

Rocky Mountain National Park Backcountry/Wilderness Camping Guide

Getting started

Use this guide to plan a safe and enjoyable trip into Rocky Mountain National Park's backcountry/wilderness. This guide contains information on how to plan a trip, obtain a backcountry/wilderness permit, use the trails, set up camp, hike in a crosscountry area, and care for the backcountry/wilderness. There is a range of opportunities for camping in the backcountry/wilderness of Rocky Mountain National Park: designated sites (individual and group), stock sites, crosscountry areas, bivouac areas (for technical climbers only) and winter areas. It is your responsibility to know and follow all backcountry rules and regulations.

In addition to reading this guide, we recommend that you read the following free publications: *High Country Headlines*, *Fishing*, *Weather and Climate*, and *Ticks*. These are available at Rocky Mountain National Park visitor centers. You may also call (970) 586-1206 for general information about the park.

You may use your credit card to order any of the following publications by phoning the Rocky Mountain Nature Association at (970) 586-1258:

- 0 Trails Illustrated Topographic Map of Rocky Mountain National Park.
- 0 Backpacking One Step at a Time, Manning.
- 0 Rocky Mountain National Park Hiking Trails, Dannen.

There are many other excellent sources on backcountry/wilderness hiking and camping. Take the time to learn Leave No Trace principles, how to backpack safely, and to how to care for the environment.

Planning your trip

The first step in planning your trip is to obtain a Rocky Mountain National Park topographical map to choose your destination and route. Use the guide map, or the Trails Illustrated Topographic Map, to select backcountry/wilderness campsites.

As you plan your trip, take into consideration the physical condition of the least experienced member of your party, and the distance and elevation gain from the trailhead to your destination.

Rocky Mountain National Park is a high elevation park. If you live at sea level, it will take you several days to become acclimated to this elevation. Most trails begin above 7,000 feet (2,000 meters) and climb abruptly higher. If you are not acclimated, you can get high altitude sickness. Rangers recommend that you spend at least one night at 7,000 or 8,000 feet (2,000 or 2,500 meters) prior to setting out. This will allow your body to begin to adjust to the elevation.

When you visit the park, discuss your plans with a ranger. Find out whether snow has melted from the trails and destination where you wish to hike. Check the weather forecast before starting on your trip. Be aware that mountain weather changes very quickly. Within just a few hours, bright sunny skies may give way to raging storms. High winds often occur in the high country. Wind chill accelerates the lowering of body temperature which can result in hypothermia. Proper clothing is your first line of defense against cold. Dress in layers so you can regulate your temperature by bundling up, or peeling down. Be sure to take rain and storm gear. Remember, you assume complete responsibility for your own safety and that of your group while hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park.

How to get your permit

You must have a backcountry/wilderness permit to camp overnight in Rocky's backcountry/wilderness. You can pick one up at the Headquarters Backcountry Office or at the Kawuneeche Visitor Center.

To minimize impacts on the park's resources, the number of permits issued is limited. You may obtain day-of-trip permits in person year round. You may make reservations by mail or in person anytime after March 1 for a permit for that calendar year. You may make reservations by phone from March 1 to May 15 and anytime after October 1 for a permit for that calendar year.

Write:

Backcountry/Wilderness Permits
Rocky Mountain National Park
Estes Park, CO 80517

Call:

(970) 586-1242
TDD: (for those who are hearing impaired)
(970) 586-1319

For all reservations:

1. Include your name, address, zip code and telephone number.
2. List an itinerary with dates corresponding to campsites or crosscountry area where you plan to stay. If you plan to stay in a crosscountry area, indicate the area(s) and elevation where you wish to camp.
3. Specify the number of people that will be in your party. (Limit of 7 per party for individual campsites and crosscountry areas. Limit of 12 per party for group campsites.)
4. There is a \$15 administrative fee for permits during peak season periods (non-refundable). Fees are not to be sent when requesting reservations, but are payable (by cash or check only) when the permit is issued.

To assist you, a Backcountry Trip Planning Worksheet is available. Please mail it in or have it with you when making in-person or phone reservations.

During the winter and early spring when the backcountry/wilderness is not as frequently used, you may self-register at the Wild Basin Winter Trailhead, Sandbeach Lake Trailhead, Longs Peak Ranger Station, Dunraven Trailhead, and Fall River and Beaver Meadows Entrance Stations.

During the busy summer months, if you have a permit reservation, you must pick up the permit by 10 AM on the first day of your planned backcountry/wilderness stay, otherwise, the permit will be cancelled in its entirety, and given to other backpackers. If you know you will not be using your permit, please cancel your reservation as soon as possible.

