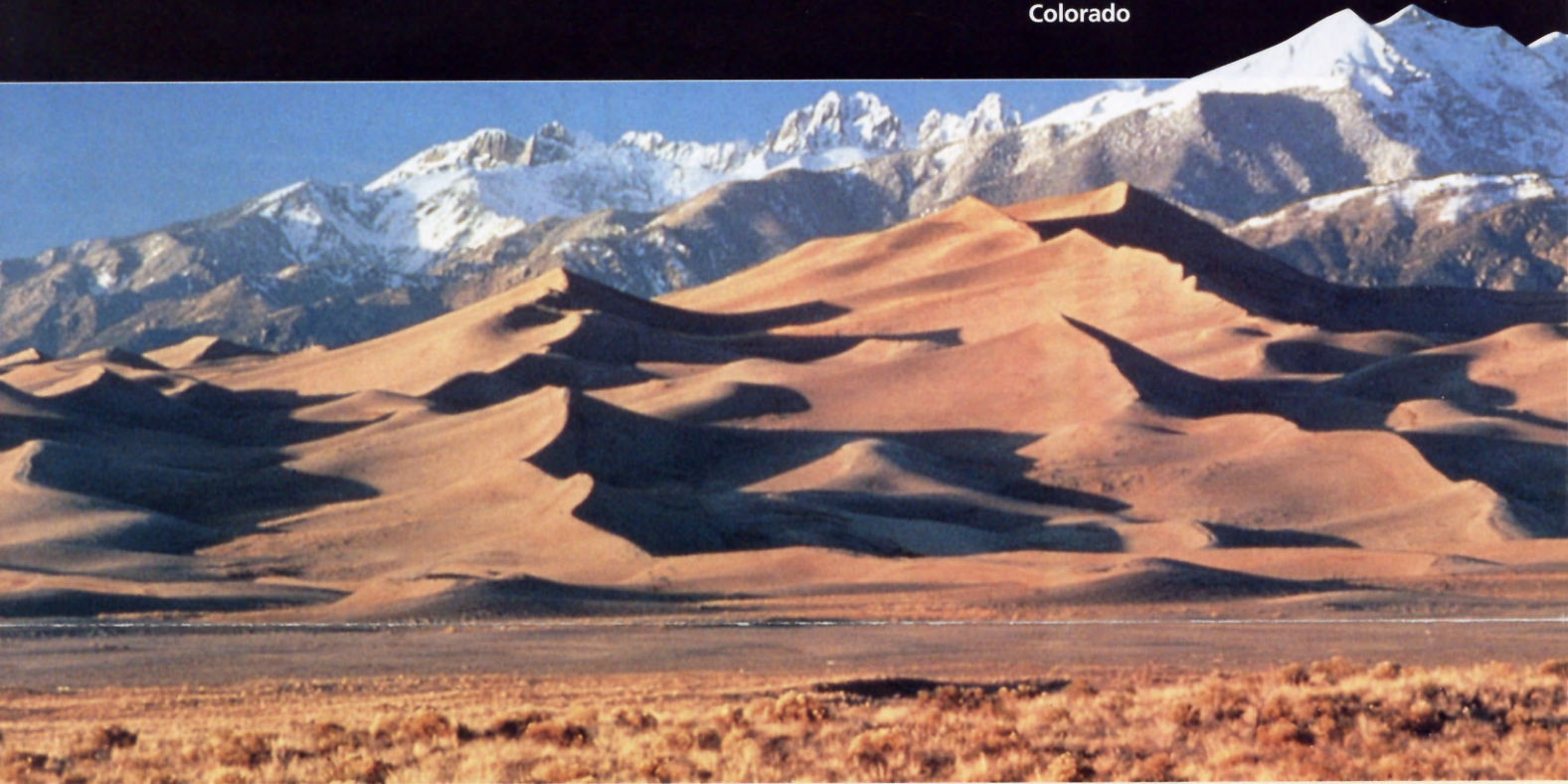


Great Sand Dunes

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
Colorado



Medano Creek



Gary Hasty Dune crest



NPS Grass, tracks, ripples



NPS Sunflowers on the dunes NPS

The Great Sand Dunes—the tallest sand dunes in North America—rise in a corner of the high-altitude San Luis Valley in the Colorado Rockies. These dunes have built to heights of 750 feet from billions of grains of sand blown across the valley by wind. The dunes cover about 30 square miles. But to understand the immensity of the dunes, you don't need facts and figures. Just explore the dunes for awhile. There seems to be no end to them—and no end to their beauty.

