

# Visitor Guide

Great Sand Dunes  
National Park  
and Preserve



Experience the best of the  
dunes, mountains, and  
the park after dark!



Morning Light on Dunes and Cottonwood Trees, October



Medano Creek, May

## Welcome!

Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve protects the tallest dunes in North America... and a whole lot more. The park and preserve contain ecosystems ranging from wetlands to forest to tundra—each supporting specially adapted plant, animal and insect life. Make the most of your visit by taking the time to



experience  
this diversity  
in your  
national  
park!

Superintendent Pam Rice



## 2-3 The Best of the Dunes and Hikes in the Main Use Area

Trip planning  
suggestions



## 4-5 The Best of the Mountains

A map of trails and  
destinations, plus  
tips for safe travel



## 6 The Best of the Park After Dark

How to  
experience the  
night at Great  
Sand Dunes

## Safety Tips: Protect Yourself and Your Park

**Emergency Calls** Dial 911 for emergencies or contact the visitor center for assistance. Cell service is not consistently reliable within the boundaries of Great Sand Dunes NP&P.

**Hot Sand** In summer months during mid-day, sand temperatures can reach 150 degrees F. Hike during the morning or evening to avoid heat exhaustion and/or burned feet. Wear closed-toe shoes.

**Lightning** Lightning can occur anytime during the warmer months (especially July – August), when afternoon storms approach the dunes. Avoid fatal lightning strikes by experiencing the dunes and other open areas during morning hours. Remain in a building or vehicle until 30 minutes after the last thunder. If you are in immediate danger, crouch in a low-lying area on top of a backpack or other item to prevent a ground charge.

**Wildlife** Rangers enforce speed limits to prevent injury or death of wildlife. Please abide by speed limits. To protect yourself and wildlife, never feed wild animals. Store food and scented items in your vehicle or bear-proof containers located in Piñon Flats Campground and Medano Pass Primitive Road. Bear hangs or bear containers are required when camping in the national park backcountry. Information sheets about bear and mountain lion country are available at the visitor center.

**High Winds** Winds are possible any time of the year. Especially during the spring season, storm fronts can produce high winds which cause sand to move. Hike during these conditions at your own risk. If hiking during windy conditions, consider wearing eye protection, long sleeves and pants to avoid getting sand-blasted. If sand gets in your eyes, flush with water or saline solution. Check at the visitor center or on the park website for weather forecasts and conditions.

**High Elevation** Elevations within the park and preserve range from 8,200 feet to 13,604 feet (2,499m to 4,146m). Visitors should stay hydrated, wear sun protection, and hike slowly. Visitors hiking in the higher-elevation backcountry should pack layers to avoid hypothermia. If you experience shortness of breath, headaches or nausea: rest, hydrate and slowly descend from your elevation.

**Unmanned Aircraft (Drones)** To protect wildlife, emergency operations, and visitor privacy and enjoyment, it is illegal to launch, land, or operate an unmanned aircraft from within the boundaries of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve or other national park units.

**Marijuana** Recreational marijuana is legal in the state of Colorado, but the consumption and possession of marijuana is ILLEGAL on federal lands, including national parks in Colorado. Individuals will be cited and fined for illegal activity within Great Sand Dunes.

