



BEST TENT Camping

6TH Edition

COLORADO

YOUR CAR-CAMPING GUIDE TO SCENIC BEAUTY, THE SOUNDS
OF NATURE, AND AN ESCAPE FROM CIVILIZATION



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Prior editions by Johnny Molloy and Kim Lipker



MENASHA RIDGE PRESS

Your Guide to the Outdoors Since 1982

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A map of Colorado with 50 numbered blue diamond markers. The markers are distributed across the state, with a higher concentration in the northern half. Major highways are shown as white lines with their respective shields (e.g., 76, 385, 34, 6, 30, 80, 25, 287, 24, 40, 35, 70, 28, 160, 350, 25, 160, 34, 50, 285, 37, 31, 49, 41, 43, 50, 44, 160, 666, 550, 40, 46, 47, 48, 39, 30, 23, 709, 40, 24, 26, 29, 28, 22, 27, 25, 9, 7, 20, 24, 35, 45, 42, 36, 34, 50, 285, 11, 21, 18, 10, 17, 16, 38, 19, 13, 12, 8, 34, 31, 15, 6, 3, 1, 2, 4). Major cities are labeled: Sterling, Fort Morgan, Greeley, Fort Collins, Denver, Castle Rock, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Cañon City, Montrose, Grand Junction, and Durango. The state is bordered by Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. A north arrow is in the top right corner.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS BOOK AND COLORADO TENT CAMPING

Welcome to the sixth edition of *Best Tent Camping: Colorado*. If you're new to tent camping or even if you're a seasoned camper, take a few minutes to read the following introduction, which explains how this book is organized and how to use it.

CAMPGROUND PROFILES

Each profile contains a concise but informative narrative of the campground, as well as individual sites. This descriptive text is enhanced with at-a-glance ratings and information, GPS-based trailhead coordinates, and accurate driving directions that lead you from a major road to the parking area most convenient to the trailhead. On the first page of each profile is a ratings box.

THE RATING SYSTEM

This book includes a rating system for Colorado's 50 best tent campgrounds. Six campground attributes—beauty, privacy, spaciousness, quiet, security, and cleanliness—are ranked using a five-star system. A low rating in one or two areas, especially privacy and spaciousness, was not necessarily grounds for exclusion from this book. In some cases, the nature of the terrain just doesn't allow for big, private sites, yet the campground still may be well worth a visit. This system should help you find what you are looking for.

- ★★★★★ The site is **ideal** in that category.
- ★★★★ The site is **exemplary** in that category.
- ★★★ The site is **very good** in that category.
- ★★ The site is **above average** in that category.
- ★ The site is **acceptable** in that category.

BEAUTY

In judging beauty, we took into account both what the general area has to offer and the campground. The most beautiful campgrounds have sites that you just don't want to leave and locations with easy access to breathtaking scenery.

PRIVACY

Privacy is determined by how much your neighbors can pay attention to what you are doing and vice versa. The best campgrounds have plenty of green space (shrubs and trees) between adjoining sites, as well as staggered sites (that is, the entrance to the site across the road is not directly opposite yours).

EASTERN COLORADO



Lakeside Campground at Jackson Lake State Park (see page 14)

Jackson Lake State Park Campground

Beauty: ★★★ / Privacy: ★★★ / Spaciousness: ★★★★★ / Quiet: ★★★ / Security: ★★★★★ /
Cleanliness: ★★★

Enjoy shoreline camping at this eastern plains oasis.

If you've never been to Jackson Lake State Park before, here's your chance. This beachy, starry-skied oasis has been ranked one of the top 15 park beaches by Reserve America, and in 2020, it was named an International Dark Sky Park, the first Colorado state park to earn the coveted designation.

A large warm-water reservoir, Jackson Lake is an important feature of the northeastern Colorado high-plains landscape. Local farmers depend on its water to irrigate their lands. But before these waters end up in the fields, they provide scenic recreational opportunities to all who know to come this way. The Rocky Mountains will always be a draw, but this Eastern Colorado state park is worth a look too. Campers can stay overnight in a slew of shoreline campsites while boating, sailing, swimming, and fishing on the 2,500-acre lake. A walk-in tent camping area and lakeside beaches make it even more appealing.