Seeing the Great Sand Dunes for the first time can be unsettling, for they seem out of place. Dunes belong on the shores of oceans or lakes, or in great deserts, not here. What did the Utes and other American Indians who hunted in this valley think? What were the impressions of the explorers, miners, stagecoach travelers, and ranchers who passed this way? Probably they were puzzled. Although the dunes seem misplaced, they are here because the key ingredients for making dunes—sand, wind, and time—exist here. The streams, rivers, and lakes in the San Luis Valley and the 14,000-foot mountain ranges that border the valley have also played a part in the creation of the Great Sand Dunes.

Streams and rivers from the San Juan Mountains to the west and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east have carried eroded particles of sand and other sediments into the valley. Most of these waterways have changed course over time or flooded into large, shallow lakes that have since diminished or disappeared, leaving behind sand deposits across

the valley floor. Predominant southwest winds have carried sand from the valley floor toward a low curve in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. As wind funnels northeastward through mountain passes, sand is deposited at the foot of the mountains. Strong storm winds from the northeast cancel the migration of the dunefield into the mountains, causing the dunes to grow vertically. Medano and Sand creeks, flowing out of the mountains, provide a further barrier to movement of the dunefield by carrying huge quantities of sand back to the valley floor, where it is eventually recycled back into the dunes by the wind.

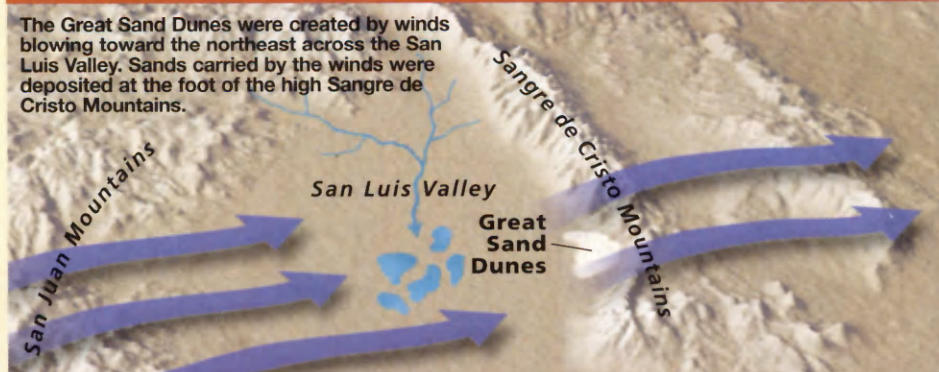
Each day, a little more sand arrives by wind or water. And each day, water and wind etch new patterns and ripples across the surface. The

winds make subtle changes to the dunes each season, but little significant change is seen in a lifetime because of the opposing wind directions. There is a saying, "Leave only footprints, take only pictures," meant to encourage visitors to treat natural areas with respect. Here at Great Sand Dunes you can't leave your footprints, at least not for very long. For tomorrow, they will be gone with the wind. The dunes—ever-changing, ever-fascinating—will remain.

Top photo: The dunes against the Sangre de Cristo Mountains
Stephen Trimble

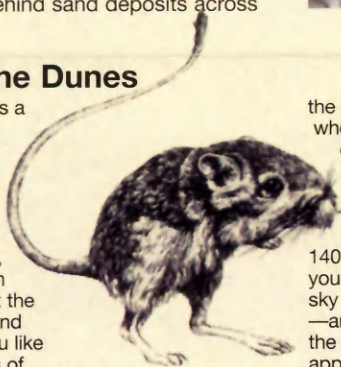
Creation of the Dunes

The Great Sand Dunes were created by winds blowing toward the northeast across the San Luis Valley. Sands carried by the winds were deposited at the foot of the high Sangre de Cristo Mountains.