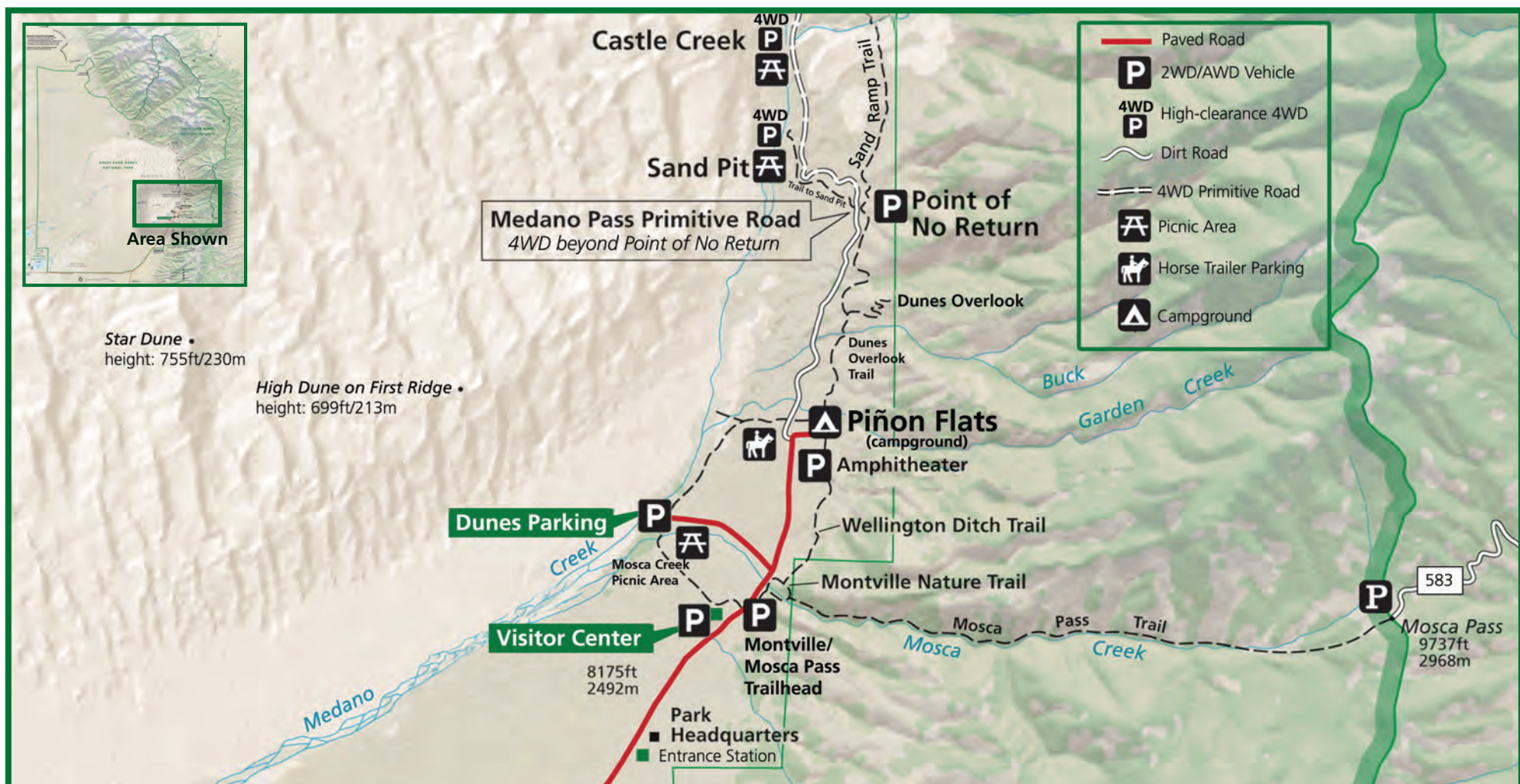
**First Aid Items** Bandages, sun protection, pain reliever, allergy medicine, eye drops and sanitary items can be purchased in the visitor center year round. These items are also available at the store in the campground, and at the Oasis store outside park boundaries, during the main spring through operating season. Contact a ranger at the visitor center for phone numbers of local pharmacies and clinics.



**Keep wildlife wild. Use  
campsite bear-proof  
boxes.**



# Hiking and Exploring Main Use Area



## from Dunes Parking



### High Dune on First Ridge

- In summer, hike early morning or evening to avoid 150°F (66°C) sand temperatures and lightning.
- View of entire dunefield
- Round trip hike: 2.5 miles (4 km) - no trails
- Elevation gain: 699 feet (213 m)
- Average Time: 2 hours
- Hike along ridges



### Medano Creek (seasonal)

- The depth of the creek and length of time the creek flows is dependent on precipitation and snow melt. This varies each year. Follow current and forecast flow on the park website: [nps.gov/grsa](https://nps.gov/grsa)
- In an average year, the creek flows April through June at the Dunes Parking Area.
- Peak flow with surge waves typically occurs from late May to early June.
- The creek is adjacent to the Dunes Parking Area, easily accessible for all. Splash, wade or hike upstream/downstream as far as you like along this unique natural beach.

## from Montville/ Mosca Pass Trailhead



### Montville Nature Trail

- Forest, Mosca Creek, and view of first ridge of dunes
- Pick up a trail guide at the visitor center during business hours.
- Round trip hike: 0.5 mile (1 km)
- Elevation gain: 200 feet (61 m)
- Average time: 30 minutes

### Mosca Pass Trail

- Forest, Mosca Creek, meadows, views of forested ridges
- Round trip hike: 7 miles (11 km)
- Elevation gain: 1400 feet (427 m)
- Average time: 3.5 hours

### Wellington Ditch Trail

- From Montville Loop Trail, continue 1 mile (1.6 km) on a foothills trail to Piñon Flats Campground.