How to use the permit

Your permit is a contract between you and the National Park Service that you agree to treat the backcountry/wilderness with respect and you will take care of the wilderness.

You will see backcountry/wilderness regulations on the back of each permit. Read, understand, sign, and obey them. Attach the permit in plain view on the outside of your backpack. When you reach camp, attach the permit to the outside of your tent. The permit indicates the number of people in your party, and specifies a campsite for each night you are in the backcountry/wilderness. You must stick with your planned itinerary so that campsites do not become overcrowded and overused.

Permit parameters

Individual parties consist of 1 to 7 people. Each party is assigned 1 campsite. Each camping area has 1 to 6 sites. We recommend you travel in small parties because fewer people per site leaves less impact on Rocky's fragile resources.

Groups consist of 8 to 12 people. They must camp at special group sites. Due to impacts caused by group interaction in and between sites (site spread, social trails etc.) groups over 7 persons may not camp in neighboring individual sites but must use group sites or slit up and camp at least one mile apart.

Between June and September, campers may stay in the backcountry/wilderness for a maximum of 7 nights and no more than 3 consecutive nights in 1 camp area. Between October and May, campers may stay in the backcountry/wilderness for a maximum of 14 nights with no more than a total of 21 nights per year.

Setting out on your trip

Always tell someone at home your trip itinerary and when you will return. Allow plenty of time for your trip. Consider the distance you plan to travel, the elevation of the trailhead and your destination, the amount of weight you are carrying, your physical condition, current and forecasted weather, and the hours of daylight remaining.

- 0 Read the trailhead bulletin board.
- 0 Plan to be below treeline during the afternoon when thunder and lightning storms most often occur.
- 0 Pets, weapons, and vehicles (including mountain bikes) are not allowed in the backcountry/wilderness.
- 0 Don't forget insect repellent to fend off mosquitoes. Check frequently for ticks.
- 0 Be considerate of others and the resource.
- 0 Set a pace that is comfortable for all members of your party.
- 0 Stay on the trail and hike single-file. Resist the temptation to walk off the trail when it is muddy. Mud will flake off your boots much sooner than trampled plants will grow back.
- 0 Never short-cut switchbacks.
- 0 Pick up litter you find along the way.
- 0 Horses and llamas have the right-of-way. Step off the trail on the downhill side and stand quietly until the stock passes.
- 0 Never leave food unattended. Properly store your food.
- 0 Never feed animals.
- 0 When you pause to rest, sit on rocks or clearings rather than on vegetation.
- 0 Do not disturb any flowers or plants.

Sanitation

There are pit toilets at many backcountry/wilderness campsites. When a pit toilet is not available, do the following:

- 0 Urinate in rocky places that won't be damaged by animals who dig for salts and minerals found in urine.
- 0 Dig a hole, 6 inches (15 centimeters) deep, for fecal waste using a small trowel or pack out waste and paper.
- 0 Be sure that you defecate at least 70 adult steps (200 feet/60 meters) from water or trails.
- 0 Do not bury sanitary napkins or tampons. Dispose them in an airtight container and pack them out.
- 0 Wash hands with biodegradable soap. Giardia and other diseases are frequently spread by unsanitary habits.

Please respect the fragile tundra

Alpine tundra vegetation is hardy. These plants survive extreme cold, strong winds, intense ultra-violet radiation, and very low humidity. Yet, as tough as these plants are, they cannot withstand repeated trampling. It takes 100 years for many alpine tundra plants to grow an inch.

Where there are no maintained trails and in undeveloped places, you may walk on the alpine tundra, but do not walk in single file. Spread out, so that your footprints are not concentrated on a small area, and rock-hop rather than step on vegetation.

At camp

When you arrive at your destination, you will see trail signs that show where to find campsites. Pitch your tent in designated areas. Don't pitch your tent on undisturbed vegetation, and never dig or trench around a tent.

There are no grizzly bears in Rocky Mountain National Park, but black bears do live here. Help park rangers keep bears and other animals (including mice, marmots, martens, porcupines, and deer) from becoming a problem, by taking precautions with your food and garbage.

- 0 Perhaps the best method to secure your food and scented items is to carry and use a portable food storage container.
- 0 Another method is to hang your food from a tree. The counter balance technique is recommended. Suspend your food at least 10 feet (3 meters) above the ground and 4 horizontal feet (1.5 meters) from the tree trunk. It takes at least 50 feet of rope, and two stuff sacks to successfully use this technique. Not all camp areas have trees that are appropriate for hanging items. Inquire at the Backcountry Office.
- 0 Keep a clean camp.
- 0 Seal uneaten food scraps and all garbage in airtight containers or storage bags and carry all garbage out of the backcountry/wilderness.
- 0 Refrain from packing greasy, smelly foods into the backcountry/wilderness.
- 0 Keep all scented items out of your tent including soap, deodorant, and toothpaste. Store them with you food.

