

Alaska's national parks this decade

How our largest attractions fared during, after COVID

By KARINNE WIEBOLD

Alaska has the five largest national parks in the country: Wrangell-St. Elias at 13.2 million acres, followed by Gates of the Arctic (8.5 million), Denali (6.1 million), Katmai (4.1 million), and Glacier Bay (3.3 million). Of the ten largest parks in the country, seven are in Alaska.

Visitor numbers had been climbing before the pandemic, with Glacier Bay, Kenai Fjords, and Katmai all hitting new highs in 2019. The pandemic curtailed Alaska's national park visits, but since the mass return of cruise ships in 2022, visitor numbers have been rising again. By 2023, most parks were well above their pre-pandemic tourist levels.

Alaska has eight national parks, plus a range of preserves, historic parks, and monuments. Annual national park visits now range from more than half a million at Glacier Bay and Denali to fewer than 20,000 at Lake Clark, Kobuk Valley, and Gates of the Arctic.

National park visits didn't drop as much nationally during COVID

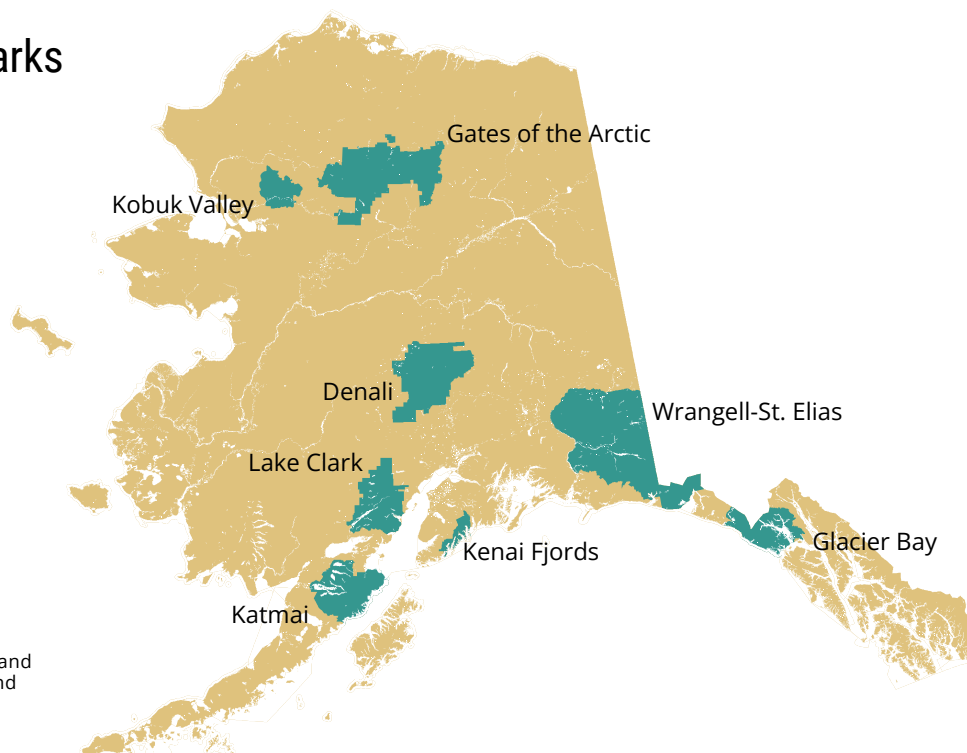
Nationally, total park visits fell by 28 percent in the first pandemic year, from 328 million in 2019 to 237 million in 2020. By 2021, nationwide visits had bounced back to 297 million, or 91 percent of their previous level.

Alaska's parks were hit much harder. In 2020, when travel plummeted, visits fell by 86 percent — three times the nationwide average.

While Alaskans do visit the state's parks, visitors from elsewhere drive the numbers. Alaska and its parks are not easily accessible, requiring significant air, sea, or international highway travel, and several can only be reached by sea or air.

