills. This project was funded through the federal Indian Youth Services Program. Watch for announcements for internship opportunities in 2024.



Ahtna Youth Interns Leve Jones, Damien Shank, and Ryan George visit a local fishwheel and participate in an ethnobotany course at the Ahtna Cultural Center. NPS/Cellarius/Wittmer.

### Visitor Services – Increase in Visitation and AK Geo Bookstore Sales

The Copper Center Visitor Center, Kennecott Visitor Center, and the Slana and Chitina Ranger Stations were open this year. There were 50,000 visitor contacts, slightly below 2019 (52,251) numbers. Alaska Geographic gross sales were up this year by 16%. Proceeds from the sales supported education programs; ethnobotany course tuition for WRST employees; aviation costs for research projects; and supplies for local events. National Park Foundation funds supported implementation of a recycling program and PMIS projects funded development of a unigrid brochure for the Kennecott Mill Site; updating interpretive exhibits; and creation of accessible audio descriptions of park exhibits.

### Job & Internship Opportunities:

- January – Announcements for Student Conservation Association (**SCA**) interns.
- March – Announcements for Ahtna Youth Interns and Youth Conservation Corps (**YCC**).  
<https://www.nps.gov/wrst/learn/management/ycc.htm>
- Check the website for Local Hire position announcements:  
<https://www.nps.gov/wrst/getinvolved/employment.htm>

## Interpretation and Education

### Youth Conservation Corps Learning Outdoor Leadership Skills

7 youth between the ages of 15-18 participated in Wrangell's Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) program. They learned about outdoor leadership; helped with Junior Angler events; learned canoeing skills; made an award-winning July 4th float for the parade in Glennallen; brushed 2.6 miles of the Bonanza Trail; and did restoration work at the Chitina Ranger Station.



YCCs and Ahtna Youth Interns learning canoeing skills at Tolsona Lake and at the July 4th parade. NPS/Tortorige

Junior Angler Day in Chitina. NPS/Scribner

### Local Kids Learn about Wrangell-St. Elias

WRST Education staff reached out to kids this winter and spring at Earth Discovery Day, two Junior Angler Camps, ice fishing, and Chosen Frozen events. Youth programs reached record level audiences this year with 513 adult and 1,060 youth contacts. Additionally, through funding provided by the National Park Foundation, Park Rangers provided distance learning opportunities, reaching school children in France and Florida.

### Local Employees Dominate the Interpretation and Education Division in 2023

15 out of the 27 seasonal employees, interns, and youth conservation corps staff this summer were from the local area. Local staff provide visitors with first-hand knowledge of the area and have unique perspectives and insights into life in Alaska. Additionally, these local hires built essential professional skills with the NPS that set them up for future careers in the Copper River Basin. In fact, 6 WRST seasonal employees working for Administration, Maintenance, and Interpretation were Youth Conservation Corps members in previous years, evidence that youth programs are serving as career ladders for local youth. Many of these seasonal positions were funded through National Park Foundation grants or National Park Service grants for youth and maintenance projects.



Local hire Ann Welshko gives a presentation in the visitor center about salmon migration. NPS/Hernandez

Thanks to **Pioneers of Alaska** for work projects at the Kennecott Cemetery and the May Creek Airstrip this summer.

NPS/Osborne





# Public Affairs

## Getting the Word out about WRST – Locally and Globally

The I&E Team maintained social media platforms, the WRST website, and the WRST mobile App in addition to sending 40 targeted emails to local stakeholders through GovDelivery. We wrote and distributed 21 news releases; monitored over 220 articles that mentioned WRST; and granted 10 interview and information requests from TV, newspaper, and radio outlets. For more information, contact Carrie Wittmer, Public Affairs Officer, 907-822-7255, [carrie\\_wittmer@nps.gov](mailto:carrie_wittmer@nps.gov).