View from the tent-only campsites in Lakeside Campground at Jackson Lake State Park



KEY INFORMATION

LOCATION: Orchard

INFORMATION: Colorado Parks & Wildlife,
970-645-2551, cpw.state.co.us

OPEN: Year-round

SITES: 251

EACH SITE HAS: Picnic table, fire ring

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Site 35 only. All
shower buildings have accessible stalls.

ASSIGNMENT: Reserve up to 6 months
in advance.

REGISTRATION: cpwshop.com

AMENITIES: Hot showers, flush and
vault toilets, laundry facilities, phone,
electricity, marina

PARKING: At campsites or walk-in tent-
campers parking area

FEE: \$9 Parks Pass, plus \$28–\$36 per night
(fees vary by site)

ELEVATION: 4,440'

RESTRICTIONS:

PETS: Must be leashed

QUIET HOURS: 10 p.m.–6 a.m.

FIRES: In fire grates only

ALCOHOL: None listed

VEHICLES: None listed

OTHER: 14-day stay limit in a 30-day period.
Camping permits expire at noon. Limit of 2
tents and 6 people per site.

Several campgrounds border the west shore. The Lakeside Campground has wide-open, sun-whipped campsites farther from the lake, but nearer to the water, cottonwoods shade the preferred lakeside sites. A camper services building and shadier campsites lie closer to the lake. A set of walk-in tent sites stretches along the shoreline; these are the best sites in the park for tent campers. Sites 50 and 49 are closest to the shore. Don't forget your camping hammock, as each site has permanent posts for hanging a hammock and swaying by the water's edge. A swimming beach is near these walk-in tent sites.

The Cove Campground is more open. It has electrical hookups and caters more to RVs. The campsite picnic tables are protected by permanent shade structures. There is access to the swim beach here as well. The neighboring Pelican Campground offers four tent-only campsites a slight distance from the shore, near a pond. A foot trail connects the marina to the visitor center and also intersects with the Prairie Wetlands Nature Trail. Many of the other campsites here are more exposed to the elements. Boaters will want to take advantage of the quick access to the Shoreline Marina and boat ramp just north of the Pelican Campground.

The next campground, Sandpiper, lies on an open slope with numerous planted trees. The height of the hill allows for a great view of the lake but at the expense of shade and privacy. A camper services building and electrical hookups are located here.

Fox Hills is on a wide slope that offers views of the prairie and lake, which is fairly distant. The final campground on the west shore, Northview, is on an open slope under the sun's harsh rays. RVers may seek out this campground for its electrical hookups.

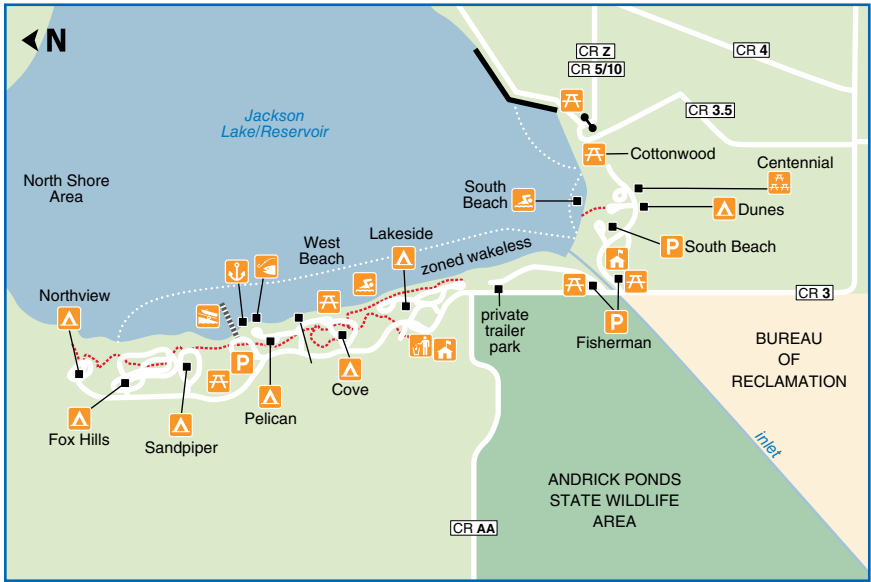
There is one more campground, Dunes, on the south shore of Jackson Lake. This small campground sits near some wooded dunes that separate you from the lake, but the water is just a short climb over the dunes. The campground has picnic shelters, and Russian olive and cottonwood trees provide shade. These are popular sites, and the small size of this campground makes for a quiet camping experience.