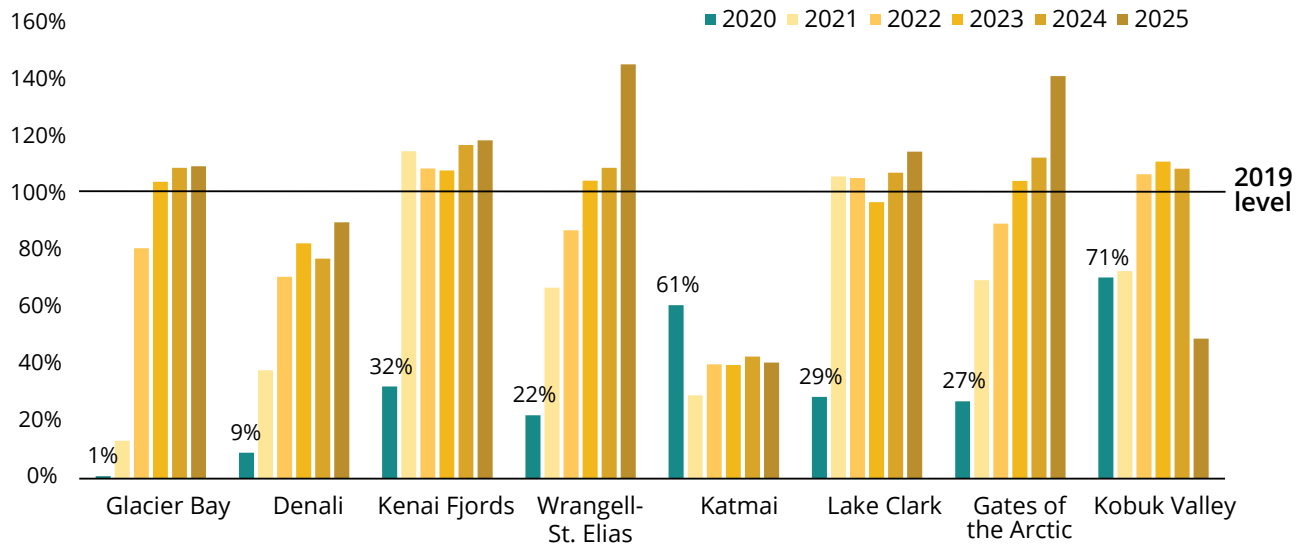
Kobuk Valley Park, for example, is so wild and remote that, according to the National Park Service, the park has no roads or trails.

Alaska's national parks



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Visitors to Alaska's national parks as a percentage of pre-pandemic levels



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

In contrast, visiting a park in the Lower 48 can be as simple as taking a short drive. Lower 48 parks were an especially attractive recreational option during the pandemic, giving visitors the opportunity to explore outdoors in relative isolation.

Local tourists and how the cruise number collapse affected parks

Most park visitors in 2020 were likely Alaskans, and they also drove much of the 2021 increase. Denali

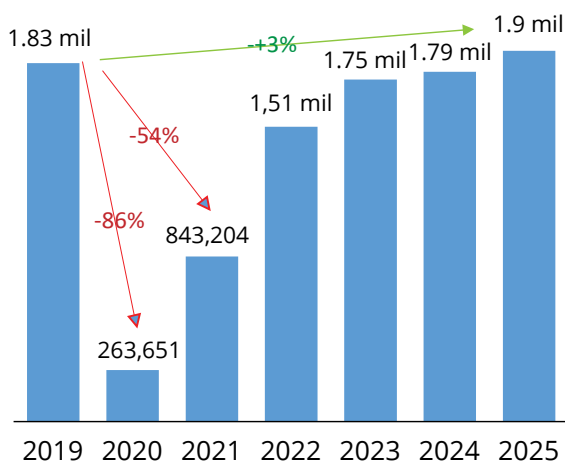
and Kenai Fjords in particular are popular with locals, and both are on the road system.

Denali opened formerly restricted parts of the road to private vehicles in 2020 and opened more extensively in 2021, which encouraged local traffic. Kenai Fjords lost two-thirds of its traffic in the first COVID year, then rebounded past its pre-pandemic visitor count by more than 50,000 people, which was the fastest and most consistent recovery.

Alaska's most visited national parks are the ones most frequented by tourists. Glacier Bay, in Southeast Alaska near Gustavus, allows cruise ships into the park. Cruise ship passengers also travel to Denali, in the heart of the Interior, by train or coach.

Cruises to Alaska collapsed to almost zero in 2020. Glacier Bay visits plummeted by 99 percent, to fewer than 6,000, mostly locals and private vessels. Denali visits dropped by over 90 percent.