## Get Up-to-date Information about WRST

Join the “Locals Listserv!” Request a subscription by emailing [wrst\\_public\\_affairs@nps.gov](mailto:wrst_public_affairs@nps.gov) and putting “Locals Listserv” in the subject line. Members receive timely news releases, Cultural Heritage Highlights, Research in the Park information, and Community Newsletters. Members can unsubscribe at any time.

Interested in knowing what’s going on in the park? Follow us on our digital media platforms:



Park Website [www.nps.gov/wrst](http://www.nps.gov/wrst)



[facebook.com/WrangellStEliasNPP](https://facebook.com/WrangellStEliasNPP)



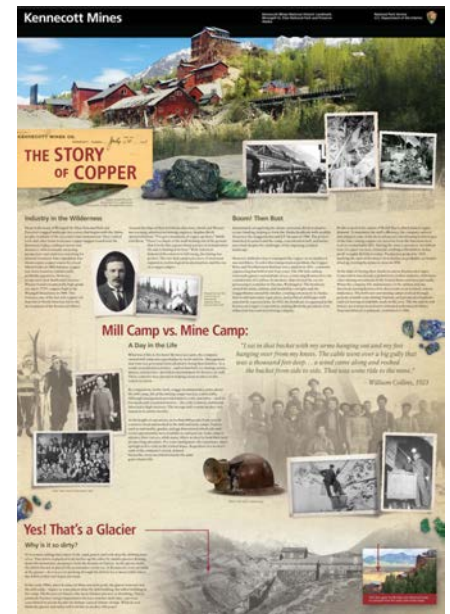
[twitter.com/WrangellStENPS](https://twitter.com/WrangellStENPS)



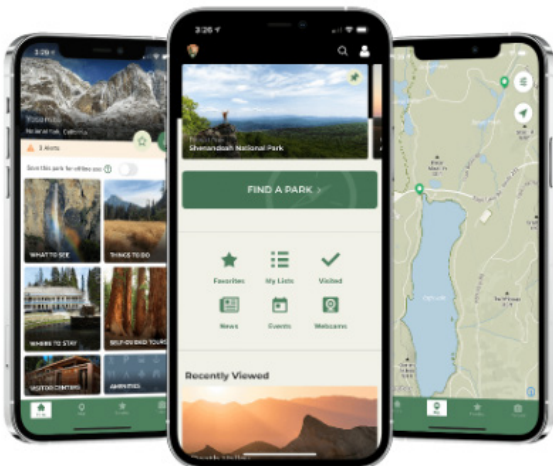
[instagram.com/wrangellstenps](https://instagram.com/wrangellstenps)

Flickr [flickr.com/photos/wrst](https://flickr.com/photos/wrst)

YouTube [youtube.com/user/WrangellNPS](https://youtube.com/user/WrangellNPS)



**Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark** unigrid brochure will be available at visitor contact stations this summer!



The new **National Park Service (NPS) mobile App** ([go.nps.gov/app](http://go.nps.gov/app)) is available for visitors to national parks across the country. Created by park rangers with visitors in mind, the NPS App gives the public up-to-date information about all 425 national park sites (including Wrangell-St. Elias) in one easy-to-use app. Visitors can download the NPS App in the iOS App Store and Google Play Store to plan a trip, find interactive maps, download maps and tours ahead of time and find things to do and places to visit.

## New Faces, New Endeavors and Farewells



**Patrick McNulty** began his career with the NPS in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and worked a few seasons on the trail crew. While he was doing a solo winter hike on the Appalachian Trail, he received notice to work for the trail crew at Rocky Mountain National Park. After 4 years, he became the trail crew leader. Later, he transitioned to Resource Stewardship, to work in Elk and Vegetation Management, Invasive Plant Management, and in the Greenhouse. On the Maintenance team, he worked for Buildings and Utilities, the sign shop, the road crew, the auto shop, and Water Utilities. After 14 years at Rocky Mountain, he moved to Maui to work at Haleakala National Park in Buildings and Utilities and as the Utility Systems Operator. Now in Alaska, where he always wanted to be, he is the Buildings and Utilities Supervisor at Wrangell-St. Elias. He said, "the Park Service has been good to me, and I intend to pay it forward through dedication and hard work."