## from Visitor Center

### Sand Sheet Loop

- Short, interpretive grasslands trail
- Round Trip: 0.25 miles (0.2 km)
- Elevation: 50 feet (15 m)
- Average time: 30 minutes



## from Piñon Flats Campground, Loop 2



### Dunes Overlook

- View of first ridge of dunes
- Round trip hike: 2.3 miles (3.7 km)
- Elevation gain: 450 feet (137 m)
- Average time: 2 hours

## from Point of No Return

### Sand Pit Picnic Area

- Gentle slopes above Medano Creek
- Round trip hike to picnic area: 1.5 miles (2.4 km)
- Elevation gain: 400 feet (121 m)
- Average round trip time: 1 hour
- Vault toilet
- Access picnic area directly with high-clearance 4WD



### Castle Creek Picnic Area

- 400 foot (121m) dune face rises from creek
- Hike trail to Sand Pit, then walk along Medano Creek to Castle Creek.
- Round trip: 3 miles (4.8 km)
- Elevation gain: 400 feet (121 m)
- Average round trip time: 1.5 hours
- Vault toilet
- Access picnic area directly with high-clearance 4WD.



# Plan Your Time: Main Use Area

## 2 hours

- Visit the visitor center for the park film, exhibits, weather forecasts, park store, and helpful rangers.
- Explore the dunefield from the main Dunes Parking Area to walk, splash in Medano Creek (seasonal), or sand sled/sandboard. See below for rental information.
- Drive your 4WD vehicle along the Medano Pass Primitive Road to Sand Pit or Castle Creek picnic areas for a picnic.
- Walk along Medano Creek from the Dunes Parking Area, Sand Pit Picnic Area, Point of No Return, or Castle Creek Picnic Area (all dog-friendly).
- Hike Montville Nature Trail (page 2).

## 3-5 hours, you can also...

- Hike to the top of the first ridge of dunes (page 2) for a view of the entire dunefield.
- Visit Zapata Falls Recreation Area for a refreshing waterfall and spectacular view of the dunefield (page 8).
- Hike upstream along Medano Creek toward the mountains.
- Attend an afternoon ranger program.



Mosca Creek, along the Montville Trail and Mosca Pass Trail, provides a shady retreat on summer afternoons when sand temperatures soar. Look for birds and other wildlife in the lush forest of this canyon.

## If you have more time:

- Attend an evening Amphitheater program
- Hike the dunes after dark to experience stars or moonlight, and natural sounds.
- Hike Mosca Pass to view wildflowers and listen to songbirds (page 2).
- Hike Star Dune, tallest dune in America.
- Explore the mountains on foot or with a 4WD vehicle (pages 4-5).
- Around sunrise or sunset, view elk, pronghorn, or mule deer in grasslands from pullouts along entrance road.



Elk in Grasslands, October

# Best Ways to Experience the Dunes

## Sandsledding and Sandboarding



Sandsled Sandboard

Snow sleds and cardboard don't slide on dry sand. Contact area retailers for sandsled/sandboard rentals:

- Oasis Store (outside park entrance) rents equipment from spring through early fall, 719-378-2222
- Kristi Mountain Sports in Alamosa (35 miles from the park on US 160), open year round, 719-589-9759
- Sand Dunes Swimming Pool near Hooper (32 miles from the park on CO 17), open year round, 719-378-2807
- Mountain View Motor Inn in Fort Garland (32 miles from the park on US 160), open year round, 719-379-2993

## Explore in a Dunes Wheelchair



Check out a free dunes wheelchair at the visitor center, and explore into the dunes beyond the parking area. Reserve a child or adult chair in advance at 719-378-6395.

## Beach Play



During Medano Creek's seasonal flow (April through June, with peak flow in late May), splash and build sand sculptures. Follow current and forecast flow on our website: [nps.gov/grsa](https://www.nps.gov/grsa). When water levels are low from mid June through July, be prepared for mosquitos.

## Wilderness Solitude



Hike away from main use areas to enjoy solitude and quiet in the dunefield's 30-square-mile expanse. Plan on 5 hours round trip to pyramid-shaped Star Dune, the tallest dune in North America; hike down the creekbed to its base then up a ridge to the summit. Get a free backpacking permit to spend the night.

## Discover Life



Seven species of insects are endemic to these dunes, including the Great

Sand Dunes Tiger Beetle. Look for them in morning or evening away from the main use area. Kangaroo Rats emerge at night, and bobcats, coyotes, and owls hunt them.

Thousands of prairie sunflowers bloom on the dunes in mid-August.