The trajectory of Alaska park visits



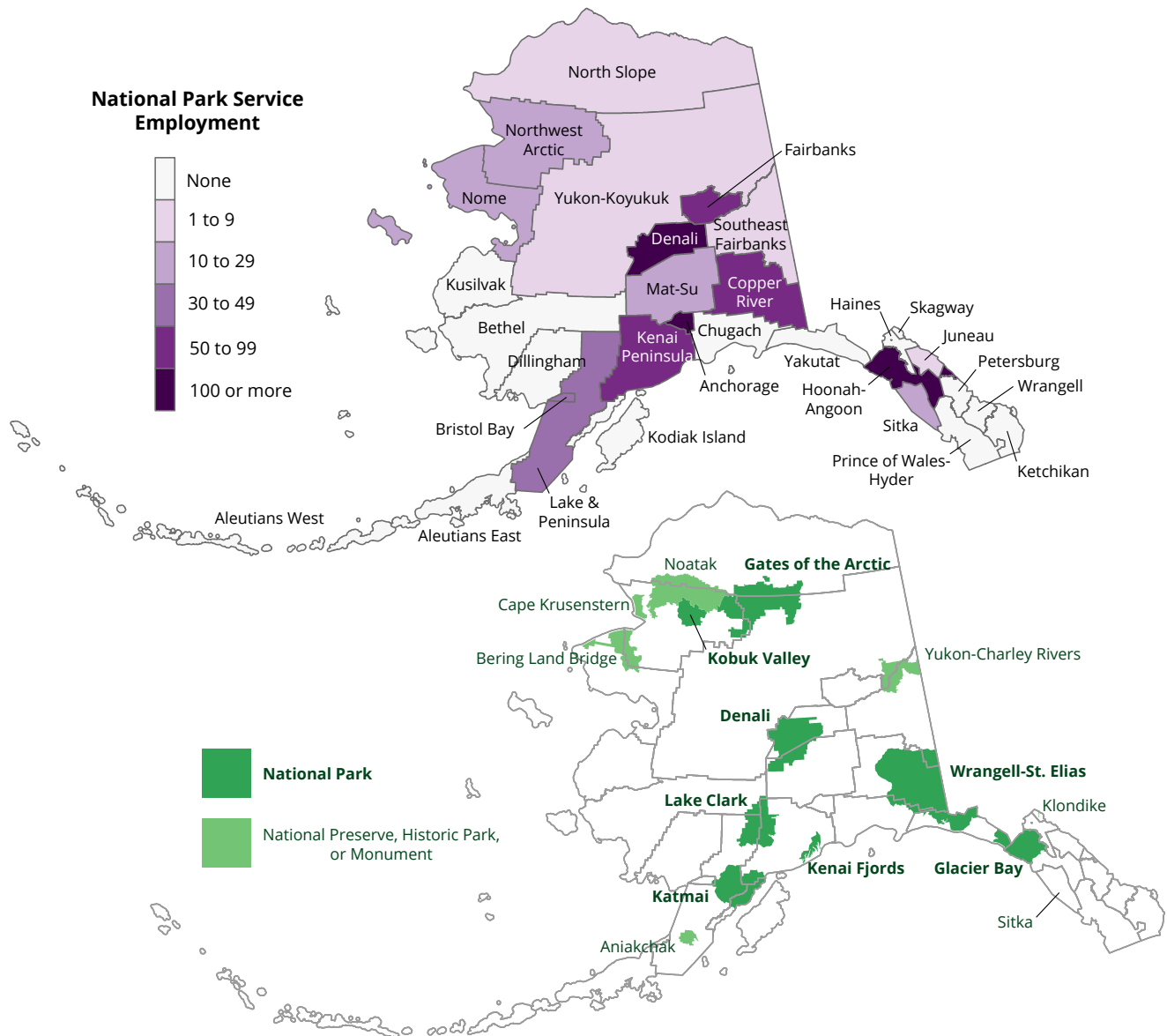
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Recovery varied by Alaska park

The next year was better, with a strong independent tourist season. In addition, around 100,000 cruise ship visitors, mainly on small ships, reached Southeast Alaska in 2021.

Visits to Glacier Bay increased to nearly 90,000, although that was just 13 percent of pre-pandemic levels. By 2023, however, cruise visitor numbers and Glacier Bay visitors both hit new highs.