Exploring the Dunes

Great Sand Dunes is a great place to hike, discover plants and animals, seek solitude, take photos, ride a horse, wilderness camp, and, if you like—run, jump, roll, and slide. Begin your explorations at the foot of the dunes, and climb as high as you like on these mountains of sand. Distances in the dunes are deceiving—often your destination is farther away than it looks. Your efforts will be rewarded with experiencing the dunes firsthand and seeing spectacular views of the San Luis Valley and surrounding mountains.



Kangaroo rat
Gene Dieckhoner

Safety

Please observe these safety regulations.

- The sand is hot and shade is scarce. Carry ample water. Wear a hat and use a sunscreen.
- Walking in the dunes is strenuous. Pace yourself and rest as needed. Consider starting out in

the morning or evening when it is cooler, especially in summer.

- Always wear shoes. The surface temperature of the dunes can reach 140°F and can burn your feet.
- Watch the sky for thunderstorms—and get away from the dunes when a storm approaches. Lightning strikes the dunes often, and you don't want to be the highest point when it does.
- Pets are allowed on the dunes, but they must be on a leash at all times; please clean up after them. Never leave pets in a vehicle; summer temperatures can reach more than 100°F within minutes. Pets left in

vehicles even for a short time may suffer heat stroke and die.

- For children the dunes are a treat. Please keep a close eye on them to prevent them from getting lost; never let them



Scurfp pea
Byron Alexander

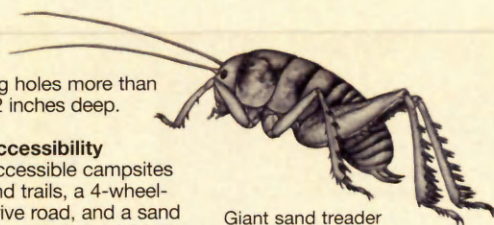
dig holes more than 12 inches deep.

Accessibility

Accessible campsites and trails, a 4-wheel-drive road, and a sand wheelchair available for free checkout offer visitors with disabilities the opportunity to explore and enjoy this national treasure.

Plants and Animals

The dunes are a tough environment to survive in, but a few plants and animals live here. Plants include blowout grass, Indian ricegrass, scurfp pea, and, especially in late summer, bright yellow prairie sunflower. These are hardy plants that have adapted to life



Giant sand treader camel cricket
Byron Alexander

in the shifting sands. Animals are even more scarce. Kangaroo rats—masters of water conservation—live here, as do six insects found nowhere else on Earth. The giant sand treader camel cricket lives in the sand. Other animals such as mule deer, elk, bobcats, coyotes, rabbits, ravens, and magpies live near dunes. Watch for their tracks in the sand.

Great Sand Dunes

About Your Visit

Visitor Center The visitor center has publications, maps, exhibits, and information about the dunes and other area features. Rangers can help you plan your visit. Schedules of activities, such as hikes and campfire programs, are posted. The center is open daily except federal holidays in winter.

Camping/Picnicking

The Pinyon Flats Campground is open all year (first-come, first-served) with tables, grills, water,

and restrooms. Back-country camping is permitted at the designated sites and in the dunes wilderness; a permit is required. Open fires and wood gathering are prohibited; firewood is sold in the park. A picnic area (charcoal fires only) at the edge of the dunes has tables, grills, water, and restrooms.

Trails

Park trails let you hike or horseback ride in the world away from the dunes—into the grasslands, the pinyon-

juniper woodlands, and the high country.

4-Wheel-Drive Use

The 4-wheel-drive Medano Pass Primitive Road, which begins in the park and goes north to Medano Pass and the Great Sand Dunes National Preserve, offers spectacular views of the dunes. Primitive picnic areas (no water or restrooms) are located along the road. Soft sand may require reduced tire pressure. Air is available near the

campground. A concessioner operates tours on the Medano Pass road from May through September.

All off-road driving, including driving on the dunes, is prohibited.

More Information

Great Sand Dunes National Monument and Preserve
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719-378-6300
www.nps.gov/grsa

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34 miles northeast of Alamosa, Colorado.