**Chelsea Hernandez** detailed as the North District Interpretation Supervisor in charge of the Slana and Copper Center Visitor Centers Summer of 2023 and we're pleased to announce that she has accepted the permanent job, starting Fall of 2023. Chelsea has worked at Haleakala National Park in Maui and Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado and we are pleased that she is joining our team!



**Marjie Lodwick** is the permanent GS-0025-09 Supervisory Park Ranger for the Slana Ranger Station. Marjie joins us from the US Fish & Wildlife Service Fish Hatchery in Leavenworth, WA, where she trained and mentored volunteers; ran visitor services at three fish hatcheries; conducted education programs; and coordinated major events (including a Salmon Festival!). Prior to her work with USFWS, she worked at C&O Canal National Historical Park in Maryland and for the Peace Corps in Indonesia.

Welcome **Spencer Williamson**, a permanent Park Ranger in Visitor & Resource Protection at Wrangell-St. Elias. He was a Guide in the park with Kennicott Wilderness Guides for 10 seasons, guiding packrafting, ice climbing, and backpacking. During this time, he was an active member on the WRST volunteer search and rescue team which got him excited to work for the park. He then became a back country ranger for 2 seasons performing search and rescue, EMS, patrols of the park studying visitor impact and educating visitors about resource protection.

Welcome **Alyssa Van Schmus**, a permanent Park Ranger in Visitor & Resource Protection at Wrangell-St. Elias.



## New Faces, New Endeavors and Farewells

Welcome **Rebekah Levine**, a fluvial geomorphologist, and a professor at the University of Montana Western, who accepted the Physical Scientist position. For the past 10 years, Bekah has worked to provide meaningful, real-world educational experiences to her students while investigating how climatological, biological and land management change affects stream systems and water movement in landscapes. A major focus has been on the role beavers play in stream evolution along with impacts to surficial processes including in-stream sediment transport and subsequent establishment of willow communities. As the new Physical Scientist at Wrangell-St. Elias, Bekah is excited to keep sharing science with others and to build new collaborations on topics related to soil, water, and surficial processes.



Welcome **Valerie Amundson**. In 2008, she began working for Western Arctic National Parklands, in Kotzebue, as a Budget Analyst and in 2013, became the Administrative Officer. In 2022, she moved to Nome and worked as the Administrative Officer for Bering Land Bridge National Preserve until Sept of this year when she accepted the position as Budget Analyst at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

**Carrie Wittmer** has been at Wrangell-St. Elias for almost five years, working first as the North District Interpretive Supervisor and then as the Public Affairs Officer and Team Lead for Interpretation and Education. With the help of Interpretation and Education Staff, she has increased public outreach through the Locals Listserv; created National Park Service career ladders for local youth; established outreach programs in communities with ties to the park; brought in over 1.5 million dollars in 5 years for education and outreach programs; and created a supportive and positive work environment for seasonal and permanent employees. In April, Carrie will be leaving for a job as Interpretation Specialist at the National Park Service Regional Office in Anchorage.



## New Faces, New Endeavors and Farewells



Congratulations to **Benjamin Pister**. Previously the Chief of Natural Resources for Kenai Fjords National Park, Benjamin is now the Team Lead for Resource Stewardship and Science at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

Congratulations to **Mark Miller**, Ecologist, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Previously the Team Lead for Resource Stewardship and Science at Wrangell-St. Elias, in his new position as Ecologist, Mark will be focused on the advancement of social-ecological knowledge to inform the subsistence salmon fishery of the Copper River drainage. Mark's charge will be to synthesize information to improve management of the salmon fishery through co-production of information with villages and communities.