## Photography



Plan your dunes time for early morning or evening to capture the evocative wind-sculpted shapes of the dunes. Hike to the top of the first ridge to capture the entire dunefield (see page 2), or capture abstract shapes and details anywhere in the sand. Other majestic views are available from pullouts near the park entrance, and from Zapata Falls (see page 8).



# Best Ways to Experience the Mountains

## 4WD Adventure: Medano Pass Primitive Road



- 4WD is required for soft sand, creek crossings, and rocks beyond Point of No Return. All-Wheel-Drive vehicles are not recommended as they run a high risk of getting stuck
- One-way distance to Medano Pass from Horse Trailer Parking Lot: 11 miles (17km), 1.5 hours.
- One-way distance to Hwy. 69 (beyond Medano Pass) from Horse Trailer Parking Lot: 22 miles (34 km) or 2.5 to 3 hours.
- Vehicles must be highway-legal in Colorado.
- Camping is permitted in 21 designated sites along the road in the National Preserve.
- During dry times, sand may become very soft. 4WD vehicles may have to reduce tire pressure to drive over sand. A free tire pressure station is available at the Amphitheater during warmer months.
- The road closes when creek crossings are high or frozen, when snow is deep, or when the road may cause vehicle damage. Check the park website for closures and road conditions.
- A Medano Pass Primitive Road Guide is available on the park website or at the visitor center.
- With a fishing license, fish for native Rio Grande cutthroat trout in Medano Creek (catch and release).
- Watch for bighorn sheep (pictured).



## Forest Wilderness: Hiking, Wildflowers, and Birds



Explore the forests of Great Sand Dunes National Preserve on-trail or off-trail. Please tread lightly to protect plants and habitats.

**Mosca Pass Trail** winds beside Mosca Creek through forests, open meadows, and rocky hillsides. Though there are no expansive views from the trail, you can hike up the slopes above the canyon to see the dunes and San Luis Valley. From Mosca Pass, a 1/8 mile (0.4 km) trail to the southeast takes you to a view into the Huerfano Basin.

- Mosca Pass Trailhead located 1/8 mile north of visitor center
- Round trip hike: 7 miles (11 km)
- Elevation gain: 1400 feet (427 m)
- Average time: 3.5 hours
- Watch for dusky grouse (pictured), woodpeckers, turkeys, and many songbirds



## Alpine Lakes and Summits: Hiking, Fishing, and Backpacking



### Upper and Lower Sand Creek Lakes

- Large alpine lakes below 13,000 ft. (4,000m) peaks
- 4WD required to reach higher Music Pass Trailhead; 2WD trailhead at Grape Creek adds 2.5 miles each way to hike
- Fishing (with license; catch and keep to limit)
- Round Trip Hike to either lake: 8 miles (13 km)
- Elevation Gain: 2000 feet (610 m)
- Check with a ranger for climbing routes to steep summits
- Watch for pikas (pictured) and marmots