National park jobs in Alaska and the size, type of each designated area



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

About 60 percent of Denali National Park's visits are associated with cruise ships, but Denali faced unrelated setbacks and a meandering recovery. Denali received less than 10 percent of its usual visitors in 2020 and 40 percent in 2021.

In 2021, the Pretty Rocks landslide closed the road, with no expectation of opening until 2027. Then in 2024, wildfires further dented visitor numbers.

Although the road hasn't reopened yet, Denali visits have slowly climbed, reaching about 90 percent of the park's 2019 level by 2025.

Visits to Katmai, home of the annual fat bear

contest and location of famed German documentarian Werner Herzog's 2005 film *Grizzly Man*, stood out in 2020. While most parks were deserted, Katmai received over 60 percent of the previous year's traveler number — a remarkable showing for 2020.

While the reasons for the strong pandemic turnout are unclear, visitors to Katmai are more likely to be independent travelers than those to Glacier Bay, Denali, or even Kenai Fjords, and to make expensive arrangements far in advance. Katmai is a bucket-list destination for bear viewing and fishing enthusiasts.

After 2020, visits to Katmai fell to between 30 and 40 percent of 2019's level and haven't increased

substantially since; however, 2019 was an unusually high year.

Kobuk Valley also lost relatively few visitors in 2020, probably because its visitors are mostly Alaskans. Visits dropped sharply in 2025, coinciding with major changes in the way the park tallies visitors.

The location and trajectory of national park jobs in Alaska

In terms of employment, the National Park Service averaged 869 park jobs in Alaska in summer 2019, which covers April through September. These include park staff and regional operations, which are mainly in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

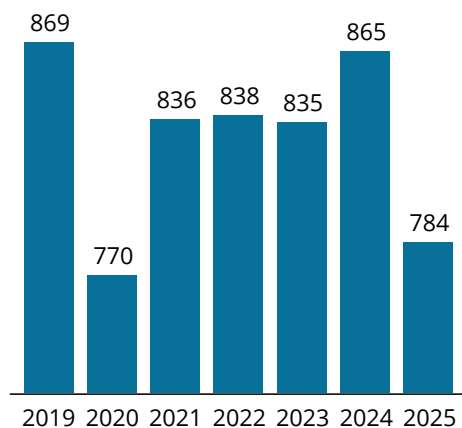
The Park Service cut 100 jobs in 2020, then restaffed to around 840 for the next three years.

In 2025, when the Trump administration was sworn in for its second term, the federal government cut thousands of jobs across all departments, and Alaska's Park Service employment fell to levels almost as low as 2020 (770).

By area, the Denali Borough had the most Park Service jobs in summer 2025, at 171. The Hoonah-Angoon Census Area, home to Glacier Bay, came in second at 145. Hoonah-Angoon also has the highest concentration of federal employment in Alaska because of its large park and relatively small economy. Anchorage also stands out as the Park Service headquarters, with 134 jobs.

Cruise ship tourism in 2026 is anticipated to be

Park Service jobs in Alaska



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

robust, with about 10 percent more passengers than in 2025. About 1.97 million cruise ship visitors are expected.

Independent and international traveler numbers are less certain. International tensions have dampened tourism expectations somewhat, and the recent U.S. war with Iran has pushed fuel prices up, which is also likely to reverberate through the tourism industry.

Federal job cuts will also continue to materialize in 2026's employment numbers, although to what degree isn't yet clear.

Karinne Wiebold is the statewide economist. Reach her in Juneau at (907) 465-6039 or karinne.wiebold@alaska.gov.

MAT-SU

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of living in the Mat-Su Borough. Our Alaska housing affordability index shows that home-buying is relatively less affordable for people living and working in Mat-Su than for those living and working in Anchorage.

Even though housing costs less in Mat-Su, its lower average wages more than offset the savings. The greatest affordability is for those who earn higher wages in Anchorage and live in Mat-Su.

The drawback is the loss of economic activity to other parts of the state. While these workers bring back much of their income to spend within the borough, some is spent outside Mat-Su's economy.

This outlier statistic has diminished over time, though. Twenty years ago, nearly half of the borough's workers were employed elsewhere. But as Mat-Su continues to mature from a suburb of Anchorage to a more independent economy that offers its own specialized goods and services, more quality employment opportunities will continue to become available locally.

Sam Tappen is an economist in Anchorage. Reach him at (907) 269-4861 or sam.tappen@alaska.gov.