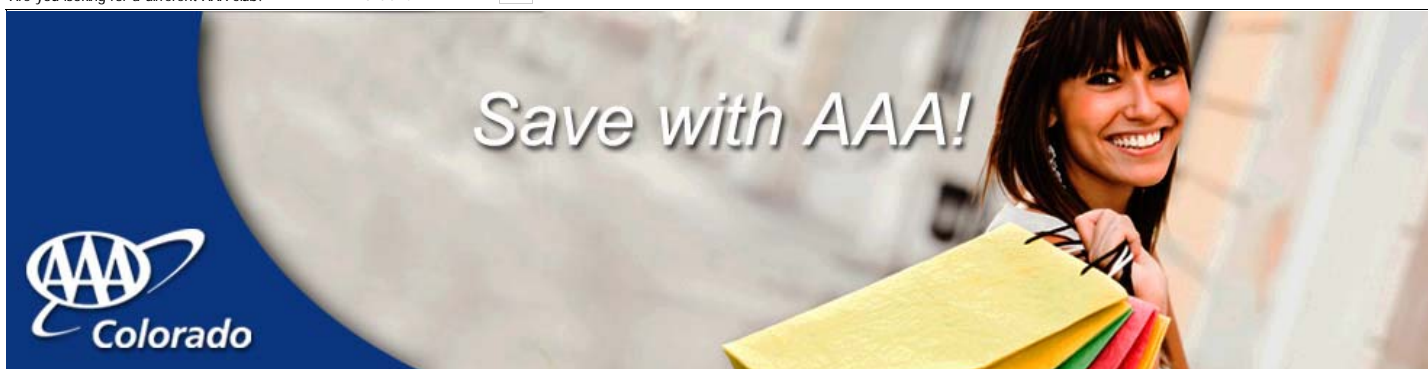


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Mini Tour: Colorado campgrounds

By Jen Reeder

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better. - Albert Einstein

Spring is an exciting time to live in Colorado. The end of snow shoveling is in sight as wildflowers start to bloom and rivers begin to rise. For nature lovers, it's time to start planning camping trips. Not only is camping more affordable than other lodging options, but it offers the chance to really experience the sights and sounds of nature. Songbirds in the morning, dew on a tent, scalding hot coffee—our senses seem heightened when we slow down and take time to smell the flowers...and turn off our cell phones.



© NPS photo/Patrick Myers

There are thousands of public, private and backcountry campgrounds around the state. So the options are limitless. Here are four very different, vehicle-accessible campgrounds that offer you the chance to enjoy Colorado's diverse landscapes.

Moraine Park Campground, Rocky Mountain National Park

There's no question, Rocky Mountain National Park is a stunner. Home to Longs Peak, the iconic fourteener symbolized on the Colorado quarter and split by the Continental Divide, Rocky encompasses approximately 265,770 acres with a variety of ecosystems and offers mountain vistas, waterfalls, rivers, lakes and an abundance of wildflower and wildlife viewing, accessible on 359 miles of hiking trails.

Still, many of the 3 million annual visitors limit their trip to several hours driving through the park on Trail Ridge Road instead of sleeping in the park. Since there's no lodging in Rocky, the only way to spend the night is to camp—and Moraine Park Campground is a terrific place to pitch a tent or park an RV.

"One of the reasons we are so popular is Rocky Mountain National Park epitomizes what the Rocky Mountains mean to people," says Kyle Patterson, public information officer at the park. "We're a busy place – we're usually the top fifth or sixth most visited national park in the country. But a lot of times if you're willing to hike early or hike late in the afternoon, you'll have a much different experience as far as crowds go."

Moraine Park Campground, on the eastern/Estes Park side of Rocky, is open year-round for camping, though you'll want an excellent four-season tent if you decide to brave the winter elements. The ponderosa pine campground is a fantastic base from which to explore the park, whether you want to hike, fish, or snowshoe. Some visitors stay there each fall during the elk mating season, or "rut." While the majestic animals bugle their desire against a backdrop of golden aspens, traffic creeps along the main roads as visitors point their cameras out car windows or scamper into fields for a better angle. By camping, you'll hear the bugles as you descend from a hike, feel smug looking at the line of taillights snaking through the park, and be able to hear them at night from the comfort of your sleeping bag – or get a private viewing in the terrain around Moraine.

"While viewing wildlife, it's important to be responsible," advises Patterson. "We always remind people that if wildlife is reacting to you, you're too close. It's illegal to feed or approach wildlife in a national park – and that means chipmunks, too. Wildlife is going to be a lot healthier if we let them have their own natural food and their own natural habitat."

Campers should store food and scented toiletries in the bear lockers at the campground or inside their cars. The park is home to black bears, moose, bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer and other "charismatic megafauna," as well as smaller animals like birds and marmots.



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Moraine Park Campground is about 2 ½ miles south of the Beaver Meadows Entrance Station, and has 245 camp sites. Reservations are accepted (and recommended) from late May to October, and first come, first served the rest of the year. The fee is \$20/night during the reservation period and when the water is on, and \$14 the rest of the year (in addition to park entrance fees).

Important travel advisory: a major reconstruction project began on Bear Lake Road this March and will continue through the summer. Be sure to check the current status before you head to the park by calling 970-586-1206. Moraine Park Campground will be accessible, as well as all other major roads such as Trail Ridge Road.

Pinyon Flats Campground, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve



*Three children enjoy the waves in the natural mountain beach environment of Medano Creek, a seasonal stream.
© NPS photo.*

In the southeast region of the state, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve rises out of the San Luis Valley floor along U.S. Hwy. 160. The largest dunefield in North America stretches across 30 square miles and the tallest dune is about 750 feet – taller than any building in Denver. But there's more to the park than just the famous dunes. The 150,000 acres encompass a variety of ecosystems, with six 13,000-foot peaks in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, alpine lakes, grasslands and aspen and fir spruce forests.