Water sports dominate the activities at Jackson Lake. Many visitors enjoy riding Jet Skis, power boating, and water-skiing during summer months. The Shoreline Marina, now under new ownership, sells limited fishing supplies and firewood but hopes to have paddleboard and kayak rentals in the future. The west and south shores are designated as wakeless areas, with two lakeside beaches where swimmers can cool off in the water and sunbathers can soak up some rays on the sand.

Bank fishing is popular in the Dike Fishing Area, where boats are prohibited. Both warm- and cold-water species inhabit the reservoir. Anglers drop lines for trout, walleye, wiper, perch, and crappie from the Dike Fishing Area and by boat throughout the lake. Ice fishing is also gaining popularity in the winter.

As for land activities, bicycling on the park roads is a popular choice. Campers can enjoy interpretive programs on summer weekends at the Cove Campground amphitheater. You can learn about Jackson Lake's wildlife, especially the wealth of waterfowl. And don't forget to peek out of your tent at the night sky, as the lake provides a natural mirror for the Milky Way above. Whether you explore by land or water, you will come away from this pride of the prairie with a new perspective on Colorado.

Jackson Lake State Park Campground



GETTING THERE

From Fort Morgan, head west on I-76 for 14 miles to Exit 66 and CO 39. Head north on CO 39 and follow it for 7.3 miles to CR Y5. Turn left on CR Y5 and follow it 2.5 miles to Jackson Lake State Park.

GPS COORDINATES: N40° 22.835' W104° 05.400'

NORTH CENTRAL COLORADO



Aspenglen Campground (see page 71)

Buffalo Campground

Beauty: ★★★★★ / Privacy: ★★ / Spaciousness: ★★★★★ / Quiet: ★★★ / Security: ★★★★★ / Cleanliness: ★★★

A quick getaway for metro Denver-area mountain bikers, hikers, and families.

So many of the best national-forest campgrounds are high in the Rockies, where the weather and roads can be rough. But not Buffalo Campground. At 7,400 feet, it is high enough to escape the heat of the lowlands but not so high that you'll be dressing for winter in July. Buffalo Campground is near a network of trails, including the Colorado Trail, that wind through the ponderosa pines and strange rock formations that burst forth from the needle-carpeted forest floor. The best part? It's only 70 miles from the metropolitan Denver area.

The campground is situated in a stand of mature ponderosa pines on a gentle slope. Flowers, grasses, and juniper ground cover spread over the open, parklike forest floor. An ideal mix of sun and shade makes its way through the evergreens onto the very large campsites. Even the largest of tents will have no problem fitting on the level areas. However, the openness limits privacy.

After passing the fee station, you'll begin climbing up the hillside and pass an inner loop that splits off to your left; this loop has seven campsites that are more open than most because they border a small clearing in the center of the main loop. Most of the campsites are on the outside of the main loop and extend far back from the road. The higher you are on the loop, the better you can see a stone outcrop across the way where rock climbers go to work. Sites 12 and 17 are tent-only.

Buffalo Campground has large, level tent pads.



KEY INFORMATION

LOCATION: Bailey

INFORMATION: U.S. Forest Service,
Pike National Forest; 303-275-5610;
tinyurl.com/buffalocampgroundco

OPEN: Mid-May–late September

SITES: 38 (24 reservable; 14 first come,
first served)

EACH SITE HAS: Picnic table, fire ring,
tent pad

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Accessible sites,
picnic tables, and vault toilets are available.

ASSIGNMENT: By reservation or first come,
first served

REGISTRATION: 877-444-6777,
recreation.gov

AMENITIES: No water; vault toilets

PARKING: At campsites only

FEE: \$27 per night (2 vehicles or 1 RV
per site); \$6 for a third vehicle

ELEVATION: 7,400'

RESTRICTIONS:

PETS: Must be leashed

QUIET HOURS: 10 p.m.–6 a.m.

FIRES: In fire rings only

ALCOHOL: At campsites only

VEHICLES: 1 site can accommodate a 40'
vehicle; others have max lengths of 15'–32'

OTHER: 14-day stay limit

A campground host is stationed on the loop, usually at site 2, to quell any late-night parties or direct you to the many recreational opportunities in the area. There are vault toilets but no water.

Plan to reserve a site here to ensure you get a spot. Weekends usually see a mix of families and youthful, active folks, the vast majority of whom are tent campers. It's quieter during the week. No matter when you come, there is plenty to enjoy in the surrounding Pike National Forest.

