

Introduction

Mount Rainier National Park is easily the most diverse national park in North America. Beginning with a very unusual inland temperate rainforest at just over 1,700 feet to the summit of its spectacular namesake volcano at 14,411 feet, the park is home to many life zones and an array of vegetation and geological features.

Mount Rainier's lowland forests must even be subclassified. The southeast corner of the park contains evergreens that rival the redwoods of California. The Grove of the Patriarchs near the Stevens Canyon entrance includes old growth Douglas fir, western hemlock and western red cedar. Some of these trees have diameters in excess of 8 feet and tower over 200 feet tall.

Meanwhile, in the northwest corner of the park the Carbon River valley is home to a temperate rainforest that more closely resembles those found along the Pacific coastline. Sitka spruce, nurse logs and an abundance of moss and ferns dominate this side of the park. Heavy rainfall and the common occurrence of summer fog play a large role in this life zone.

The silver fir forest is the most common and well-recognized forest within the park. It begins at about 2,200 feet where the Pacific silver fir is the most dominant tree. It shares the forest with the noble fir near this elevation, while its upper reaches, near 4,500 feet, are dominated by the yellow cedar, mountain hemlock and silver fir. These species flourish despite the constant rigors of altitude, cold temperatures, drought, wind and a shorter growing season.

The next life zone is the subalpine zone. This zone stretches from about 4,500 feet to the growing limits of the trees. Islands of trees and open meadows characterize this zone. Subalpine fir, silver fir, mountain hemlock and yellow cedar cluster to survive the elements here. This zone produces some of the best wildflower shows for photography.

The alpine zone exists above tree line and consists of a world of rock and ice. Heather, lupine and other adaptive plants still find a way to exist despite the harsh environment and weather extremes. The ceiling for plants is at about 9,000 feet. Above this, only algae and lichen continue to exist.

Mount Rainier National Park is truly a playground for photographers. The park consists of 235,625 acres (97 percent is designated as federally protected wilderness), encompasses elevations from 1,610 to 14,411 feet, includes 9 major watersheds, 382

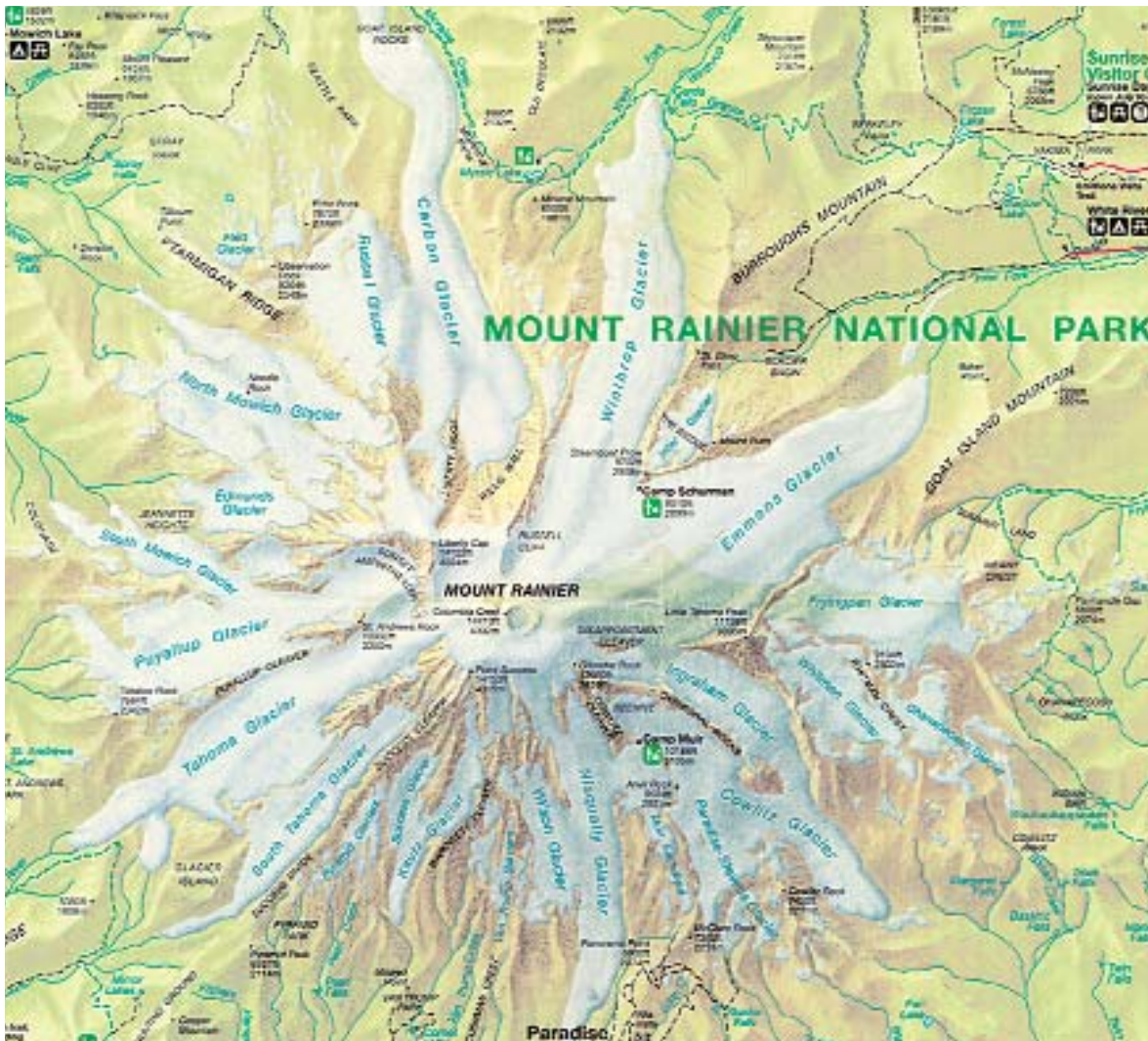
Front cover: Evening alpenglow on Mount Rainier from Tolmie Peak.

Title page: Evening light on Mount Rainier and the Willis Wall reflected in a tarn above Mystic Lake.

Opposite page: Early light on Mount Rainier above Edith Creek and Paradise Meadows.

lakes, 470 streams and rivers, 787 plant species, 126 bird species and 54 mammal species. Nearly all sides of Mount Rainier can be viewed from a road. The mountain benefits from both morning and evening light, which is quite uncommon for most comparable subject matter.

Photographers have certainly established their favorite destinations within the park — and it should be of no surprise with nearly two million visitors annually. Reflection Lakes probably top the popularity list, with Paradise Meadows not far behind. Show up to either of these destinations on a summer morning and you will find photographers lined up side by side, or even waiting in line for specific compositions! Still, they come back again and again for the experience.



Map of Mount Rainier.

