



Nature's Knife Edge

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.

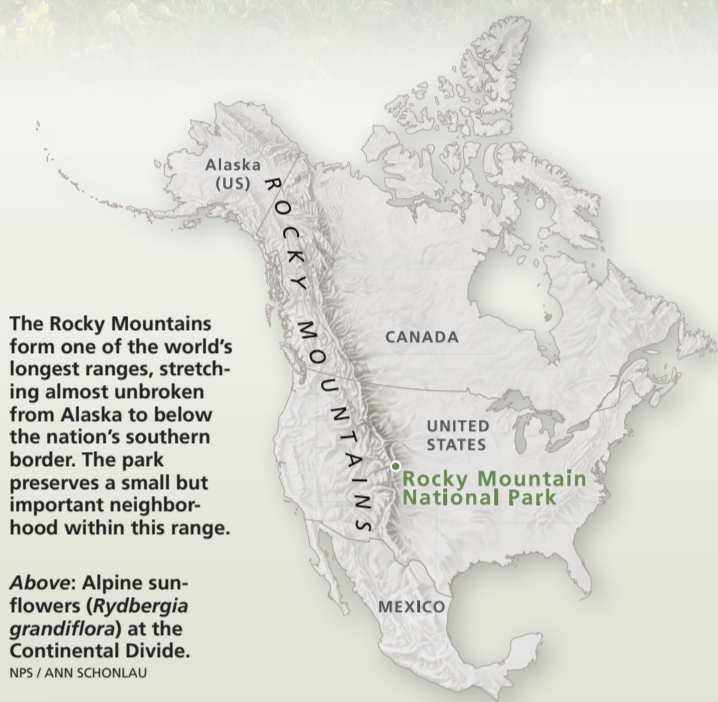
Despite the brief, six-week growing season, plants survive. Most conserve energy by miniaturizing. Each July thousands of brilliant alpine sunflowers burst from the thin blanket of soil that covers parts of the tundra. For decades these hardy plants have worked toward this moment. Many tundra flowers 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, explore the Tundra Communities Trail to the east. To the west, the Continental Divide splits 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. It is responsible for some of the most iconic scenery in the world and supports varied recreational opportunities, serves as vital species habitat, holds deep Tribal significance, and provides water to 42 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 designated wilderness. Nature has always ruled this wild, fantastic place. As human-triggered events outside park boundaries increasingly affect life within the park, how will nature respond? What is our role in caring for this wilderness to ensure it remains for our descendants?



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

Nature's Guideposts

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 trees feeds and shelters the tassel-eared Abert's squirrel. Some trees reach up to 150 feet.

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' shoots and soft inner bark 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 each year. 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 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.



Pika

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, preserve moisture with waxy 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—© SHATTL / ROZINSKI PHOTOGRAPHY



Ptarmigan

Travel through Ecosystems along Trail Ridge Road

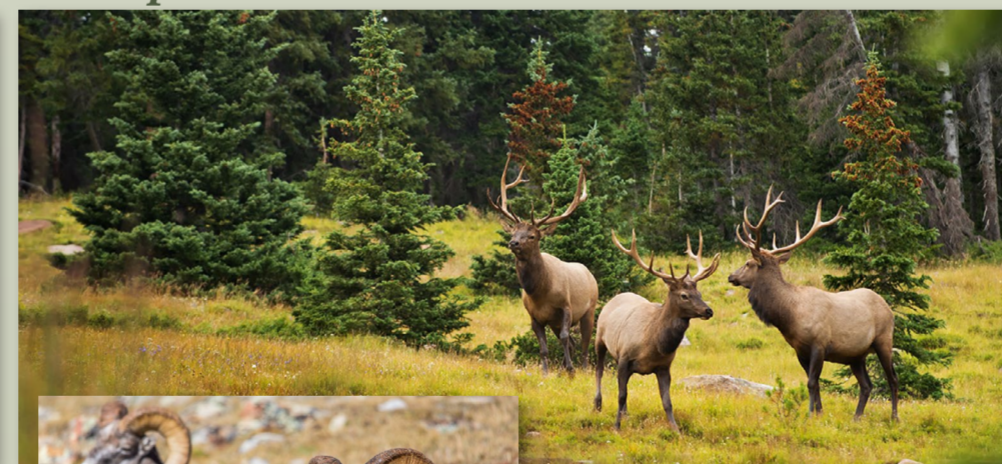


Montane



Above: Aspen (*Populus 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 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: Hiking Flattop Mountain. Left: Five-petaled avens (*Geum rossii* ssp. *turbinata*) hug the tundra. Far left: Yellow-bellied marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*).
ABOVE—NPS / BONNIE BEACH; FAR LEFT—© JACOB W. FRANK; LEFT—© SHATTL / ROZINSKI PHOTOGRAPHY

Legacy of Stewardship

Rocky Mountain National Park acknowledges, with respect, Native people have been successful stewards of this land since time immemorial. We understand that the park is located within the ancestral and traditional homeland of the Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne. Many other Tribes used this land including the Comanche, Shoshone, and Lakota/Dakota. The park continues to work with Tribes today.

Indigenous people lived on this land for centuries until they were forcibly removed by the US government in the 1800s. Settlers, miners, and ranchers moved in. As more people used the land for a variety of purposes, people began to recognize the need for preservation.

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 paved the way for preservation by helping make others aware of the region's rugged beauty and "unprofaned freshness."

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.

Ancestral people relied on traditional knowledge to navigate the landscape as they followed migrating animals and seasonal plant growth. They left behind tools, pottery, rock structures, and trail corridors. The Ute Trail and what is now known as Trail Ridge Road represent early evidence of human travel over the mountains—the start of a continuum of



Left to right: September 4, 1915; volunteer assists a visitor with telescope.
COURTESY DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY / HARRY MELLON RHOADS; NPS / PETER BIDDLE

human visitation that continues today. Native people continue to care for this land and are working to ensure the younger generation maintains the connection to their homeland. These mountains remain their homeland and continue to be a sacred place to visit.

Over four million people now pour into the park every year, with the majority visiting between May and October. 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 forest composition. Over 100 invasive plant species now mingle with native species.

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 Research 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?



The Rocky Mountain Conservancy promotes stewardship of Rocky Mountain National Park by funding publications such as this one, educational programs, and philanthropy.
mconservancy.org

Exploring 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 visitor guide for current information about visitor centers, ranger-led activities, hiking, wildlife, shuttle buses, and more.

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 on ALL Rocky Mountain National Park trails, tundra, 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. • A Colorado fishing license is required. • 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. Wilderness 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 wildlife. • Leave wildflowers and other plants for others to enjoy. • It is illegal to have open alcoholic beverage containers in vehicles on park roads. • Possession of any federally scheduled drug is prohibited in the park.

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

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 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.

National Park Foundation. Join the park community. www.nationalparks.org



Wilderness Non-wilderness



Do not use this map for backcountry hiking. Buy topographic maps at visitor centers.

- Tundra closure area
- Overlook
- Unpaved road
- Hiking trail
- Continental Divide National Scenic Trail
- Continental Divide
- Distance indicator
- Ranger station
- Campground
- Picnic area
- Boat launch
- Stable
- Wheelchair-accessible
- Self-guiding nature trail
- Restrooms
- Telephone
- Emergency telephone

