

MY PARK TOURS

Rocky Mountain National Park

A thoughtful first visit

A practical, unhurried guide from Stephen Branum.

COMPLIMENTARY GUIDE / OCTOBER 2026 EDITION

01 / START WITH THE FEELING

Choose your kind of day

One park; several very different ways to spend a good day.

Rocky Mountain National Park begins at the edge of Estes Park, but its lake country, open meadows and high road do not belong on a single checklist. Before choosing a trail or a reservation, decide what you want to remember: a quiet wildlife morning, time beside a lake, or a long, clear view above treeline.

WILDLIFE & MEADOWS

Build a flexible morning or evening around meadow edges and safe viewing distance. Wildlife is never guaranteed; the reward is the time to watch when it does appear.

LAKES & GENTLE EXPLORING

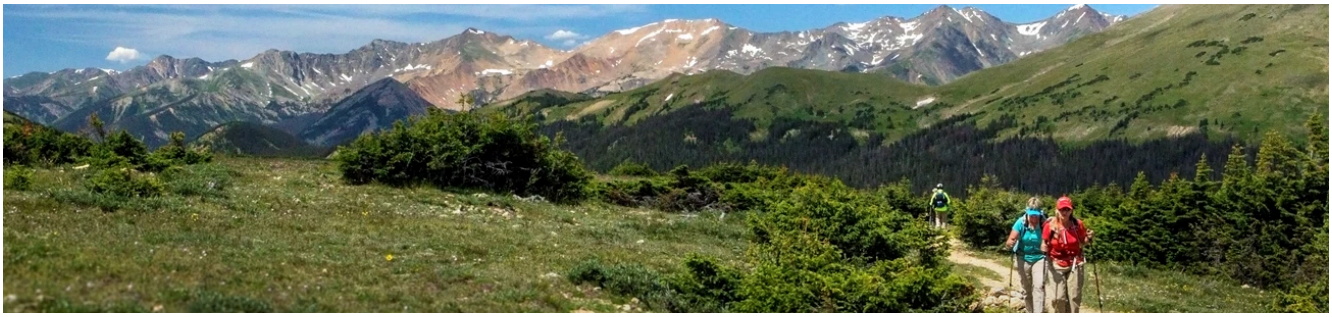
The Bear Lake Road area offers several scenic stops. Match the outing to your group's actual walking comfort, parking plan, weather and seasonal access.

THE HIGH COUNTRY

When Trail Ridge Road is open, make the alpine drive an experience, not a hurried crossing. Wind, altitude and rapid weather changes deserve room in the schedule.

AN ESTES PARK BASE

Staying near the east entrance makes it easier to combine a park day with an unhurried meal and time in town. A west-side stay asks for a different route.



Alpine tundra in Rocky Mountain National Park. NPS photo.

Stephen's perspective: In private guiding, I've found that the pace of the day matters as much as the destination. A view worth lingering over should have space in the plan.

Start gently if you've just arrived

If you're coming from a lower elevation, don't make your first afternoon the most demanding high-country outing. Settle into your lodging, choose a comfortable nearby walk or an Estes Park dinner, and save your larger decision for a day when you know how everyone is feeling.

02 / A FLEXIBLE SAMPLE

One day, or a little longer

Use these as shapes for a trip, not reservations or guaranteed routes.

If you have one park day

Choose one main area rather than trying to cover the map. A Bear Lake Road day might pair a lakeside stop with a meadow and a meal back in Estes Park. Alternatively, if conditions permit, choose a Trail Ridge Road scenic day with fewer stops and time to acclimate. The access you need, your group's energy and the forecast decide which is sensible.

If you have two days

Let the first day be closer to the east side: wildlife, water or a walk that fits your group. Hold the second day for the high road **only if it is open**; otherwise use it for a different accessible park area or a more relaxed return to a favorite place. Reserve one flexible window so a change in weather doesn't unravel the whole visit.

If you have three days

Add depth rather than distance. A third day might take in a different trail or a west-side visit if the trans-park road is open and your lodging route supports it. Otherwise give the east side another day at a new pace. The extra day is especially valuable for families, mixed abilities, or guests who prefer scenery and wildlife over ambitious hikes.

A PLANNING RULE THAT TRAVELS WELL

Build each day around one anchor and one nearby alternative. Check current park alerts before departure, then be willing to change course. Hiking distances, elevation and road access should always match the people actually traveling.

IF THE HIGH ROAD CLOSES

Stay on the side of the park you're already on; choose a lower-elevation plan rather than gambling on a trans-park drive.