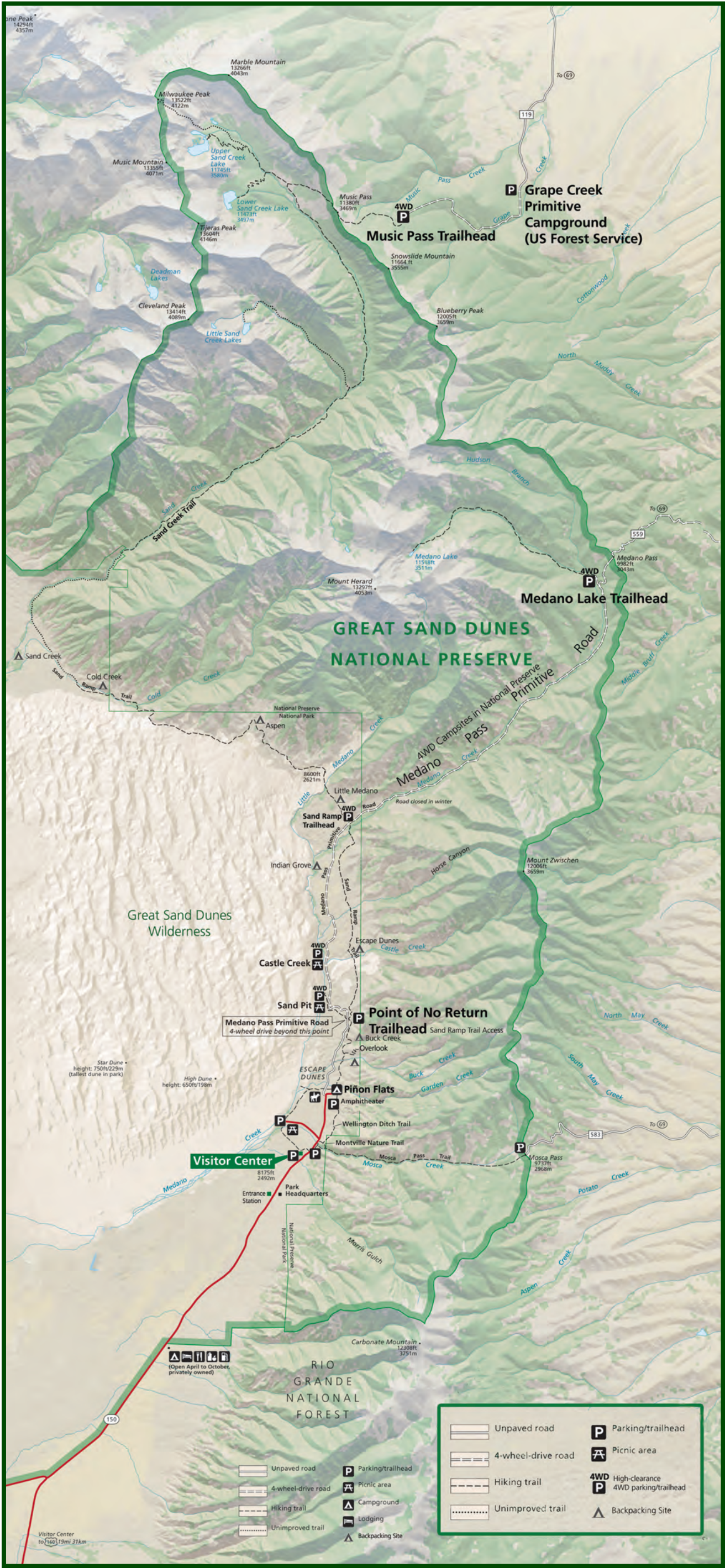


### Medano Lake

- A day hike or overnight trip to forested areas and a small alpine lake, home to native Rio Grande cutthroat trout (catch and release with license).
- Trailhead accessible by high-clearance 4WD vehicles via Medano Pass Primitive Road
- Round trip hike: 7.4 miles (12.4 km)
- Elevation gain: 2,000 feet (610 m)
- Continue 1.5 steep miles to the summit of Mount Herard (13,297 feet/4,052m) for a view of the dunefield.







## Directions to Trailheads

**Montville/Mosca Pass Trailhead:** Drive 1/8 mile north of visitor center.

**Point of No Return:** 1 mile (1.6km) on Medano Pass Primitive Road, beyond Piñon Flats Campground. This parking area provides access to national park backcountry sites along the Sand Ramp Trail.

**Sand Ramp Trail Access:** 5 miles (8km) on Medano Pass Primitive Road, beyond Pinon Flats Campground. This small parking area is accessible by high-clearance 4WD vehicles only, providing access to national park backcountry sites along the Sand Ramp Trail.

**Medano Lake Trailhead:** Follow sign after driving 10.5 miles (17km) along Medano Pass Primitive Road, beyond Piñon Flats Campground. This trailhead is accessible by high-clearance 4WD vehicles only, providing access to Medano Lake.

**Music Pass Trailhead:** This trailhead is accessible via Pass Creek Road, CR 572, located 2 miles (3km) west of La Veta Pass on US 160. The turnoff is 39 miles from the visitor center or 28 miles west of I-25. Drive 11 miles on CR 572 (unpaved) until the road turns into CR 570 (unpaved). Take a right on CR 550 (paved) and drive 5 miles (8km) to CO 69 (paved). Turn left and drive another 28 miles (45 km) until you see the “Music Pass” sign. Continue to follow the signs on several gravel or dirt roads. 2WD or AWD vehicles should park and hike from the USFS Grape Creek Campground. 4WD vehicles can continue for an additional 2.5 miles (4km) to the trailhead.



Route to Music Pass Trailhead via Pass Creek Road  
Courtesy Google Maps

## Backcountry Safety Tips

**Check the weather forecast** before your trip. Plan for rapidly changing weather if you are traveling in higher elevations. Weather forecasts are available on the park website or at the park visitor center during operating hours.