Beware: Deer, bighorn sheep, porcupines, and other animals are attracted by sweat and urine. These animals can destroy campsites, clothes, boots, and camping gear in search for salt. Hang your gear and use proper backcountry/wilderness sanitation.

Preparing meals at camp

Cook meals with a portable stove. Do not plan to build a fire. Fires are comforting and aesthetically pleasing, but they cause considerable impact on the backcountry/wilderness. Wood is better used for habitat for wild creatures than as fuel for campers whose lives do not depend upon forest resources. Campfires have potential to get out of control if not well tended. For these reasons, fires are allowed in only a few designated campsites which have metal fire rings. Never take food in the sleeping area. Separate where you eat from where you sleep.

Drinking water

Always purify the drinking water you get in the backcountry/wilderness by using one of the following methods:

- 0 Filter water with a portable water filter system that eliminates Giardia.
- 0 Boil water for 10 minutes.

- 0 Use water purifying tablets or drops that eliminate Giardia

Wash water

Carry water at least 70 adult steps (200 feet/60 meters) from a lake or stream to wash yourself or your dishes. Use biodegradable soap. When disposing wash water, first filter out all food scraps with a small screen. Pack the food scraps into an airtight container to be carried out later. Then toss out the wash water by throwing it over a wide area.

- 0 Never wash directly in a lake or stream.
- 0 Do not scatter food scraps in the water or on the ground.
- 0 Do not throw food into pit toilets.
- 0 Pack out all food scraps, trash, and uneaten food.

Leaving the backcountry/wilderness

If you end a trip early, notify a ranger to cancel the permit, so other backpackers may take your place. Please report all unusual wildlife sightings, trail conditions, or incidents to a ranger. Pack out all your garbage and that of others less considerate. If you see any violations of rules and regulations, please report them to a ranger as soon as possible. You can find showers and laundry facilities in Estes Park and in Grand Lake.

Crosscountry areas

Crosscountry areas are the least traveled and least accessible places in Rocky Mountain National Park. Stock are not permitted to travel in these areas. Those who travel here must be skilled with a map and compass and must be proficient at Leave No Trace camping and hiking techniques.

Crosscountry areas are remote areas characterized by rugged terrain, dense forests, icy streams, and wet bogs. These areas are below treeline. Fires are not allowed. There are no developed campsites, no developed trails, and no pit toilets. The following regulations and guidelines, in addition to those listed above, apply to crosscountry area campers.

- 0 Have no more than 7 people in your party.
- 0 Plan more hiking time to get to your destination than if you were on a trail.
- 0 And carry a portable stove for cooking.

When you choose a campsite you must:

- 0 Stay within the boundaries of the crosscountry area.
- 0 Camp at least 70 adult steps (200 feet/60 meters) away from any water source.
- 0 Be out of sight and sound of any other party.
- 0 Move your camp at least 1 mile (1.6 kilometers) each day.
- 0 Stay no more than 2 nights in 1 crosscountry area.

Sprague Lake Accessible Camp

This is a special wheelchair accessible backcountry campsite near Sprague Lake. It is half a mile (1 kilometer) from the trailhead to the campsite.

This camp accommodates 12 campers including a maximum of 6 wheelchair users. If you are hearing or sight impaired and have a certified assistance dog, your dog may accompany you to this or any other campsite or trails in Rocky Mountain National Park. To make reservations please read the section above entitled How to get your permit.

Fishing

To fish in Rocky Mountain National Park you must have a Colorado State fishing license. You may purchase licenses at local sporting goods stores. Check at Rocky Mountain National Park visitor centers for fishing regulations. Ask for the Fishing brochure.

Packing with horses or llamas

There are special stock campsites and rules for overnight camping with stock. Some trails are closed to stock use. Call (970) 586-1206, or (970) 586-1242 for information about packing with stock. Ask for the Horse and Pack Animals brochure.

Climbers and bivouac camps

If you plan to bivouac during a technical rock climb, you must obtain a bivy permit. You can make reservations as described above for backcountry/wilderness permits. The following rules apply for bivouacs:

- 0 You may have no more than four people in your party. All in party must climb.
- 0 The climb must be four or more technical pitches.
- 0 You must bivy in the area specified on your permit.
- 0 Bivys must be on rock or snow.
- 0 Bivys must be broken down by sunrise.
- 0 No tents or erected structures are permitted.
- 0 Fires are not allowed.
- 0 Helmets are advised for climbing.

For your safety and protection of the park resources...

