

# Great Sand Dunes

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes  
National Park and Preserve



## Photography

Whether you seek to capture abstract sand/shadow patterns, people splashing on a beach, or majestic views of dunes with snowcapped peaks, the Great Sand Dunes landscape provides opportunities for all styles of photography.

### When to Go

#### Seasons

The Sangre de Cristo Mountains are typically snowcapped from October through June, making a dramatic visual contrast between cool snow patterns and warm sand. Prairie sunflowers are at their peak in the dunes and surrounding grasslands in mid-August during wet summers. Aspen color usually peaks at the end of September, while the cottonwood trees peak a couple of weeks later.



Timing your visit for various seasonal elements - snow, creek waves, fall colors, or sunflowers - can diversify your images and transcend the predictable stereotypes of desert photography.

The photo of snowy dunes and the photo of dunes with gold aspens were taken in late afternoon light; the image of Medano Creek was taken in early morning light.



#### Times of Day

##### *Late Afternoon*

Late afternoon generally has the most dramatic light angles and dune shadows, because the sun drops lower over the distant San Juan Mountains. Additionally, afternoon light tends to be richer because the sun is shining through more atmospheric haze across the San Luis Valley.

##### *Early Morning*

The sun has to clear the adjacent Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the morning, so the light angles are higher, the shadows are smaller, and the air is often more clear and crisp. Early morning is the best time to photograph Medano Creek: it is always highest at dawn, and lowest at dusk.

##### *Avoid Mid-Day*

Not only is the light flat in mid-day, but in summer months you may encounter a 140 degree F sand surface or thunderstorms.



left and top left: NPS/Patrick Myers 2011  
above: Kris Illenberger 2010





This classic view of Star Dune and the 14,000' (4200m) Crestone Peaks is from the main park entrance in late afternoon. Park in pullouts near the entrance sign. Photo taken in early June. NPS/Patrick Myers 2009

## Where to Go

For a variety of photos, including close-up abstracts, panoramas of the dunefield from High Dune or Star Dune, and images of Medano Creek, start at the main Dunes Parking Lot. By walking out to the left of the main paths that visitors take to High Dune, you can avoid most or all footprints. Additionally, by walking left (west), you can find a variety of dune shapes along the first ridge of dunes, and be able to shoot back toward the mountains to include them in your images if you choose.



There is an endless variety of beautiful shapes to capture along the first ridge of dunes. Kris Illenberger 2010

In summer months, this first ridge of dunes begins to develop shadows in mid-afternoon, but at sunset it is completely in shadow as the sun is dropping farther north. To capture the final light on the dunes, you'll need to either climb to the top of the ridge, walk about 3 miles down the creekbed to the base of Star Dune, or drive back to the main park entrance (see photo at top).



The forests near Zapata Falls provide trees in the foreground, while the valley floor, dunefield, and mountains offer an expansive background. NPS/Patrick Myers 2006

### *Views From the Mountains*

There aren't any established trails in the national park and preserve that give good views of the dunefield from the mountains. However, you may explore up into the forest wherever you see the kinds of trees you'd like in the foreground of your photo. For a spectacular view of the San Luis Valley, dunefield, and mountains, drive up to Zapata Falls Recreation Area 8 miles south of the national park. The parking lot has excellent views, but you'll find even more variety of trees and views as you hike 1/2 mile (0.7 km) to the waterfall itself. It's definitely worth wading through the chilly water back into the cave to photograph the 20' (6m) falls. The falls are actually best photographed mid-day, because the high sunlight filters down into the rock crevasse from above.