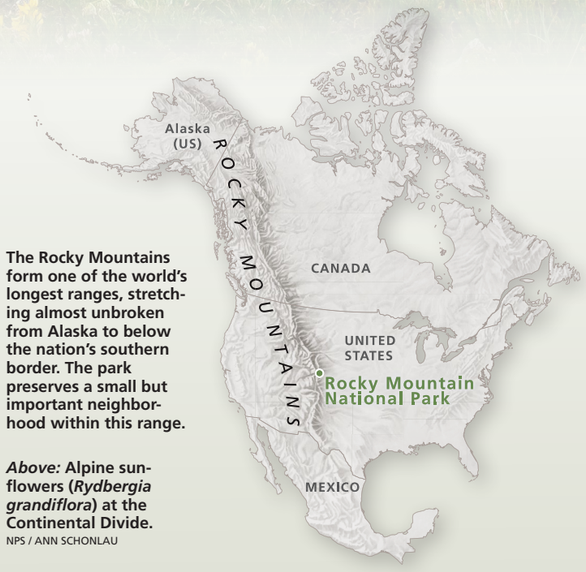
Rocky Mountain

Rocky Mountain National Park
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Nature's Knife Edge



The Rocky Mountains form one of the world's longest ranges, stretching almost unbroken from Alaska to below the nation's southern border. The park preserves a small but important neighborhood within this range.

Above: Alpine sunflowers (*Rydbergia grandiflora*) at the Continental Divide.
NPS / ANN SCHONLAU

To ascend Rocky Mountain National Park's Trail Ridge Road is to leave this world and enter another. It carries you, breathless with wonder and altitude, toward a fragile alpine realm, the tundra. Most animals hibernate or migrate during the harsh winters. No trees can live here.

Despite the brief, six-week growing season, plants survive. Most conserve energy by miniaturizing. Each July thousands of brilliant alpine sunflowers burst from the thin blanket of soil that covers parts of the tundra. For decades these hardy plants have worked toward this moment. Many tundra flowers track the sun to maximize their intake of light, required for photosynthesis.

Park your vehicle at the Alpine Visitor Center and behold 360-degree views of astonishing peaks, lakes, snowfields, canyons, forests, and meadows spread over 400 square miles. For a close look at the alpine ecosystem, walk the Tundra Communities Trail to the east. To the west, the Rockies' spine divides the continent into two watersheds. One flows west to the Pacific, the other east to the Atlantic.

On the park's drier east side, snow blows in from the wetter west, replenishing the few remaining glaciers. All rest in cool, dark valley cirques, or bowl-shaped depressions. Higher summer temperatures since the 1990s have caused the glaciers to melt back. On the park's west side, in the Never Summer Mountains, the Colorado River begins as a tiny stream fed by snowmelt. Downstream it provides water to 40 million people.

Thrust skyward by Earth's forces 40 to 70 million years ago, then sculpted by multiple glacial episodes, the Rockies are "new" in geologic terms. In 2009 Rocky Mountain National Park, a small neighborhood within this vast mountain range, became one of the nation's "newest" designated wildernesses. Nature has always ruled this wild, fantastic place. But as human-triggered events outside park boundaries increasingly affect life within the park, how will nature respond? What is our role?

Nature's Guideposts

Pika

Montane
below 9,000 feet

The montane ecosystem is the park's gateway whether you enter from Grand Lake, Estes Park, or Wild Basin. On warm, south-facing slopes the ponderosa pines greet you with their sweet fragrance. The open, sunlight-dappled forest of tall (up to 150 feet) trees feeds and shelters the tassel-eared Abert's squirrel.

Chokecherry, currant, and juniper bushes sustain many animals, insects, and birds. Beavers and otters work and play in the montane's streams. Elk, one of the park's larger mammals, gather here to rut in fall. They eat the aspen trees' soft inner bark and shoots and leave a calling card of abraded aspen trunks. On cooler, north-facing slopes, forests are dense with Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine.

Subalpine
9,000–11,400 feet

Snow that falls in the alpine zone blows down to the subalpine, creating a wet ecosystem with over 30 inches of precipitation annually. Sharp-tipped, pungent Engelmann spruce and flat-needled fir trees prevail, reaching 100 feet. The understory supports shrubs like blueberry, wax currant, huckleberry, and Wood's rose. Wildflowers like arnica, fairy slipper, twinflower, and purple elephant's head colonize open meadows.

On the park's southern edge, the water ouzel, or American dipper, defies rushing streams to dive for food. Downy and hairy woodpeckers, bold Steller's jay, and the yellow-rumped warbler share the woods. Look for the pocket gopher and golden-mantled ground squirrel.

