

ROCKY MOUNTAIN

NATIONAL PARK TRIP PLANNER

Tips To
Plan Your
Winter
Vacation



A Park
Map



National Park Trips



LET LIFE TAKE ON A WHOLE NEW POINT OF VIEW

YMCA of the Rockies—Estes Park Center is a natural paradise bordered on three sides by Rocky Mountain National Park. Families find adventure and photographers find inspiration right outside their door.

Make and Capture Picture-Perfect Memories
YMCAROCKIES.ORG



GETTING THERE

See a different side of Rocky Mountain National Park when the snow starts to fall.



ON THE COVER: Sunrise at Dream Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park (Flickr/Bryce Bradford) • This Page: Snowshoeing on Emerald Lake trail (Courtesy of Visit Estes Park)

You may find yourself spontaneously belting out John Denver's *Rocky Mountain High* as you explore Rocky Mountain National Park in the winter. Whether you travel by snowshoes or cross-country skis, there's plenty of solitude and breathtaking beauty among the snow-capped peaks and trails sparkling with thousands of snow crystals.

While there are no lodges inside Rocky Mountain National Park, the park is bordered by two towns offering plenty of services. On the east side of the park, you'll find Estes Park, Colo., which is not a park but a vibrant town catering to visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park. On the west side sits the quieter Grand Lake, a hidden gem built on the shores of the stunning Grand Lake and nestled in the mountains. In summer, the entrances are connected by the park's highest road, Trail Ridge Road, but in winter, Trail Ridge Road closes. The only way to travel from one side of the park to the other is via a very circuitous route on I-70.

Because of the sheer traveling distance on winter roads between the two sides of the park, choose which entrance best fits your needs and plan on spending a spectacular winter vacation there. There's so much winter fun to be had.





PARK ENTRANCE PRIMER

Here's everything you need to know about accessing Rocky Mountain National Park in the winter.

EAST ENTRANCE ESTES PARK EXPLORATION

This is definitely the most popular town to drive through on the way to Rocky Mountain National Park. It has a bustling downtown that caters to tourists and includes everything from coffee and outdoor gear shops to a full-service grocery store. All of it sits under incredible geologic formations that attract rock climbers from all over the world in the summer and fall. While Estes Park, Colo., does not have a cross-country or downhill ski area, Rocky Mountain National Park offers an incredible variety of trails with majestic views to explore by skis or snowshoes.

Just a 1-hour-and-45-minute drive from Denver (90 minutes if you don't go through Boulder), Estes Park has a variety of cabins, hotels and inns to base out of for park adventures. There are a number of shops in Estes Park that rent snowshoes, boots and cross-country skis, including Estes Park Mountain Shop, which offers equipment at reasonable rates. The YMCA of the Rockies just outside of the park has lodging options, rents snowshoes and offers guided tours.

From Denver take I-25 north to Hwy. 36, which routes you through vibrant Boulder and quaint Lyons before reaching Estes Park. Choose between three park entrances once you arrive. The Beaver Meadows Entrance is the most direct entrance from Estes Park. It's also the most popular. Stop by the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center to get information, books and maps. Like the Beaver Meadows Entrance, the Fall River Entrance is just a few minutes from Estes Park. Drive 5-10 minutes on Hwy. 34 to reach it. The Wild Basin Entrance is about a 30-minute drive south of Estes Park and is a lesser visited area since it is more remote. Access it by heading south on Hwy. 7.

WEST ENTRANCE A GRAND LAKE ADVENTURE

This entrance brings you to one of the most authentic towns in Colorado, Grand Lake. Tucked in the folds of the Rocky Mountains and anchored by a stunning lake, this town is lined with shops, restaurants, motels and hotels, some of which close for the winter. There are no

major grocery stores here and only one small market stays open in winter.

The park's west side is absolutely stunning in winter with nearby world-class downhill skiing areas, Winter Park Resort about an hour's drive away. Plus, three spectacular cross-country skiing areas line Hwy. 40, the road to Grand Lake, which is the western gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. Devil's Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa, the YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch and Grand Lake Nordic Center offer world-class cross-country ski trails.

Grand Lake is two hours and 30 minutes [127 miles] from Denver International Airport. It's one hour and 45 minutes [90 miles] from the airport to Winter Park Resort.

From Denver take I-70 to exit 232 where you will drive Hwy. 40 through the Victorian-era town of Empire and up and over 11,306-foot Berthoud Pass. Winter Park and Mary Jane base areas sit at the bottom of the pass. From there it's 45-55 minutes [36 miles] to Grand Lake and Rocky Mountain National Park.



PHOTOS: Bear Lake, Dream Lake (Gloria Wadzinski), Moraine Park (Rebecca Alfrey)

NOTE: In winter, Trail Ridge Road, which connects the park's east side with its west side, closes. The only way to access both sides of the park is via a circuitous route on I-70.

Map illustration by Peter Sucheski

ROCKY'S TOP SIX

Here are some of our favorite things to do from snowshoeing to exploring the park's neighboring towns.



1

EAT BREAKFAST IN GRAND LAKE

Fuel up for the day a hearty breakfast of French toast, egg dishes or oatmeal at Blue Water Bakery before heading into the park. Check for opening hours and days during winter.



2

STRAP ON SKIS

Discover solitude on cross-country skis in the park or at Grand Lake Nordic Center, which has fantastic views of the park. Or experience downhill skiing about 50 minutes away at Winter Park Resort in Winter Park, Colo.



3

RIDE A SNOWMOBILE

Outside the park's west side surrounding Grand Lake lies 150 miles of groomed snowmobile trails that get on average a whopping 185 inches of snow every winter. Check Visit Grand County online for details.



