

Yellowstone National Park

What do Old Faithful, Hayden Valley and Mount Washburn have in common? They are all in Yellowstone National Park! You may have heard of the first ever National Park called Yellowstone, but do you know what the park is all about?

Yellowstone National Park was indeed the first region to be declared a National Park, giving it protection from settlement, poaching, and vandalism. It became a park on March 1, 1872, when then-President Ulysses S. Grant signed *The Act of Dedication*. It was the first document of its kind and it set the stage for future national parks.



So, why was it named Yellowstone? Yellowstone National Park includes 3,468 square miles in northwestern Wyoming, southern Montana, and northeastern Idaho. The Native Americans had actually been hunting and fishing on the land since about 11,000 years ago. The Yellowstone River has its headwaters in the park. Headwaters are where a river comes out of the mountains to flow above ground. The Minnetaree tribe called the river “Mi tsi a-da-zi.” This name was translated by the French trappers who hunted in the area in the late 18th century to mean “yellow stone” in English. It is thought the name came from the yellow rocks that help form the cliffs along the Yellowstone River.

It is easy for us to get around in modern times, but in the 1800s, there were no roads and no cars to get to remote places. Yellowstone is actually on a high plateau surrounded by the Middle Rocky Mountains, so it was not easy to find. It was “unexplored” by Europeans until 1859. Fur trappers had traveled through the area, starting when John Colter broke away from the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1807. Colter, along with many others, was not believed when he spoke of “fire and brimstone” in the form of boiling mud and spouting water. Yellowstone’s history began as a myth.

Thankfully, starting in 1859, several expeditions into the area lead to a detailed report on the amazing natural beauty found there. It was this report by Ferdinand V. Hayden, complete with photographs by William Henry Jackson and paintings by Thomas Moran, that convinced Congress to remove the area from the public auction of the “New World” called America. This then led to the signing of *The Act of Dedication*.

Yellowstone National Park has a cold, dry climate. The average elevation is 8,000 feet above sea level. The lower altitudes have a record high temperature of only 99 degrees Fahrenheit in 2002. The coldest temperature recorded in the park was -66 degrees Fahrenheit in 1933. The normal temperature in the summer is between 70-80 degrees Fahrenheit in the day, while the fall and spring daytime temperatures are between 30-60 degrees Fahrenheit. Nighttime temperatures can get below freezing, even in the summer! The winter days only get to about 20 degrees Fahrenheit, and most winter nights are below 0 degrees Fahrenheit! Rainfall varies in different areas of the park. The northern areas by Mammoth Hot Springs average 15 inches of rainfall a year. The southern areas average 80 inches per year. Because of the cold temperatures, it can snow any month of the year in Yellowstone.

You might think that the cold temperatures keep people from visiting Yellowstone, but it is estimated that over 3 million people visit there every year! Over 60 million visitors have been recorded to have visited the park since 1872. July is the warmest month in that part of the country, so most visitors go during that month. The 10,000 geothermal features such as the 300 geysers in the park, including Old Faithful, make up two-thirds of the geysers and half of the total geothermic activity in the entire world! These amazing natural wonders, along with one of the world’s largest petrified forests, 290 waterfalls that are at least 15 feet high, and a large diversity of animals and plants make Yellowstone a great place to visit!