Farewell and Congratulations to **Ann Crow**, Chief of Administration who is retiring after 29 years at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve! Thank you for all your years of excellent service in Human Resources!

Farewell and Congratulations to **Nyssa Landres**, Wilderness Coordinator, who accepted a new position as Deputy Regional Aviation Manager in Anchorage, working with Lynn Ellis, Regional Aviation Manager.

Farewell and Congratulations to **Stephens Harper**, South District Ranger in Visitor & Resource Protection who is retiring in January after 20 years! Stephens' ranger career began with the Alaska State Parks in SW Alaska in 1989. He then worked as a ranger for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1991, before starting with the NPS at Katmai National Park in 1997. Stephens moved to McCarthy in 1999 and began working for WRST in 2003. Stephens said "Working as a ranger in Alaska for 35 years has been amazingly rewarding and challenging at times. I appreciate the many co-workers and neighbors who helped me along the way". He and his wife Tamara plan to continue living in McCarthy and enjoying Alaska life within Wrangell-St. Elias.





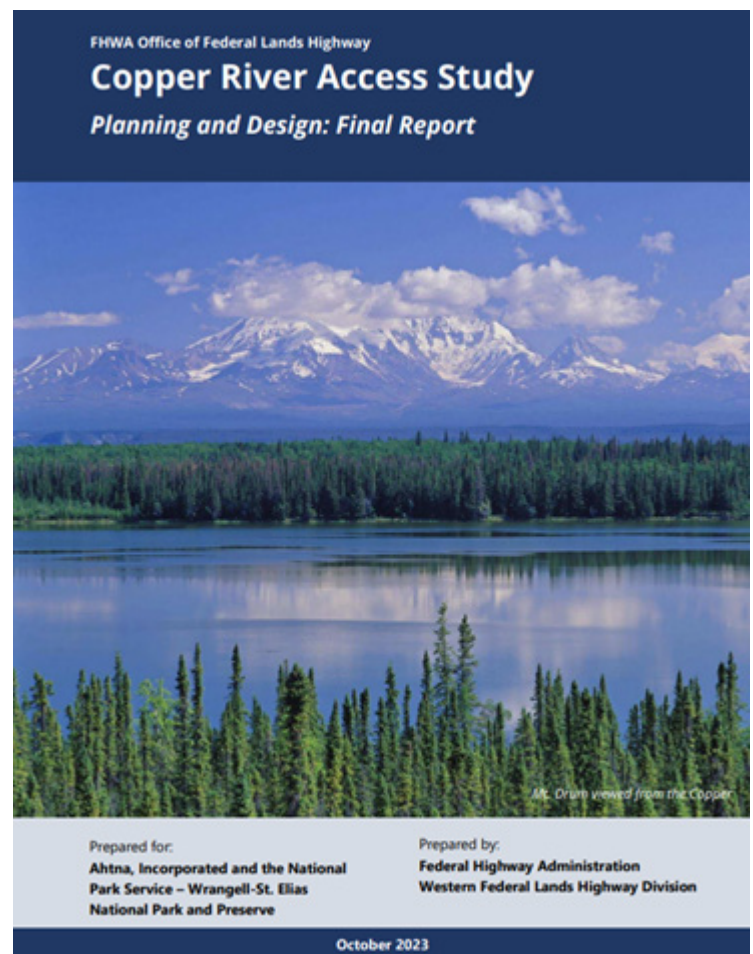
# Lands and Planning

## Kennecott Planning

The Kennecott Operations Plan (KOP) is a guiding document for National Park Service (NPS) management of park land in and around the Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark (NHL). A review of the plan, addressing actions identified in the plan and the status of those actions, was completed in 2023. The review concluded with a public meeting on June 9, 2023, and a superintendent's letter outlining the status of each action identified in the 2013 KOP. A revision is underway, and the draft revised Kennecott Operations and Management Plan (KOMP) was open for public comment from September 8 – December 10, 2023 at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=21&projectID=34130&documentID=131552>. The comment period was extended by 30 days from November 10 to December 10 due to requests for a longer review period. A public meeting introducing the revision was held on September 8, 2023. Comments from the review will be addressed in the winter of 2024. Park staff will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft KOMP in the spring of 2024, and the plan will be released for another round of public review in the summer of 2024. For more information, contact the Alaska Region Outdoor Recreation Planner, Brenna McGown at [brenna\\_mcgown@nps.gov](mailto:brenna_mcgown@nps.gov).

