Overview
Get an overview of the two sides of Rocky Mountain National Park, which transforms when winter arrives.

Park Entrances
Learn about Rocky’s park entrances, why they are different and how to get to them.

Park Map
Get a lay of the land with this detailed map that includes entrances, trailheads and points of interest.

48 Hours in the Park
Get ready for a vacation of a lifetime with our favorite things to do in the park.

Wildlife Guide
Learn about the park’s fantastic wildlife and the best places to spot these mammals.

What to Expect
Check out our packing list and learn more about entrance fees and weather.
Overview

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

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 explore by snowshoes or cross-country skis, there’s plenty of solitude and breathtaking beauty among the snow-topped 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 bustling small town catering to visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park. On the west side sits 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 circuitous route on I-70, which takes much longer.

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 Rocky Mountain National Park from which park entrances are open in winter to how to get there.

EAST ENTRANCE

ESTES PARK EXPLORATION

This is definitely the most popular town to drive through en route to Rocky Mountain National Park. It has a bustling downtown that caters to tourists from coffee shops to a full-service grocery store and outdoor shops. All of it sits under incredible rock 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 stay in as a basecamp 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 as 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 and the mogul-laden Mary Jane. The two downhill ski areas are connected, making for a fantastic variety of terrain. Plus, three spectacular cross-country skiing areas line Hwy. 40, the road to Grand Lake, the western gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park.

For cross-country skiing enthusiasts, Devil’s Thumb Ranch Resort & Spa, the YMCA’s Snow Mountain Ranch and Grand Lake Nordic Center offer world-class 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 this pass. From there it’s 45-55 minutes [36 miles] to Grand Lake and Rocky Mountain National Park.
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.
48 Hours in the Park

Choose between the West Entrance near Grand Lake, Colo., (below) or East Entrance near Estes Park, Colo., (to the right) for your winter adventure. Bring extra layers, food and water with you as winter weather can deteriorate rapidly.

**STRAP ON SKIS**
Discover solitude on cross-country skis in the park or at the Grand Lake Nordic Center, with fantastic views of the park. Or experience downhill skiing about 50 minutes away at Winter Park Resort, which includes the Mary Jane ski area. Highlights include two lifts that carry skiers to 12,000 feet.

**BREAKFAST IN GRAND LAKE**
Head to Fat Cat Cafe on Grand Avenue for excellent food ranging from homemade spinach quiche and pastries to amazing egg dishes.

**DINE AT HECK’S TAVERN**
About a 35-minute drive from Grand Lake is the Devil’s Thumb Ranch, a gorgeous 6,000-acre ranch offering some of the best Nordic skiing in the country. Dine in one of the most beautiful restaurants in the valley built with 800-year-old Douglas Fir beams that were reclaimed from a forest floor in Vancouver.

**SNOWSHOE ON THE WEST SIDE**
Snowshoe in the gorgeous Kawuneeche Valley inside the park’s West Entrance. Keep your eyes peeled for moose and elk loitering near the Colorado River and in the willows.

**RIDE A SNOWMOBILE**
Just outside the park lies 150 miles of groomed snowmobile trails, which get covered by an average 185 inches of snow every winter. Check Visit Grand County for details on snowmobile rentals, trails and more.
BREAKFAST IN ESTES PARK
Fuel up for the day with pancakes, chile rellenos or eggs at Mountain Home Cafe for a hearty breakfast before heading into the park.

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 the YMCA of the Rockies, which also offers snowshoe tours in the park, or at an outdoor gear store in Estes Park.

GRAB A SLED
The park’s east side 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.

DINNER AT TWIN OWLS STEAKHOUSE
Indulge yourself in elegant dining Rocky Mountain style in this log-cabin lodge built in the 1920s. You’ll find exposed beams, a huge stone fireplace and specialities like elk medallions and bison sirloin in this Estes Park gem.

HAPPY HOUR AT THE STANLEY HOTEL
Warm up with a drink in the Whiskey Bar, home to the state’s largest selection of whiskey, at this iconic hotel built in 1909. It was the inspiration for Stephen King’s best-seller The Shining. You may even spot the ghost of F.O. Stanley who built the hotel and produced steam cars.
Wildlife Field Guide

In winter, a blanket of snow covers the landscape, making it a splendid time of year to see animals. In addition, many migrate to lower elevations where it’s a little warmer, bringing them that much more into focus.