IF THE LOT IS FULL

Use the seasonal Bear Lake Road shuttle from Park & Ride when available, or shift to a different destination with a clear access plan.

The aim is not to "do Rocky" in a day. It is to have a day that feels like yours.

03 / ACCESS WITHOUT SURPRISES

Know what needs booking

An entrance pass and a timed-entry reservation are different things.

PARK ADMISSION

NPS normally requires a valid park entrance fee or pass even outside timed-entry hours; check current rules and any special fee-free dates for your trip. The timed-entry processing fee does not replace admission. For a private tour, entrance costs are factored into the quoted tour price; park entry is not complimentary. Check your booking terms.

Two timed-entry choices in 2026

TIMED ENTRY

For park areas **other than** the Bear Lake Road Corridor. Required from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., May 22–October 12, 2026. This choice does not provide Bear Lake Road access during that corridor's reserved hours.

TIMED ENTRY + BEAR LAKE ROAD

Includes the Bear Lake Road Corridor and the rest of the park. Required for corridor entry from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m., May 22–October 18, 2026. Enter the corridor within your reservation's two-hour window.

Reservations are made through Recreation.gov, not at the park entrance. A reservation does **not** guarantee parking. During its 2026 operating season, the free in-park shuttle helps visitors park once at Park & Ride and reach stops along Bear Lake Road. The separate Estes Park Hiker Shuttle requires its own ticket and a park entrance pass. Neither shuttle crosses Trail Ridge Road.

For the 2026 season, NPS released reservations in monthly batches and an additional batch at 7 p.m. Mountain Time the evening before a visit. Availability can change quickly; make your booking plan before your preferred date opens, then verify next year's schedule when published.

BEFORE YOU DRIVE

Check the latest NPS timed-entry page for the year you will travel, reserve the correct corridor and arrival window, confirm your pass or tour access arrangement, and check shuttle schedules if you plan to use one. These 2026 dates are a snapshot, not a promise for later seasons.

Official details: NPS timed entry · fees and passes · shuttles.

04 / GIVE THE PARK ROOM

Wildlife, weather & the high road

The best plan knows when to pause—and when to turn back.



Elk in Rocky Mountain National Park. NPS photo; sightings are never guaranteed.

Keep wildlife wild

Watch from a pullout, not a stopped travel lane. NPS says stay at least **75 feet** from wildlife and at least **120 feet** from bears, moose and mountain lions; move farther away if an animal reacts. Use binoculars rather than approaching. Elk are often sought in fall, but nature keeps its own schedule.

Respect the high country

Trail Ridge Road is a summer connection between Estes Park and Grand Lake, not a year-round promise. Weather can close it temporarily—even when the forecast in town looks pleasant. Call the NPS recorded road line at **970-586-1222** and check park alerts before setting out.

PACK FOR THE DAY YOU MIGHT ACTUALLY HAVE

Layers, wind or rain protection, water, food, sun protection and suitable footwear matter even on a scenic outing. At higher elevations, take your time and keep the option to shorten or change the day. In colder months, expect snow and ice and check road traction requirements.

Official details: NPS wildlife viewing · park roads · safety.

05 / MAKE IT YOURS

From first ideas to a real journey

Good planning leaves room for the moments you couldn't schedule.

Your five-minute starting list

01 YOUR DATES

Which month, how many nights, and where will you be staying?

02 YOUR PEOPLE

Who is coming, and what walking pace or accessibility needs should shape the plan?

03 YOUR PRIORITIES

Wildlife, lakes, alpine views, photography, a private guided day—or time for several?

04 YOUR FLEXIBILITY

What would you happily trade for better weather, a gentler morning or more time at one place?

Two ways to work with us

Already know you want a private Rocky Mountain park day? Estes Park Concierge is the direct booking path for its current private tour offerings and availability. Applicable park entry costs are reflected in the tour quote and booking terms. Explore RMNP tours ↗

Need the whole visit to fit together? My Park Tours can help shape lodging areas, reservations, independent outings and the place a booked tour has in the larger itinerary. Every journey is individually proposed, with services, availability and pricing clearly outlined before you book. Tell us about your trip ↗

A NOTE FROM STEPHEN

Rocky Mountain National Park is where my private guiding began. Whether we spend a park day together or I help design the wider trip, the conversation starts with how **you** want to experience the place.

VERIFY BEFORE TRAVEL

Park rules and conditions change. For current decisions use NPS trip planning, timed entry, and the recorded road status. Information checked October 3, 2026. Photography: existing My Park Tours park image on cover; NPS images inside. This independent guide is not an official National Park Service publication.