## Gulkana To Copper River Access Study

The final report for the Copper River Access Study has been released! Visit <https://highways.dot.gov/sites/fhwa.dot.gov/files/copper-river-access-study-final-report-october-2023.pdf> This study is the culmination of about 18 months of work between Ahtna, Inc., Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Bureau of Land Management - Glennallen Field Office, Alaska DOT&PF, and Federal Highways Western Federal Lands. The purposes of the study are to (1) clarify an access easement between the Richardson Highway north of the Gulkana Airport across Ahtna, Inc. lands to the Copper River and (2) develop conceptual designs for a roadway, parking, and boat launch facilities, including future design and construction costs. The study includes background information on the study area and purpose; the approach taken by the project team; stakeholder and public perspectives from throughout the study; recommended alignments, designs, and cost estimates; and additional considerations. The Final Report also includes all of the more detailed documents developed throughout the study as appendices. These include the existing conditions, engagement strategy and summary, conceptual designs and cost estimates, and historical easement documentation.



For more information refer to the Project Website <https://highways.dot.gov/federal-lands/projects/ak/gulkana-2019-1> or contact: Park Planner, Morgan Sobek, 907-822-7213, [morgan\\_sobek@nps.gov](mailto:morgan_sobek@nps.gov)

# Lands and Planning

## McCarthy Road Planning and Environmental Linkages Study (PEL)

The McCarthy Road PEL is underway! The Federal Highway Administration—Western Federal Lands (WFL) Highway Division, in partnership with the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) and the National Park Service (NPS), are working together to conduct a Planning & Environmental Linkages (PEL) study for the McCarthy Road. This study will provide an opportunity over the next two years to evaluate transportation-related needs and opportunities along the road, identify and evaluate potential improvements, and propose recommendations for future implementation. Visit the study website: [www.mccarthyroadpel.com](http://www.mccarthyroadpel.com) to get the most recent newsletter, sign up for email updates, and to learn more. For more information contact: Chief of Lands and Planning, Joshua Scott, 907-822-7243, [Joshua\\_scott@nps.gov](mailto:Joshua_scott@nps.gov).

PEL Study website and area map: <https://mccarthyroadpel.com>





## Resource Stewardship & Science

The wildlife program evaluated the status of golden eagles, bald eagles, caribou, dall's sheep, and moose at Wrangell-St. Elias in 2023.

### Golden Eagles:

Field surveys began in mid-March with biologists from Denali and Wrangell-St. Elias to evaluate the population status of migrating golden eagles.

- 1,400 golden eagles were counted from mid-March to early-April.
- One eagle was tagged with a tracking device allowing identification of migratory routes and movements.

Adult male golden eagle in the Mentasta Mountains. NPS/Cutting.



### Bald Eagles:

The 19th year of a long-term bald eagle monitoring program was conducted on the Copper and Chitina Rivers.

- A total of 330 nests were visited along 300 miles of river habitat.
- 125 nesting territories were occupied by nesting adult eagles.
- Long-term data has shown that nests in the upper Copper River are more successful than nests further downriver.
- Water clarity and salmon abundance are believed to be drivers of this nest productivity gradient.



Balsam poplar galleries of bald eagle nesting habitat along the Copper River. NPS/Cutting.

### Caribou:

In June, a survey was conducted to estimate the number of adults in the Mentasta caribou herd.