Black Bear

These omnivores follow their mostly vegetarian food sources in the park. In spring, they feast on shrubs and new shoots in the forest. Throughout summer and fall, they retreat to the cooler alpine zone, chasing berries and trout. Black bears hibernate in winter and mate in summer.

WHERE TO SEE THEM:
The park’s bear population is small, and black bears avoid people, so seeing one requires great luck during the warmer seasons. In winter, they hibernate, so you might spot one in late fall or early spring during the cold season in the mountains.

Elk

These 800-pound animals are nearly ubiquitous in and around the park. The best time to see elk is September and October when herds gather for the mating season, also known as “the rut.” In winter, elk dwell in lower elevations where it’s warmer and there’s less snow.

WHERE TO SEE THEM:
Elk and mule deer are most active at dusk and dawn and are usually seen in meadow areas.
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.

WHERE TO 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.

WHERE TO 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.

Coyotes

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’s grayish yellow with white fur on their undersides. They dine on virtually everything from plants to carcases.

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

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.

WHERE TO 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, in meadows.

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.

WHERE TO SEE THEM: When the ground is white, look for crescent-shaped bird droppings. The 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 Marmots

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.

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

From what to pack to entrance fees and weather, here’s the scoop.

WHAT TO PACK

Here’s what to put in your suitcase for winter travel to Rocky Mountain National Park. Staying warm and dry are key to a fun vacation. Avoid packing cotton base layers as cotton gets damp from sweat and does not dry quickly, which can lead to hypothermia if you are out for a prolonged period. Wool and quick-dry synthetic materials are best for winter outdoor experiences.

- Ski jacket
  A breathable jacket with GORE-TEX will keep you warm and dry and protect against wind and wet snow.

- Snow or ski pants
  Whether you cross-country ski or snowshoe, pack breathable water-resistant pants to keep you dry and warm.

- Non-Cotton Base Layers and Socks
  Pack wool or synthetic long underwear and socks to avoid wet, cold soggy clothes and feet.

- Fleece Layer
  Pack this top layer to stay toasty.

- Down Jacket
  No one regrets buying one of these to ward off winter.

- Winter Hat
  Protect your head and ears from piercing cold.

- Sunglasses and Ski Goggles
  Shield your eyes from fierce sun and blowing snow. Wear goggles while it’s snowing because sunglasses fog up and don’t stop snowflakes from dive-bombing your eyes.

- Waterproof Gloves or Mittens
  Your old wool mittens won’t be able to stand up to Colorado’s snowy winters.

- Snow Boots
  Walking outside is much more enjoyable when you don’t have snow tumbling into your sneakers and socks.

- Neck Warmer, Balaclava or Scarf
  When the wind is howling, you’ll want added protection on your face and neck.

- Daypack
  Carry extra layers, snacks, a flashlight or headlamp and water with you.

- Binoculars
  Spot wildlife up-close.

- Hand Warmers
  Available at sporting good stores and online, these little heat pockets keep hands toasty when the mercury drops.

WEATHER IN WINTER

When winter descends on Rocky Mountain National Park, it changes everything from where animals live to which trails are easily accessible to humans. Daytime temperatures can sink below 0 or hover in the 20s. Nights are often much colder. It’s important to be dressed and prepared for mountain weather, which can be unpredictable. Storms can move in quickly and sit for longer.

In addition the west side of the park (closest to Grand Lake, Colo.) and east side of the park (closest to Estes Park, Colo.) have different weather patterns.

ENTRANCE FEES

- $10
  ONE-DAY PASS FOR CYCLISTS AND WALKERS

- $20
  ONE-DAY PASS FOR CARS AND MOTORCYCLES

- $15
  SEVEN-DAY PASS FOR A WALKER OR CYCLIST

- $25
  SEVEN-DAY PASS FOR A MOTORCYCLE

- $30
  SEVEN-DAY PASS FOR A CAR

- $60
  ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK ANNUAL PASS

- $80
  AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL ANNUAL ALL-PARK PASS

- $80
  SENIOR PASS (PRICE INCREASED FROM $10 ON AUG. 28, 2017)

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LET LIFE TAKE ON A WHOLE NEW POINT OF VIEW

YMCA OF THE ROCKIES—ESTES PARK IS A NATURAL PARADISE. BORDERED ON THREE SIDES BY ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK, FAMILIES FIND ADVENTURE JUST OUTSIDE THEIR DOOR, AND WITH ABUNDANT WILDLIFE AND MAJESTIC MOUNTAIN VIEWS, PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE SURE TO BE INSPIRED.

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