

Everything to know about Rocky Mountain National Park



Nymph Lake - excerpts from a National Geographic article by Lori Cuthbert and Joe Yogerst

The towering peaks of Colorado's spectacular wilderness are some of the highest in any U.S. national park. In the shadow of Rocky Mountain National Park's soaring peaks are wild rivers, placid alpine lakes, and an amazing array of flora and fauna. And you don't even have to hike to see them, if you don't want to.

FAST FACTS

Established: 1915

Size: 265,461 acres

Annual Visitors: 4.4 million

Visitor Centers: Beavers Meadows and Kawuneeche (year-round); Fall River and Alpine (seasonal)

Entrance Fee: \$20 per vehicle, \$10 per person

Trail Ridge Road, which follows a path that Native Americans used for thousands of years, meanders through forests, above the tree line, and over the Continental Divide; it's the longest continuous paved road in the United States and an efficient way to explore the park's topographical range. But while driving may offer magnificent scale, nothing captures detail like a hike. So here are a few of the park's star attractions that are accessible either by car or by foot.

Don't miss

Walking a section of the Continental Divide Trail offers a taste of the 3,100-mile trail that wanders through Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and New Mexico. Twenty-eight miles of the trail falls in Rocky Mountain, and there are shorter, family-friendly options that are easier to access.

Lulu City is a ghost town that in late 1880 was home to a population of 500 and 10 working mines. The boom didn't last long, and by 1886 Lulu City was abandoned. Now a doable six-mile hike gets you to the spooky remains of a dream gone bust: several dilapidated log cabins, a few foundations, and ghosts of miners past.

The Milky Way glows in the black night skies over the Rockies in a way we can't imagine if we live in towns or cities. During the summer months, park rangers at Rocky Mountain join forces with the darkness and volunteer astronomers to walk visitors through what exactly is going on overhead.



More to see...



BEAR LAKE

Frosted with snow, Bear Lake gleams beneath distant Longs Peak and Keyboard of the Winds. The lake is one of the few high-mountain lakes in Colorado reachable on a paved road. Avoid the crowds as other destinations (Dream Lake) and hikes also start here.



GRAZING ELK

In summer, some 3,000 elk roam the park's high country, but from mid-September to mid-October, they move to the lower valleys to wait out the winter. Year round viewing? A herd has made the town of Estes Park their home!



SPRAGUE LAKE

Sunrise is quiet at Sprague Lake, a fishing pond reachable by an easy half-mile walk.



LILY LAKE

Easy .8mi - More of a walk than a hike



COPELAND FALLS

More a short hike thru a subalpine forest than a great waterfall destination , but it's an easy hike. Located in the southeast corner of the NP, use the Wild Basin Trailhead.



COYOTE VALLEY TRAIL

Located in the western part of the NP. Level walk thru marshland but go past the end of the gravel trail into the woods... animal sightings possible here!

The old frontier town of Estes Park has long been the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. Art galleries and artisanal alcohol (breweries, distilleries, and wineries) are the twin pillars of the downtown scene. Opened in 1909, the Stanley Hotel (Stephen King's inspiration for *The Shining*) offers guided history tours and evening ghost tours to guests and the general public.

There's also plenty of outdoor action. The bright red cars of the Estes Park Aerial Tramway sail to the summit of Prospect Mountain, where the view often extends 100 miles along the snowcapped Front Range. Strewn with sculptures and shady sitting spots, Estes Park Riverwalk meanders along the banks of two rivers that cut through town. The nonprofit Rocky Mountain Conservancy partners with the national park on a wide range of guided tours, seminars, and family activities like geocaching, fly-fishing, and art in the park.

From Estes, two routes lead into the national park. Highway 36 shoots to Beaver Meadows Visitor Center with its information desk, natural history exhibits, and backcountry permit office; Highway 38 makes its way to Fall River Visitor Center and a similar set of services. The two roads converge at Deer Ridge Junction, the start of the 48-mile Trail Ridge Road. Owing to snow cover, the route is open only between Memorial Day and mid-October. Places to pause along the drive range from the Highest Point and the lofty Alpine Visitor Center—the nation's highest continuous paved road—to the half-mile Tundra Communities hike and several sections of the strenuous Ute Trail across the rocky highland.

Trail Ridge Road eventually dips into the Kawuneeche Valley. Few visitors make their way this far, lending the region an end-of-the-earth feel. It is here that the Colorado River starts its 1,450-mile journey to the Gulf of California as streams tumbling down from the Never Summer Mountains. The Colorado River Trail heads 3.1 miles upstream past cliffs that often shelter herds of bighorn sheep. Farther south, Holzwarth Historic Site spins tales of a German immigrant family that homesteaded the valley in the 1860s.

The park's other legendary auto route, Old Fall River Road is an 11-mile, one-way climb from Horseshoe Park to Chapin Pass and the Alpine Visitor Center. Be forewarned: It's mostly gravel and features numerous switchbacks. Along the way are the slot canyon that funnels the 25-foot Chasm Falls and views of 13,000-foot peaks within the Mummy Range.

Known for broad meadows and alpine lakes, Rocky Mountain's southeast sector is accessed via Bear Lake Road. The park's largest open space, Moraine Park, is a favorite grazing place for elk and mule deer; an easy 5.5-mile trail loops around the entire meadow. Farther up the road are trailheads for Hollowell Park, Sprague Lake, Storm Pass, Glacier Gorge, and the shoreline path around handsome Bear Lake—hikes that vary from easy to strenuous depending on their length and elevation gain. Several of these trailheads are also jumping-off spots for ascents of 14,259-foot Longs Peak, the park's highest mountain.