What mystery lies in the Bermuda Triangle?

Amid the untouched beauty of Alaska's varying landscape, a mystery lingers. Because people seem to go missing at an eerily high rate, a large section of the state has come to be called Alaska's Bermuda Triangle, also known as the Devil's Triangle. Planes go down, hikers go missing and Alaskan residents and tourists seem to vanish into the largely untouched backdrop.

The so-called Bermuda Triangle slices through four of the state's regions, from the southeastern wilderness and fjords to the interior tundra and up to the arctic mountain ranges. Its points include the large swath of land from Juneau and Yakutat in the southeast, the Barrow mountain range in the north, and Anchorage in the center of the state.

Because of the high rate of disappearances, one area of Alaska has been called its Bermuda Triangle.

Even the native Alaska Tlingit Indians that live near Juneau have integrated this peculiar mystery into their religious culture. They believe an evil spirit named Kushtaka, a cross between a man and an otter, captures people who have drowned or gotten lost, whisking them away to his realm never to be seen again.

Evil spirits or not, the rate of people reported missing in Alaska is almost twice the national average. While many cases involve runaways or people who return home, Alaska also has the highest percentage of missing people who are never found [source: Tizon].

In 2007, Alaska state troopers added 2,833 missing person notices to their Missing Persons Clearinghouse that maintains all related information [source: Alaska Governor's Office]. In a state with just over 670,000 residents, that figure averages out to about four in every 1,000 people.

Along with missing persons reports, state troopers oversee search and rescue operations. In 2007, they performed 42 missions related to overdue hikers, 85 related to overdue boaters and 100 related to overdue snow machine operators who were temporarily missing [source: Alaska Governor's Office]. The Civil Air Service also assists with search and rescue missions, and Alaska's branch received the most state funding and saved the most lives in 2006 out of all other state branches [source: Civil Air Service].

Why are so many people becoming lost or stranded, sometimes forever, in Alaska? Is a Kushtaka spirit skulking in the wild or is Mother Nature to blame?

Missing in Alaska

In July 1993, 24-year-old Chris McCandless set off into the Alaskan wilderness determined to live off the land. After 112 days, he died of starvation, and four months later, a moose hunter accidentally stumbled upon his body.

The subject of the best-selling novel "Into the Wild" and 2007 motion picture by the same name, McCandless' tale symbolizes to many the romanticism and brutality of nature. Twenty-two miles from the nearest road, McCandless removed himself from the typical man-made dangers often associated with premature death. Nevertheless, it didn't take long for him to succumb to the will of a potentially greater threat -- the environment.

Grizzly bears are just one threat to safety in the Alaskan wilderness.

More than half of the nation's federally-designated wilderness lies in Alaska [source: National Agricultural Law Center], and many of the permanent disappearances in Alaska are

linked to the pristine, yet sometimes perilous, natural elements. Bound by 33,000 miles of coastline, the land contains more than three million lakes, untamed wildlife, and winters that blanket vast reaches of the state in snow and ice. Likewise, of the hundreds of search and rescue operations performed each year, a majority are the result of people literally becoming lost in the middle of nowhere.

Accidental injuries are the third-highest cause of death in Alaska, twice the national incidence rate [source: Alaska Division of Public Health]. In addition to car accidents, this category of fatalities can also include people falling down mountains or slipping in the spaces between glaciers, called crevasses. Of those accidental deaths, drowning is the third-highest cause [source: Alaska Department of Public Safety]. Many times, the cold temperatures cause bodies to sink to the bottom of the water rather than float to the top, adding another challenge to finding missing people.

The Denali National Park.

The Denali National Park, where Chris McCandless set up camp, sits in the middle of the so-called Bermuda Triangle and gapes across an area slightly smaller than the state of Massachusetts. Home to Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America, yearly temperatures fluctuate between 55 degrees Fahrenheit (12.7 degrees Celsius) in the summer to a mere 2 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 16.6 degrees Celsius) in the winter.

The brief climbing season lasts only from April to June, but at least 28 people have died there since 1996 [source: Associated Press]. According to the National Park Service, 19 people were rescued and two people died out of the 1,218 Mt. McKinley climbers in 2007.

Each year, scores of tourists visit Alaska to see that unspoiled land found in the so-called Bermuda Triangle and experience none of the dangers detailed above. Nevertheless, the Alaska Department of Parks and Outdoor Recreation urges those who visit the more remote areas to be prepared for the natural elements -- and dodge the clutches of the Kushtaka.

Source: Conger, Cristen. "Why has part of the Alaskan wilderness been called the Bermuda Triangle?." 15 April 2008. HowStuffWorks.com. <http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/alaska-bermuda-triangle.htm> 26 June 2008.