**Filter, boil, or treat creek water** before drinking.

**Leave your travel plans** with friends or relatives.

**Wear bright colors during hunting season** in Great Sand Dunes National Preserve.



# Best Ways to Experience the Night



Great Sand Dunes is one of the best locations in the United States to enjoy the night sky. Our distance from urban areas, dry air, and high elevation makes for excellent star viewing on a moonless night.

Yet there is much more to the night than the sky. Below are suggested ways to experience nighttime with all your senses in this unique wilderness.

## Star and Constellation Viewing

To see the most stars, plan to view on a moonless night. Check a moon calendar online or ask at the visitor center for the moon phase and moonrise/moonset times.

The dunefield has the most open views of the sky. Just a short stroll into the sand from the Dunes Parking Area provides excellent viewing. Be sure to note the location of the Dunes Parking Area in relation to the line of cottonwood trees so you can find your vehicle when you return. Alternatively, the South Ramada Picnic Area or the park Amphitheater provide paved access.

Bring your own telescope, binoculars, or just your eyes. There are many free apps that help you navigate the night sky on your phone or tablet. The park store in the visitor center has star charts, nocturnal wildlife books, interactive kits and models, and red LED flashlights to protect your night vision.



## Free Evening Programs



Free ranger programs are offered at the Amphitheater, just below Piñon Flats Campground, on many evenings during summer and fall. Check the program schedule at the visitor center or on the park website for descriptions of programs offered during your stay. The Amphitheater has paved surfaces and sidewalk access for wheelchairs. If you are not staying in the campground, park in the lot below the Amphitheater.

## Enjoy a Full Moon



Though few stars are visible during a full moon, you can explore the dunefield without artificial light. Note the location of the Dunes Parking Area in relation to the line of cottonwood trees so you can find your way back.

## Discover Night Life



Tiger Salamander

Many fascinating animals emerge at night, but their eyes are extremely sensitive to light. Please do not shine flashlights at nocturnal animals,

or you may blind them for over a half hour. Use a dim light or red light to protect their night vision and yours. Amphibians such as salamanders have sensitive skin that can become irritated or infected by the oils and bacteria on human skin. Please enjoy observing them, but do not attempt to pick them up.

- Nine species of owls in the park and preserve are more commonly heard than seen. Listen and watch for owls at dusk as you walk the Montville Trail, Mosca Pass Trail, Wellington Ditch Trail, or Sand Ramp Trail (see page 2).



Northern Pygmy Owl

- Walk anywhere in the dunefield to observe nocturnal creatures and their tracks. Kangaroo Rats can jump over 5 feet in the air to avoid bobcats, coyotes, owls and other mammals that hunt them in the dunes. Giant sand treader camel crickets emerge at dusk to feed and find mates. On wet nights, tiger salamanders and three species of toads are sometimes observed migrating in the dunes. When the sun rises, they burrow down to the moist sand and wait until the next rain comes.



# General Information

Please also visit our website  
[www.nps.gov/grsa](http://www.nps.gov/grsa)



## Weather Information

Great Sand Dunes experiences four seasons. No matter what season you are visiting, plan according to daytime and nighttime highs and lows, possible precipitation and wind speeds. Check the weather on the park website or at the visitor center. Temperatures are relatively cool all year due to high elevations, but dry, thin air makes daytime temperatures feel warmer year round. Winds primarily occur in springtime or during regional weather fronts.



Daytime highs in the 80s F during summer will create 150 degree F sand temperatures. Plan to hike the dunes in early morning or evening in summer months.

Season	Highs (F)	Lows (F)
Winter	20s - 30s	-20 - 10
Spring	50s - 70s	20s - 40s
Summer	70s - 80s	40s
Fall	50s - 70s	20s - 40s

## Piñon (Pinyon) Flats Campground

- The campground is open April 3 to October 31.
- Reservations can be made at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov). Individual sites are \$20/night for a maximum of 8 people and 2 vehicles. Visitors with senior pass or access pass pay \$10/night.
- Check out time is 1 pm. Quiet hours are from 10 pm to 6 am. Generators may run sparingly between 7 am and 8 pm.
- Individual campsites can be reserved from 6 months up to 4 days in advance of your arrival day. Sites that aren't reserved will be made available as first-come, first-served.
- Sites in Loops 1 and 2 are suited for tents or RVs.
- Three group sites in Loop 3 can be reserved 12 months in advance. Prices range from \$65-\$80. Tents only in group sites.
- There is a fill station and a dump station, but no hookups for RVs.
- Flush toilets and sinks are available in each loop.
- All camping equipment must fit within established tent pad and campsite to minimize ground disturbance and impacts to vegetation and wildlife habitat.
- A camp store is located between Loop 1 and 2 for the sale of firewood and other amenities. Firewood collection is strictly prohibited.