4

GO SLEDDING

Accessed from the Estes Park side, the park used to have a ski area named Hidden Valley Ski Area. Today its lower slopes make for great sledding. Stay within the fenced and signed snow-play hill. On weekends volunteers staff the Warming Hut.



5

EXPLORE BY SNOWSHOE ON THE EAST SIDE

Go on a ranger-guided snowshoe tour or head to Bear Lake to explore the park on your own. Rent snowshoes at Estes Park Mountain Shop in Estes Park.



6

EAT LOCAL IN ESTES PARK

Head to Bird & Jim, the first farm-to-table restaurant in Estes Park, for an incredible meal. Then warm up with a drink in the Whiskey Bar & Lounge, home to the state's largest selection of whiskey, at the Stanley Hotel, the inspiration for Stephen King's *The Shining*.

PHOTOS: Snowy pine trees in Rocky Mountain National Park, Pancakes, Cross-country skiing, Snowmobiling, Boy sledding (Depositphotos), Snowshoeing (Tom Luhmann/National Parks Photography Contest), appetizer plates (Courtesy of Bird & Jim)

WILDLIFE FIELD GUIDE

In winter, a blanket of snow covers the landscape, making it a splendid time of year to see animals.



MOOSE

You can spot a male moose easily by its huge antlers that can stretch up to six feet. Females don't have antlers. Moose have long snouts, bulbous noses and extra skin under their throats. They weigh up to 1,800 pounds. They can reach speeds of up to 35 miles per hour and have special joints that allow them to swing their legs over the snow.

SEE THEM: Look for them along the Colorado River on the park's west side. You'll often spot them in willows, which they munch on.



BIGHORN SHEEP

Traveling in groups, bighorn sheep are born with rough split hooves. They climb up steep, rocky terrain to escape predators. Males, also known as "rams," have larger horns that can weigh up to 30 pounds. Females, referred to as "ewes," have horns that only form half a curl. Bighorn sheep eat grasses and shrubs. In fall rams compete for ewes by butting each other for up to 24 hours at a time.

SEE THEM: Look for them along the Hwy. 34/Fall River corridor on the park's east side.



MOUNTAIN LION

These solitary and elusive cats are not frequently spotted. Males can weigh up to 200 pounds and stretch 8 feet long, including their tails. Females are generally smaller. Mountain lions are golden with whitish fur on their throat, belly and inner legs. They stalk mule deer and coyotes.

SEE THEM: Mountain lions roam throughout the park. Encounters with them can be dangerous. If you encounter one, don't run. Stand tall, make eye contact and attempt to scare it away. Travel in groups and keep children next to you.



COYOTE

Hunted in the early days of the park until they were extirpated, coyotes are thriving today. They travel alone or in pairs but gather in packs, even hunting as a group. Larger than foxes and smaller than wolves, coyotes are about 3-4 feet long and weigh between 20-50 pounds. They have brown fur that turns grayish yellow and white on their undersides. They dine on virtually everything from plants to carcasses.

SEE THEM: Spot them any time and listen for their howls as night falls.



PTARMIGAN

As the smallest grouse in North America, these birds turn a speckled brownish gray in summer, blending in with alpine willows and rocks that make up their environment. But in winter, they turn white to match their snowy habitat. These tundra birds stay sheltered at tree line during colder months. The ptarmigan watch for natural predators such as golden eagles, coyotes and high-altitude-roaming fox.

SEE THEM: When the ground is white, look for crescent-shaped bird droppings. Ptarmigan don't fly much and tend to walk to their destinations to conserve energy. Droppings could be a fresh clue to a nearby bird.



YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT

These curious creatures live in colonies of about 10-20 where they spend the middle of the day and nights in high-elevation burrows in rocky areas or meadows. They eat flowers, grass, insects and bird eggs. When they eat in the open, one stands guard, whistling when danger appears.

SEE THEM: Where are the marmots in winter? They hibernate for quite some time, usually from late October until late April.

INSIDER'S TIPS

Every year, we help more than 700,000 travelers plan a national parks tour in Colorado.

Here's how to build your itinerary.

ONLINE

Visit MyColoradoParks.com to find out where to stay and what to do during your vacation. Interested in exploring other national parks? Check us out at NationalParkTrips.com.



WORKSHOPS

Join us for our online Night Skies National Park Photography Workshop. With Tamron's professional photographers, we offer instruction on how to take night skies, sunset and sunrise photos. Learn more at NationalParkTrips.com/workshops.



PACKING LIST

- Refillable insulated water bottle to keep hot drinks warm while you're outside
- Binoculars
- Warm clothing layers to accommodate temperature fluctuations of 30-40 degrees in one day.
- A sun hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- Down jacket, winter hat and gloves
- Sturdy hiking/snow boots
- Daypack and hand warmers



Learn more at MyColoradoParks.com/park/what-to-pack.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK ENTRANCE FEES

Buy your pass at a park entrance station, purchase a digital pass at recreation.gov or order a card online at REI.com (with no shipping costs).

\$30
Rocky Mountain National Park one-day pass

\$35
Rocky Mountain National Park seven-day pass

\$80
America the Beautiful annual pass for all national park sites

\$80
One-time fee for the Senior Pass (citizens 62 and up)

\$0
Cost of a Military Pass (active military) and Access Pass (permanently disabled U.S. citizens)

SOCIAL

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK WEATHER

	JAN.	FEB.	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.
Average High (°F)	39	41	45	53	62	73	78	77	70	60	46	40
Average Low (°F)	16	17	21	27	34	41	46	45	38	30	23	18
Rain (inches)	.37	.45	.86	1.28	2.02	1.76	2.21	1.86	1.17	.81	.6	.47
Snow (inches)	4.6	6.3	7.8	3.8	.5	.1	0	0	.5	1	3.8	5.7

Source: nps.gov (Estes Park, Colo. stats)