Alpine
above 11,400 feet

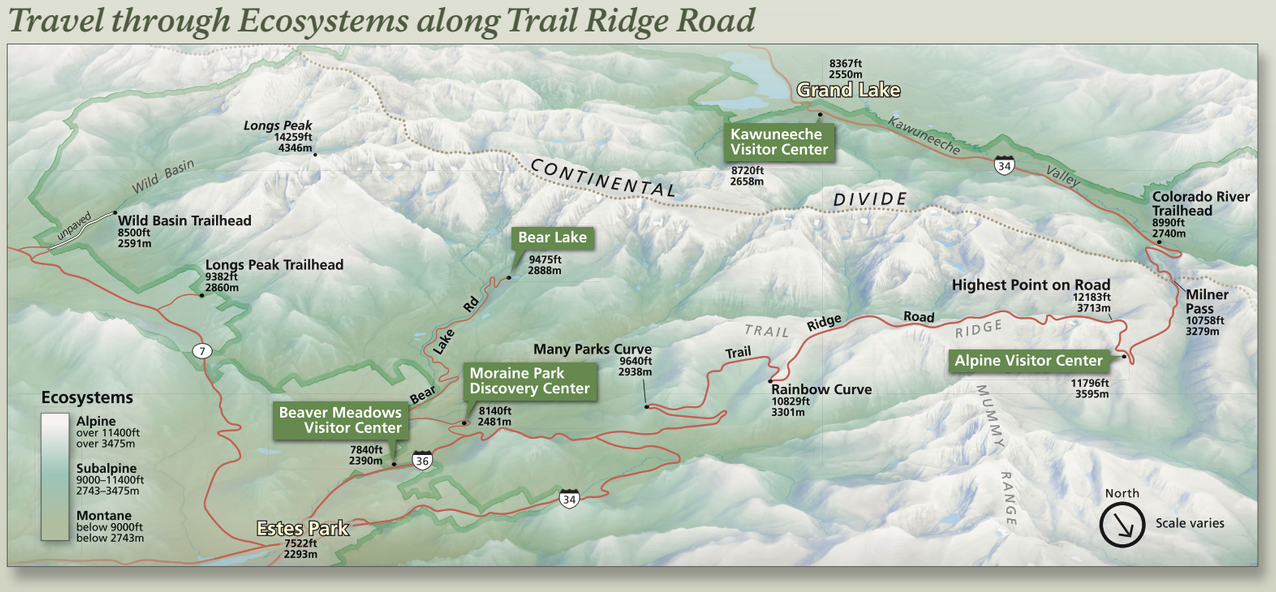
Extremely thin soil, strong ultraviolet light, drying winds, and bitter cold define life on the tundra. Many plants hug the ground in dense mats (avens, *below right*), preserve moisture with waxen leaf surfaces, or trap warmth against stems and leaves with hairs.

Animals also must adapt or die. Marmots store fat, then draw upon their reserves as they hibernate. Bighorn sheep graze here in summer but migrate in fall to lower elevations like many other species in the park. The resilient white-tailed ptarmigan is an exception. This bird stays all winter in the alpine zone, warmed by feathered eyelids, nostrils, legs, and feet.

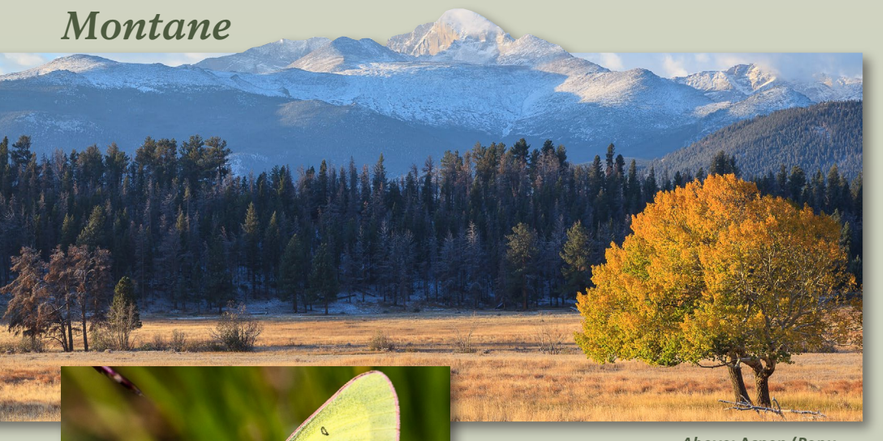
PIKA AND PTARMIGAN—© SHATTIL / ROZINSKI PHOTOGRAPHY

Ptarmigan

Travel through Ecosystems along Trail Ridge Road



Montane



Above: Aspen (*Populous tremuloides*) and lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*). *Left*: Common sulphur butterfly (*Colias philodice*) pollinates a purple aster (*Erigeron simplex*).
ABOVE—© ERIK STENSLAND; *LEFT*—© JACOB W. FRANK

Subalpine

Above: Elk, or wapiti, graze amid Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*). *Left*: The park is home to over 350 bighorn sheep, which were nearly extinct here in the 1950s.
ABOVE—NPS / JT-FINEART; *LEFT*—© JACOB W. FRANK

Alpine

Above: Hikers atop Ypsilon Mountain. *Left*: Five-petaled avens (*Geum rossii* ssp turbinata) hug the tundra. *Far left*: Yellow-bellied marmot.
ABOVE AND FAR LEFT—© JACOB W. FRANK; *LEFT*—© SHATTIL / ROZINSKI PHOTOGRAPHY

Legacy of Stewardship

1915 — *2015*

Native Americans lived on and cared for this land for centuries. As settlement and land use increased, people recognized that preservation was needed.