As mentioned, rock climbers scale the formation across from the campground. Mountain bikers are seen everywhere, riding the trails that wind through the Buffalo Recreation Area and beyond. A favorite ride is the Colorado Trail. Keep going up the hill from the campground and you will intersect the trail. You can turn left out of the campground on the Colorado Trail and bike to CO 126, then return via Forest Service Road (FS) 550. Trail 722 makes a loop off the Colorado Trail south. Just off FS 550 is another loop that heads toward Miller Gulch. Make up your own loop in the trails that twist and turn amid the pines and pillars of stone.

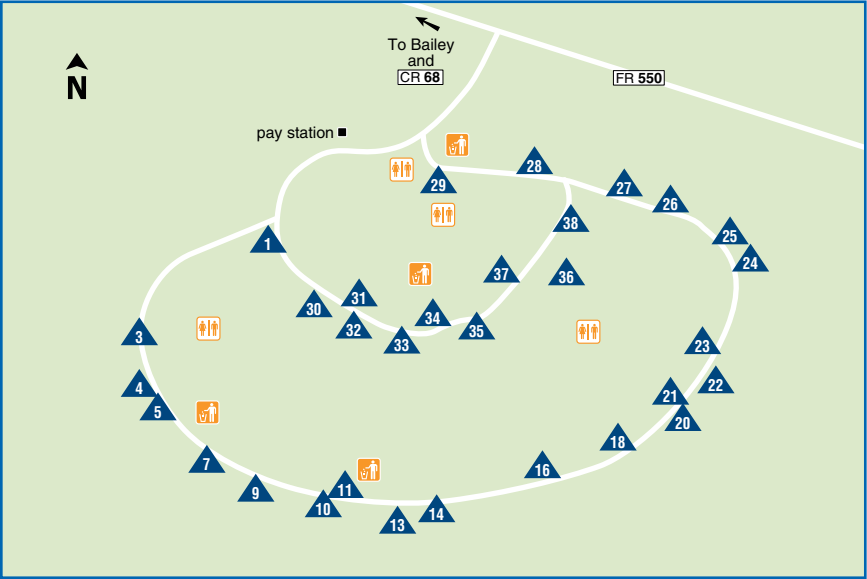
Access Buffalo Creek across from the campground entrance. This creek offers trout fishing and a nice place to dip your toes in the water. Find more mountain biking along FS 543.

Hikers can enjoy the same trails as the mountain bikers. You can also head into the Lost Creek Wilderness, just a few miles northwest of Buffalo. From the trailhead off Wellington Lake Road, hikers can take the Colorado Trail into the wilderness high country or walk the Craig Meadows Trail into Craig Creek. Other hikes into this wilderness are also accessible from this trailhead.

If you'd like a little lakeside diversion, head over to Wellington Lake. This private lake is just a short drive away, with day-use areas for swimming, fishing, boating, and stand-up paddleboarding. Wellington Lake also offers excellent camping right on the water or along the surrounding hillsides, with a variety of hikes for all levels.

In the summer, there's still enough light to make the drive from Denver or Colorado Springs and be sitting at Buffalo Campground at dusk by the campfire, where you can cook up a good supper and retire to your tent before jumping onto your favorite trail by morning.

Buffalo Campground



GETTING THERE

From US 285 in Bailey, head southeast on County Road 68 (it turns into FS 543) for 7 miles. Turn left on FS 860/FS 550/Redskin Creek Road and follow it 4 miles to Buffalo (sometimes called Buffalo Creek) Campground, which will be on your right.

GPS COORDINATES: N39° 20.548' W105° 20.138'

NORTHWEST COLORADO



Weir and Johnson Campground (see page 105)



Cold Springs Campground

Beauty: ★★★★★ / Privacy: ★★ / Spaciousness: ★★★ / Quiet: ★★★ / Security: ★★★ / Cleanliness: ★★★★★

Cold Springs is one way to have it all while camping in the eastern Flat Tops Wilderness.

Camping at Cold Springs is like checking all the boxes on everything you love as a tent camper. Camping near a bubbling cascade? Check. Camping near a mountain pond? Check. Camping by a spectacular mountain view? Double check. Add in camping next to Colorado's second-largest protected wilderness and you have what some would call a sheer earthly delight.