Be prepared with appropriate gear:

- 0 Sleeping bag/tent with appropriate seasonal rating.
- 0 Snow sealed or plastic boots.
- 0 Stormgear, gaiters, cap, gloves etc.
- 0 Sunglasses (check UV/IR), sunscreen (check SPF).
- 0 Topographical map/compass.
- 0 Supplies to purify all water.
- 0 Rope for hanging all food. 40' of rope & 2 stuff sacks.
- 0 Camp stove.
- 0 The "Essentials".
- 0 Signed permit (Please verify correct camp areas and dates on front of permit before leaving the Backcountry Office).

- 0 Dash tag required for each vehicle at the trailhead.
- 0 Snowshoes or skis seasonally.

Check upcoming weather before departure. Remember, conditions can change quickly!

Backcountry Camping Rules and Regulations

A backcountry use permit is required for all overnight backcountry use and must be displayed on the outside of your pack while hiking to your campsite and on you tent at the campsite.

- 0 The permit is valid only for the dates and camp areas listed.
- 0 A displayed “dash tag” is required for overnight parking.
- 0 Camp must be established on designated tent pads where provided or within 15’ of the metal arrowhead that marks the designated site.
- 0 Use pit toilets where provided, otherwise dig a 6” deep “cat-hole” at least 200’ (70 adult steps) from water, trails and campsites.

GENERAL REGULATIONS

In order to protect park resources and minimize impacts, the following are prohibited everywhere in the backcountry:

- 0 Pets, weapons, and vehicles (including bicycles)
- 0 Fires (except at specific sites with metal fire rings)
- 0 Hunting, feeding, approaching or disturbing wildlife
- 0 Removing or disturbing natural features
- 0 Trenching around tents and camps
- 0 Shortcutting between trail switchbacks
- 0 Littering or leaving trash in sites or pit toilets
- 0 Washing dishes or bathing within 200’ (70 adult steps) of water.

SPECIAL REGULATIONS

Designated Sites:

- 0 Camp must be established within 15’ of the metal arrowhead and post which marks the site.
- 0 Use stoves only. Fires prohibited, unless staying in a *wood fire site* with visible metal fire ring (using dead and down wood only).
- 0 Party size is limited to 7 at individual sites and 12 at group sites.
- 0 Due to excessive impact, groups over 7 persons must use group sites or split up and camp at least one mile apart.
- 0 If the designated site has more than 4" of snow, follow the “Winter Regulations” below.

Crosscountry Areas:

- 0 Camp must be established. . .
 - within the designated cross-country zone.
 - at least 200' (70 adult steps) from water.
 - out of sight and sound of trails and other campers.
 - below treeline and out of meadows.
 - and moved at least 1 mile each night.
 - no more than 2 nights in 1 crosscountry zone
- 0 Party size is limited to 7 people.
- 0 Fires prohibited. Use portable stoves only.
- 0 Stock prohibited.

Stock Sites:

- 0 Camp must be established in "stock camps" only.
- 0 Party size is limited to 6 people and 8 stock at individual sites.
- 0 Party size is limited to 12 people and 16 stock at group stock sites.
- 0 Use stoves only. Fires prohibited, unless staying in a *wood fire site* with visible metal fire ring (using dead and down wood only).
- 0 Grazing is prohibited. Carry complete feed.
- 0 Loose herding is prohibited. Tie stock to hitchracks.
- 0 Ask for the Stock Use brochure for more information.

Bivouac Areas:

- 0 A bivouac is defined as a temporary, open-air encampment.
- 0 Permits are issued only to technical climbers.
- 0 The climb must be 4 or more technical pitches and 3½ or more miles from the trailhead.
- 0 Party size is limited to 4 people and all members must be climbing.
- 0 A bivouac must be established. . .
 - within the designated bivy zone, or at the base or on the face of the climb.
 - at least 200' (70 adult steps) from water.
 - with camp set up at dusk and taken down before dawn.
 - without the use of erected type shelters, tents or supported tarps.
 - on rock or snow only, not on vegetation, and out of meadows.
- 0 Fires prohibited. Use portable stoves only.
- 0 Stock prohibited.

Winter Areas:

- 0 If the designated site has more than 4" of snow, camp at least 200' (70 adult steps) away from the site. Do not camp in the site.
- 0 Party size is limited to 12 people.
- 0 Camps must be established. . .
 - within the designated winter zone.
 - at least one mile from the trailhead.
 - at least 200' (70 adult steps) away from water.
 - on snow or rock only -- never on vegetation or in meadows.

- out of sight and sound of other campers and trails.
- 0 Fires prohibited. Use portable stoves only.

Enjoy your trip

A trip into the backcountry/wilderness can be an adventure of a lifetime for you and those who follow. It is up to you to preserve these precious resources for future generations.