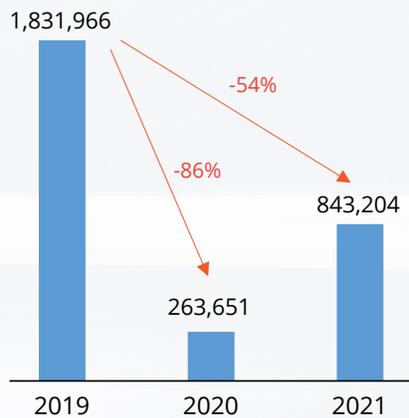


Alaska national parks and COVID

How visitor numbers have declined and recovered so far

Decline in yearly park visitors during COVID



Source: National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics

By KARINNE WIEBOLD

The pandemic restricted travel in myriad ways over the last couple of years, but for many people, national parks with their wide open spaces and easy access by car made visits to “America’s backyard” more appealing than other trips. Still, the pandemic sharply cut the numbers of park visitors.

Nationally, total park visits fell 28 percent in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, from 328 million in 2019 to 237 million. Visits bounced back partway by 2021, to 297 million.

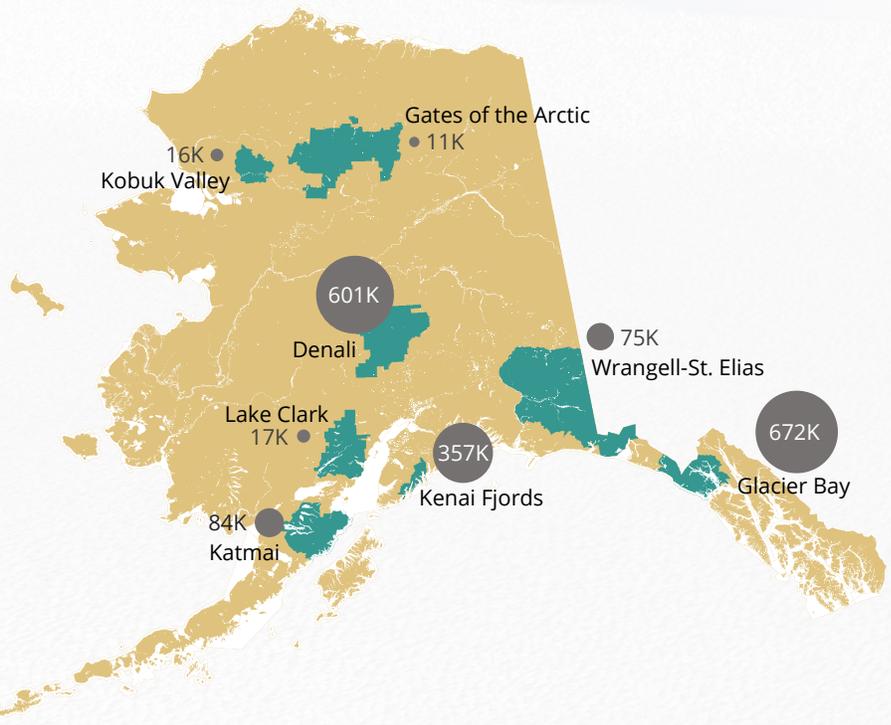
Alaska’s parks were hit much harder. In 2020, visits fell by 86 percent from 2019’s count of more than 1.8 million. That loss was more than triple the nationwide decline, proportionately. In 2021, Alaska park visits were still 54 percent lower than in 2019.

With cruise ships scheduled to return to Alaska in more typical numbers in 2022, though, visitor counts may recover or even

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Alaska's national parks and how many visited in 2019

Sources: National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section



PARK VISITORS

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exceed their pre-pandemic levels.

Alaska's eight national parks

Alaska has eight national parks with annual visits ranging from more than 600,000 a year in Glacier Bay and Denali to less than 20,000 in Lake Clark, Kobuk Valley, and Gates of the Arctic. Visitor counts were rising before COVID-19, with Glacier Bay and Katmai both hitting records in 2019.

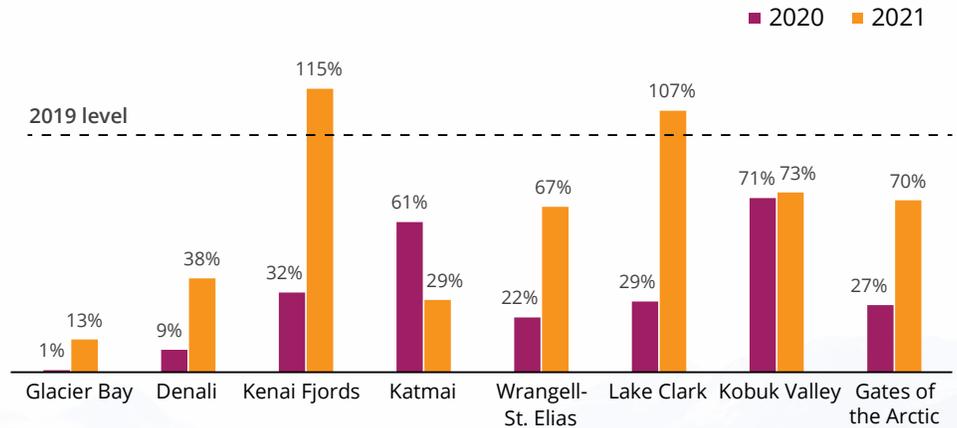
Alaska's most-visited national parks are those most popular with tourists. Glacier Bay, in Southeast Alaska near Gustavus, welcomes tourists from cruise ships into the park. Cruise-based tourists also travel to Denali, in the Interior, by train or bus.

Alaska's cruise-based tourism collapsed in 2020. Visits to Glacier Bay plummeted 99 percent, to fewer than 6,000. Denali visits also fell by over 90 percent.

Who did visit Alaska parks during the pandemic, and which ones

Alaskans continued to take advantage of our parks during the pandemic, however, and likely made up the bulk of visits in 2020 and a significant part of 2021's increase. Denali National Park is on the road system between Alaska's two largest cities, and

Park visits in 2020 and 2021 as a percent of 2019 level



Source: National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics

Kenai Fjords is also accessible by road and popular with Alaskans as well as visitors.

Denali opened formerly restricted parts of the road to private vehicle traffic in 2020 and more extensively in 2021, which encouraged local visitors.

Kenai Fjords lost two-thirds of its traffic the first year of the pandemic, but traffic rebounded and exceeded pre-pandemic visits in 2021 by more than 55,000.

After the great tourist rapture of 2020, 2021 was an improvement for every park but Katmai. Independent travelers made a strong showing last year, and around 100,000 cruise ship visitors returned to Southeast. (Still, that was about a 10th of what Southeast would typically get.)

Visits to Glacier Bay grew to nearly 90,000 (13 percent of the pre-pandemic level) and Denali reached 230,000 (38 percent of 2019). Denali estimates that about 60 percent of visits in a normal year come from cruises.

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