## Accessibility



Accessible restrooms are available at the Visitor Center, campground, and Dunes parking lot. In the campground, sites # 10, #14, and #63 are accessible. Evening amphitheater programs are also accessible, with paved sidewalks and seating area. Adult and child sand wheelchairs are available upon reservation at 719-378-6395 or in person at the Visitor Center. These special chairs can be used at the Dunes Parking Lot which has an accessible mat to the creek as well as a viewing platform.

## Junior Ranger Program

Kids starting at age 3 and older can pick up a free activity booklet to earn a badge or patch. The activity booklet takes 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete. For families with more time, kids can participate in the Junior Ranger Explorer Program by checking out a backpack with supplies to complete in one day or overnight. Kids of any age can earn a badge after recording field observations using scientific tools. The park store has Junior Ranger items such as vests, hats, and other memorabilia.



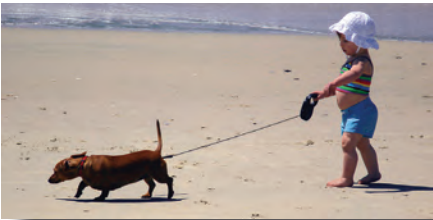
## Free Ranger Programs



Free ranger programs are offered during summer and fall at various locations. Check the park website, visitor center, or bulletin boards at Piñon Flats Campground for a list of programs.

## Pets

Leashed pets are allowed in day use areas of the national park (including the play area of the dunefield and campground) and in the national preserve, but not in backcountry areas of the national park. Protect your pet from 150° sand temperatures by avoiding the dunes mid-day during summer. Take plenty of water for your pet. It is unlawful to leave your pet unattended for any amount of time in your vehicle or in public spaces. Clean up after your pet to ensure the national park and preserve is a welcoming place to visit.



## Park Partners

Since 1938, WNPA has advanced education, interpretation, research, and community engagement to ensure national parks are increasingly valued by all. All net proceeds from the park store support National Park Service research and programs. [www.wnps.org](http://www.wnps.org)

Western  
National Parks  
Association



Founded in 1989, Friends of the Dunes supports cultural, educational, and research activities at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. [www.greatsanddunes.org](http://www.greatsanddunes.org)



## Visitor Center

The visitor center is open daily year round except for winter federal holidays. Hours from Labor Day weekend to Memorial Day weekend are 9 am to 4:30 pm. Call 719-378-6395 for summer hours. The visitor center offers ranger assistance, passport stamps, lost and found, park film, exhibits, restrooms, backcountry office, and a park store.



Video Microscope





## Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

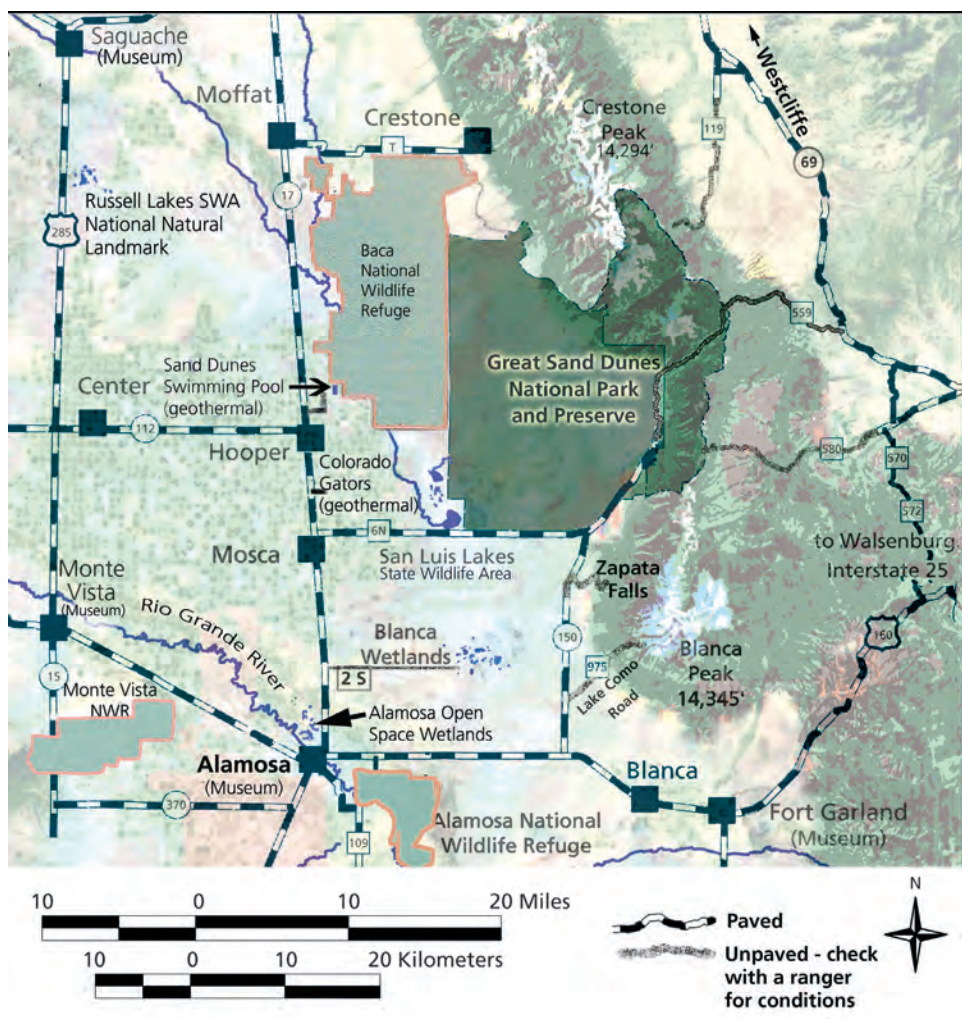
11500 Highway 150  
Mosca, Colorado 81146  
General information (recorded, 24 hours)  
719-378-6300  
Visitor Center and Park Store  
719-378-6395