Many passionate advocates for a park emerged, including naturalist and guide Enos Mills (1870–1922). He led the push for a wilderness park. Mining, grazing, and logging interests lobbied for a national forest where commercial activities could continue. In 1915 Congress designated Rocky Mountain National Park.

Influential Estes Park resident Mary King Sherman (1862–1935) also campaigned hard to establish the park. She promoted outdoor education, citing better health and an increased sense of civic duty as benefits. Her ideas are cornerstones of National Park Service programs today.

Long before anyone envisioned a Rocky Mountain National Park, Isabella Bird (1831–1904) published *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. Her book helped make others aware of the region's rugged beauty and "unprofaned freshness" and paved the way for preservation.

In 1873 a fur trapper called Mountain Jim helped Isabella Bird climb Longs Peak. He was one among many who traveled to the Rocky Mountains in search of natural beauty or bounty.

Native Americans preceded all others in this wild place. Tools, pottery, and rock piles whisper of human presence over 10,000 years ago, when Paleo-Indians seasonally hunted and possibly traded here. Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho bands later came to these mountains. They probably wore the path now known as Trail Ridge Road. They left few other traces.

Clockwise from upper left: September 4, 1915; Mary King Sherman; volunteer assists a visitor with telescope; ranger leads snowshoe walk.
CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—COURTESY DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY / HARRY MELLON RHOADS; ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK ARCHIVES; NPS / PETER BIDDLE; NPS / ANN SCHONLAU

Over one million people now pour into the park in a six-week period each summer. Nearby urban areas affect how the park is managed. Decades of fire suppression created dense undergrowth, which only increased the threat to surrounding communities and caused changes in the forest composition. Over 35 invasive plant species now mingle with native.

To better understand these and other challenges, the park has set aside areas for science and research. It is also home to the Continental Divide Learning Center, where education and research programs focus on park resources.

As Rocky Mountain National Park moves into its second century, it will continue to preserve natural systems and cultural stories for future generations. *What role can you play in the park's next 100 years?*

Wilderness, Wildlife, Wonder

☆GPO:2022—419-059/82866 Last updated 2022

Roaming Rocky Mountain National Park

Lightning can kill. Hike early and watch the sky—thunderstorms are more common in the afternoon.

NPS / ANN SCHONLAU

Park Information Check your free park newspaper for current information about visitor centers, safety and highcountry survival, ranger-led programs, services, hiking trails, wildlife, shuttle buses, and more. Find lodging and visitor services at Estes Park and Grand Lake.

Safety Avoid lightning. Begin your hike early in the day. Get below treeline or to a shelter by afternoon, when thunderstorms begin. If caught above treeline in a storm, run from summits and isolated trees and rocks. Avoid small cave entrances and overhangs. Crouch down on your heels. • Many park visitors experience altitude sickness. Consult your doctor if you have a respiratory or heart condition. • The park's swift-running streams, waterfalls, falling trees, and sudden weather changes present many natural hazards. • While driving, stay alert for wildlife crossing the roads.

Pets Pets are prohibited in all areas not accessible by motor vehicle, including trails and meadows. Do not leave pets unattended in vehicles. Where allowed, pets must be kept on a six-foot leash.

Hunting, Fishing, and Firearms Hunting is prohibited in the park. • Fishing requires a Colorado fishing license. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

Regulations Abide by park regulations and restrictions, available at visitor centers and entrances. • Camp only in designated campgrounds. Backcountry camping requires a permit. • Do not leave property unattended for more than 24 hours without prior permission. • All vehicles, including bicycles, must stay on roads or in parking areas. Stopping or parking on roads is prohibited. Overnight parking requires a permit. • Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • Do not feed, approach, or try to touch any wild animal. • Leave wildflowers and other plants for others to enjoy. • Open alcoholic beverage containers in vehicles on park roads are illegal. • Marijuana use is prohibited in the park.

Tundra Closures The alpine ecosystem is fragile. Stay on the trail in tundra closure areas along Trail Ridge Road (*see highlighted areas on map below*).

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

Rocky Mountain National Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn about national parks at *www.nps.gov*.

More Information
Rocky Mountain National Park
1000 Hwy. 36
Estes Park, CO 80517-8397
970-586-1206; TTY 970-586-1319
www.nps.gov/romo

Follow us on social media.
Use the official NPS App to guide your visit; select "save this park" to use offline.

For information call 970-586-1206
For Trail Ridge Road status call 970-586-1222

Emergencies call 911

Preserving Wilderness

In 2009 Congress protected most of Rocky Mountain National Park as wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Wilderness is a gift to people today and to future generations. The designation protects forever the land's wild character, natural conditions, opportunities for solitude, and scientific, educational, and historical values. In wilderness people can sense being a part of the whole community of life on Earth.