

Alaskan Labyrinth

BEAT YOUR OWN PATH THROUGH DENALI NATIONAL PARK'S CONFOUNDING AND LITTLE-TRAVELED WYOMING HILLS.

The Hike Folded into the northeast corner of Denali is a clutch of nearly vertical 5,000-foot emerald peaks called the Wyoming Hills. Here is one of America's most epic and empty trekking areas, a

remote 33-square-mile jumble of rock and shrubland flanked by the teal braids of the Toklat and East Fork Rivers. With valleys full of caribou, dall sheep, moose, bears, and wolves—and a scant 18 visitors per year—these hills practically guarantee more solitude than a monastery. Rangers are stingy about issuing permits here (in park units 37 and 38) to anyone with suspect navigational skills, so bring your A game.

From the Polychrome Rest Area on the Denali Park Road, hike north a dozen miles, following the East Fork across a massive green valley with countless creek crossings. Once into the hills, this horseshoe-shaped, trailless route eventually arcs west for roughly 15 miles, winding through deep valleys amid the tallest hills, to connect to the Toklat, which you'll follow south back to the Park Road. The deeper you get into the



DON'T STEP BLINDLY: DENALI'S DENSE FOLIAGE HIDES BEARS, BUT ALSO ANKLE-TWISTING TUSSOCKS.

four- to five-day route, the slower, trickier, and more gaze-worthy it becomes.

The Crux Navigation (in addition to crossing icy creeks and being griz-aware). Mt. McKinley, an obvious navigational aid elsewhere in the park, falls out of view down in the dales of the Wyoming Hills. Add fog or cloudy weather, and the mess of drainages and alder-filled nooks and crannies become a massive labyrinth.

The Key Navigational "handrails." Shannon Rochelle, a veteran Alaskan NOLS instructor, says to think of the two main rivers (the most easily found landmarks on your topo) as boundary lines—or handrails—and keep

the East Fork on your right (east) and the Toklat on your left (west). Once you launch into the hills, routinely confirm your position before and after each tributary, drainage, or landmark. In June and July, the sun is due south at about 2 p.m. (due west at 8 p.m., east at 8 a.m.). Escape route: If you get totally flummoxed, backtrack to the Park Road (which bisects the park from east to west); it will always be to your south.

The Way Take the Park Road bus from the Visitor Center. Ask your driver to drop you at the East Fork at the Polychrome Rest Area.

Plan It nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit. USGS quads: Mount McKinley C-1, Healy C-6