Now, this place isn't perfect, but it's pretty close. You can leave your tent, fish and hike all day, and then return to your little scenic mountain haven. Sure, it's a little closer to the road than is truly ideal, and the campground as a whole is pretty broken in. But if you're OK with those compromises, give this place a shot.

Turn into the short campground drive and check out the first campsite on your left, in an open meadow with the best of alpine views. Snow-covered Flat Top Mountain lies across Bear River, which rushes from Stillwater Reservoir above. Behind you, tree-covered slopes rise to mountain lakes. There is a good view down the valley of Bear River as well.

Fishing in the pond near Cold Springs Campground



SOUTH CENTRAL COLORADO



A trail through the aspens near O'Haver Lake Campground (see page 121)

Alvarado Campground

Beauty: ★★★★★ / Privacy: ★★★★★ / Spaciousness: ★★★ / Quiet: ★★★★★ / Security: ★★★★★ / Cleanliness: ★★★★★

A hiker's haven on the eastern slope of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains

Alvarado is a campground for all but especially the active set. Any given day there will be hikers, bikers, and horseback riders gearing up and heading out on their favorite trails. Several trails leave directly from the campground, which is a nice place to return after a day soaking up the scenic Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

On a slope just into the forest line above the Wet Mountain Valley, Alvarado Campground enjoys a mixture of woodland and meadow, where Douglas-fir and ponderosa pines intermingle with aspens. Dense cottonwood and brush grow along Alvarado Creek. Forest density varies with exposure throughout this campground. There are many options for both sun and shade, and the campground still has about 20 first-come, first-served sites in case you don't snag a reservation.

Alvarado is perched on the side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains among sweet-smelling ponderosa pine, aspen, lodgepole, and Gambel oak trees. Some sites offer views of the Wet Mountain Valley below, while others sit beside Alvarado Creek. The campground is within reach of the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, which spans 226,455 acres with 60 alpine lakes, 400 miles of streams, and more than 400 miles of trails to explore. Large aspen stands visible in the area today are the result of fires set in the early 1900s to clear pastureland, expose minerals, and produce charcoal.

A mix of trees, meadows and distant peaks at Alvarado Campground



SOUTHWEST COLORADO



View of the Gunnison River in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (see page 134)

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park: North Rim Campground

Beauty: ★★★ / Privacy: ★★★ / Spaciousness: ★★★ / Quiet: ★★★★★ / Security: ★★★★★ / Cleanliness: ★★★★★

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison is a unique physical feature of Colorado and is a must-see for both locals and tourists. The North Rim Campground gives you front-row seats.

You won't believe how deep and narrow a gorge the Black Canyon is until you actually see it. As you drive toward the canyon rim, it seems to come out of nowhere, making it all the more jaw-dropping. There are many places to access the gorge, but the North Rim is the best for tent camping. It is the quietest and most primitive, set on the rim's edge in an ancient piñon/juniper forest. Instead of looking up at snowy mountains—your typical Colorado view—you will be looking down into a nearly 2,000-foot-deep canyon. You can hike along the rim or drop down into the gorge itself, where the fishing is great along a stretch of Colorado's Gold Medal Waters. Some of the best climbing in the state can be done here at "The Black," as it's known in the climbing world.

Make your drive from Crawford and slightly descend to the canyon along Grizzly Gulch. Pass the ranger station, and come to the North Rim Campground. Enter the loop and the piñon/juniper forest, which is complemented with Gambel oak and the bird-attracting

The Gunnison River from the bottom of the canyon



Perfect Camping for You in **COLORADO**

The **CENTENNIAL STATE** provides a spectacular backdrop for some of the most scenic campgrounds in the country. But do you know which campgrounds offer the most privacy? Which provide the best views? Monica Parpal Stockbridge traversed the entire state—from historic Mesa Verde National Park to the bird-watchers' paradise at Pawnee National Grassland—and compiled the most up-to-date research to steer you to the perfect spot.



Inside You'll Find

- 50 campgrounds in national parks, state parks, and other breathtaking locales, organized into five distinct regions
- Selections based on location, topography, nearby activities, and overall appeal
- Detailed maps of each campground and key information such as fees, restrictions, dates of operation, and facilities
- Driving directions and GPS coordinates
- Ratings for beauty, privacy, spaciousness, noise level, security, and cleanliness

Whether you seek a quiet campground near a fish-filled stream or a family campground with all the amenities, grab *Best Tent Camping: Colorado*. This guide is a keeper.



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