[www.nps.gov/grsa](http://www.nps.gov/grsa)

email: [grsa\\_interpretation@nps.gov](mailto:grsa_interpretation@nps.gov)

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

## Nearby Campgrounds, Lodging, and Public Lands



### Nearby Campgrounds and Lodging

#### Great Sand Dunes Oasis (near park entrance)

- Tent camping and RV sites with hook-ups, camp store, gas station, sandsled and sandboard rentals, restaurant (open May through September), and duplex motel are open April - October. 719-378-2222 or visit [www.greatdunes.com](http://www.greatdunes.com)

#### Great Sand Dunes Lodge (near park entrance)

- Modern motel with indoor pool, open mid-March through October. Located up the hill above the Oasis Store. 719-378-2900 or visit [www.gsdllodge.com](http://www.gsdllodge.com)

#### Zapata Falls Campground (8 miles south of park entrance)

- Primitive BLM campground; no water or hookups; compost toilets. Bumpy gravel access road. Open year round, but access road is not plowed in winter. No reservations. \$11 per night. 719-852-5941 (BLM office in Monte Vista open Mon.-Fri.; no phone at campground)

#### San Luis Lakes State Wildlife Area (15 miles west of entrance)

- Tent camping and RV sites with electric hook-ups, no potable water. Colorado Wildlife Annual Permit is required for entry. Visit <http://cpw.state.co.us/placestogo/parks/SanLuis>

### Rio Grande National Forest



#### South Zapata Lake

From Zapata Falls Recreation Area, hike 10 miles (16km) round trip to an alpine lake below Ellingwood Peak (14,042 feet/4,280m).

**Blanca Peak** is the fourth highest peak in Colorado at 14,345 feet (4,372m). 16 mile round trip hike to its summit from trailhead; shorter hike with high-clearance 4WD on very rough Lake Como Road.

### Area Wetlands

#### San Luis Lakes State Wildlife Area

Main lake open year round; wetlands closed Feb. 15 to July 15 for nesting. Located on Lane 6N. 719-378-2020.



#### Blanca Wetlands

Located 14 miles SE of Mosca; from Highway 17, take County Road 2S east 7 miles. Closed for nesting Feb.15-July 15.

**National Wildlife Refuges** Alamosa and Monte Vista NWR open year round, 719-589-4021. Baca NWR Visitor Center is open to the public; call 719-256-5527 for hours.

### Zapata Falls Recreation Area



This 20 ft. (7m) high waterfall cascades within a narrow crevasse, and the area includes spectacular views of the entire dunefield and valley. Drive 8 miles south to the large Zapata Falls Recreation Area sign, then drive 3 miles up the very bumpy gravel road. Hike 1/2 mile (800m) on a trail to the creek. **You must wade through water into**

**the crevasse to view the falls.** Watch for falling rocks or ice. Water is cold, and may be swift and deep in early summer. The falls and creek are frozen in winter and spring. Primitive campground, picnic tables, and mountain biking trails are also available. BLM, 719-852-5941.