- Results indicate the herd population in 2023 was between 200 and 375 individual adult caribou, which is lower than the 2021 estimate of 390 to 630 individuals.
- In September, 17 new GPS collars were deployed on female caribou from the Mentasta herd.
- Location data from collars inform the park about populations, movements, distribution, survival of the two herds and help in harvest management.
- Thawing permafrost was observed, which is impacting caribou habitat.



Caribou in the Mentasta Herd. NPS/Cameron.

### Dall's Sheep:

Sheep populations were surveyed in the northern Wrangell and eastern Mentasta Mountains.

- Dall's sheep transect surveys resulted in a total of fifty-eight 9-mile transects in sheep habitat.
- Preliminary results indicate a 40-60% decline in adult sheep since 2021 in the northern Wrangell Mountains and adjacent areas.
- The record snowfalls of the past two winters in this region has likely contributed to the population decline.

Dall's sheep ewe moving down a rocky ridgeline in the Mentasta Mountains. NPS/Cutting.



## Resource Stewardship & Science

### Moose:

A Fall moose population survey was conducted in coordination with Wrangell-St. Elias, Yukon-Charley, and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Glennallen and Tok offices.

- A total of one hundred and forty-seven 2.5-mile grids were surveyed from Chisana westward and southward to McCarthy, a 3-million acre landscape that spans a gradient of habitat and hunting pressure.
- Data is currently being processed to generate a population estimate and create a map of moose abundance across this large area.



< Bull moose showing social dominance, taken during the fall 2023 moose survey. NPS/Cutting.

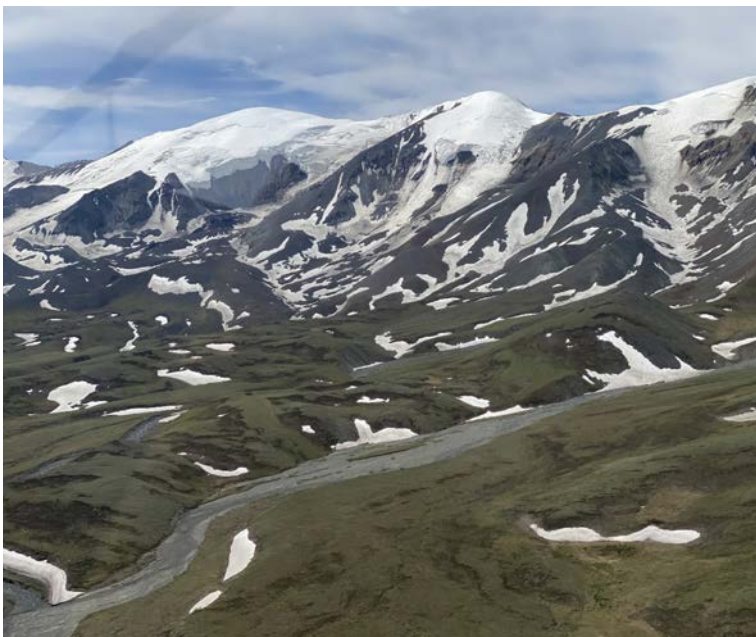
NPS staff and partners learning to use bear spray. NPS/Cutting. >



### Bear Safety Training:

Bear Safety classes were held for seasonal employees, Youth Conservation Corps and interns.

- Training provides knowledge and hands-on experience about bear biology, habitat protection, safety practices while working in bear country and deploying bear spray in case of an aggressive encounter in the field.



Melting permafrost can be seen by the bare soil and sinking ground in the green landscape. Climate change impacts on melting permafrost may be affecting caribou habitat. Chisana, Alaska. NPS/Cutting.

### NEW Story Map!

#### Alaska's Shrinking Glaciers: Monitoring Glaciers in a Warming Climate

The new story map is based on the most recent Alaska-wide glacier inventory.

<https://www.nps.gov/maps/stories/alaskas-shrinking-glaciers.html>