"It's kind of a microcosm of all of the diversity of Colorado in one place," says Patrick Myers, interpretive park ranger at Great Sand Dunes.

Myers says the advantage of camping at Pinyon Flats Campground, the only campground within the park, is the opportunity to explore more of the park, and to experience it at different times of day.

"The prettiest times of the day, especially for photography, are at sunrise and sunset. So if you're just here during the day, you're seeing the dunes in kind of a flat light. In the morning and evening light, you get some beautiful dramatic shadows on the dunes and on the mountains," he says. "Also the night skies here are some of the best in the United States because we're at a high elevation, the air is dry, and we're pretty far away from cities, so the night skies here – if it's clear – can be pretty spectacular."

Activities include climbing the dunes or "sand sledding" down them (ideally after precipitation). Spring weekends are packed with visitors swimming in the fresh melt of Medano Creek, or heading to nearby Zapata Falls, a waterfall with a lovely view of the dunes. There are plenty of hiking trails to look for wildflowers and wildlife, including elk, pronghorn, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and over 200 species of birds, from eagles to hummingbirds.

"In the dunes themselves, we have six species of insects that are endemic here – meaning they're found no other place on earth," Myers says. "The prettiest one is probably the Great Sand Dunes Tiger Beetle ... it's got a tigery pattern on its back and an iridescent greenish-blue head."

Pinyon Flats Campground offers 88 sites along two loops. Loop 1 is first come, first served and Loop 2 is reservable up to six months in advance from May 4 – Sept. 9, 2012. The price is \$20/night plus entrance fees.

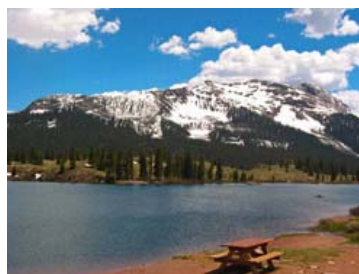
Molas Lake Park & Campground, Silverton

Nestled in the San Juan Mountains along the Million Dollar Highway (U.S. Hwy. 550) just 10 minutes from the mountain town of Silverton, Molas Lake Park & Campground beckons fishermen, hikers, photographers and mountain bikers. This little gem was granted to the town of Silverton in 1925 by the Bureau of Land Management, and was renovated in 2008 with help from a \$600,000 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado.

"There aren't that many campgrounds that are owned by a town," says Dave Michaelson, Silverton town planner and San Juan County planner. "We own it, we manage it, we take great pride in what we can provide visitors and residents alike."

What Molas provides visitors is a 25-acre alpine lake stocked with rainbow trout surrounded by 13- and 14,000-foot peaks from the Weminuche Wilderness (Colorado's largest wilderness area), as well as hiking and mountain biking trails that lead into the backcountry and to the Colorado Trail.

"Those trails can accommodate everybody from hardcore backcountry hikers to children and the elderly. You can't find a location in the state where anybody and everybody can enjoy the backcountry ... it's just a jewel," Michaelson says. "I'm a fourth-generation Colorado boy, and Molas is one of the most spectacular settings that we've got."



*Terrific fishing, hiking and camping await at Molas Lake Park & Campground near Silverton along the Million Dollar Highway.
© Jen Reeder*

Because of its elevation at 10,515 feet, Molas Lake Campground is only open in warmer months. Reservations are recommended, as the Park saw nearly 20,000 visitors in 2011.

There are over 50 campsites at Molas Lake, and the price varies depending on location, time of year, tent or RV, or ADA-accessible.

Saddlehorn Campground, Colorado National Monument



The Saddlehorn campground at Colorado National Monument.

© NPS photo.

Most visitors to Colorado National Monument only have to drive a mile or so on scenic Rim Rock Drive before they are awe-struck by the majesty of this Red Rock Country. The beauty of Colorado National Monument's canyons led early conservationists like John Otto to call for its preservation just over a century ago.

"We were the second national park unit in Colorado," says Briana Board, education ranger at Colorado National Monument.

In honor of its centennial last year, exhibits at the Visitor Center have been revamped to include interactive displays about the geology, biodiversity and human history of the monument. For 2012, the

administration is installing new interpretive wayside signs at pullouts and overlooks along Rim Rock Drive. Board suggests stopping at the road's overlooks at Balanced Rock View and Fruita Canyon View for a chance to see Bighorn Sheep, particularly in the fall. Lizard lovers will want to stop at the area around the Devil's Kitchen Picnic Area from May to August to look for the collared lizard, one of nine species of lizards in the park.

"It's really bright and beautiful. Its head is yellow, its body is green, and it poses for pictures quite well," Board says.

While the monument is an easy daytrip from nearby Grand Junction or Fruita, camping at Saddlehorn Campground provides a chance to hike in the cooler mornings and evenings, enjoy the night skies and brilliant sunrises, and even take night hikes. Board suggests the Alcove Trail, a half-mile trail with interpretive signs that starts near the Visitor Center, as a good place to start. "It's a really great chance to use your other senses, like your sense of hearing, and try to spend some quiet time and see what animals are out and about," she says. "You can see the Great Horned Owl and some of our other nocturnal animals, like the pinyon mouse and the ringtail, that aren't out in the heat of the day."

Saddlehorn Campground is open year-round and has 80 tent and RV campsites that are first come, first served. Each site includes a picnic table, charcoal grill (wood fires are not permitted anywhere in the monument) and a parking area. Campsites are \$20/night plus entrance fees.

Jen Reeder (www.jenreeder.com) is a freelance journalist based in Durango who loves exploring Colorado trails and campgrounds with her husband and their dog, Rio.

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