

# Visitor Guide

April through October

Great Sand Dunes  
National Park  
and Preserve



Great Sand Dunes, great mountains...and great experiences!



A herd of young elk runs across grasslands in front of the dunes and Sangre de Cristo Mountains in April.

## 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 and preserve!

Superintendent Pam Rice



The endemic Great Sand Dunes Tiger Beetle



Climbing the dunes, October

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## Know Before You Go: Safety Tips and Reminders

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

**Hot Sand** Sand temperatures can reach over 60 degrees hotter than the air temperature, up to 150 degrees F (66C). In warmer months, hike during morning or evening to avoid heat exhaustion and burned feet. Wear closed-toe shoes. Be cautious when hiking with pets. Hot sand can burn dogs' paws. Take necessary precautions by reducing the amount of time you are hiking on hot sand, or cover paws with dog 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. Areas with trees are slightly more safe than open areas.



Ranger Vehicle

**Driving** Rangers enforce speed limits to keep the roads safe for visitors and wildlife. Please abide by speed limits to arrive alive.

**Wildlife** Never feed or approach wildlife. Keep a safe distance when viewing wildlife. Food and scented items should be stored out of sight in your vehicle or in bear proof containers in the campground or along Medano Pass Primitive Road campsites. Bear hangs or bear proof containers are required in the national park and preserve backcountry.

**High Winds** Winds are possible any time of the year and can cause sand to move. Wear eye protection, long sleeves, and pants to avoid getting sand-blasted when hiking during high wind conditions. Check the weather forecast on the park website or at the visitor center.

**High Elevation** Elevations within the park and preserve range from 8,000 feet to 13,604 feet (2,438 m to 4,146 m). Stay hydrated, wear sun protection, and hike slowly. In the higher-elevation backcountry, 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)** 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. This law is to protect wildlife, emergency operations, and visitor privacy and enjoyment.

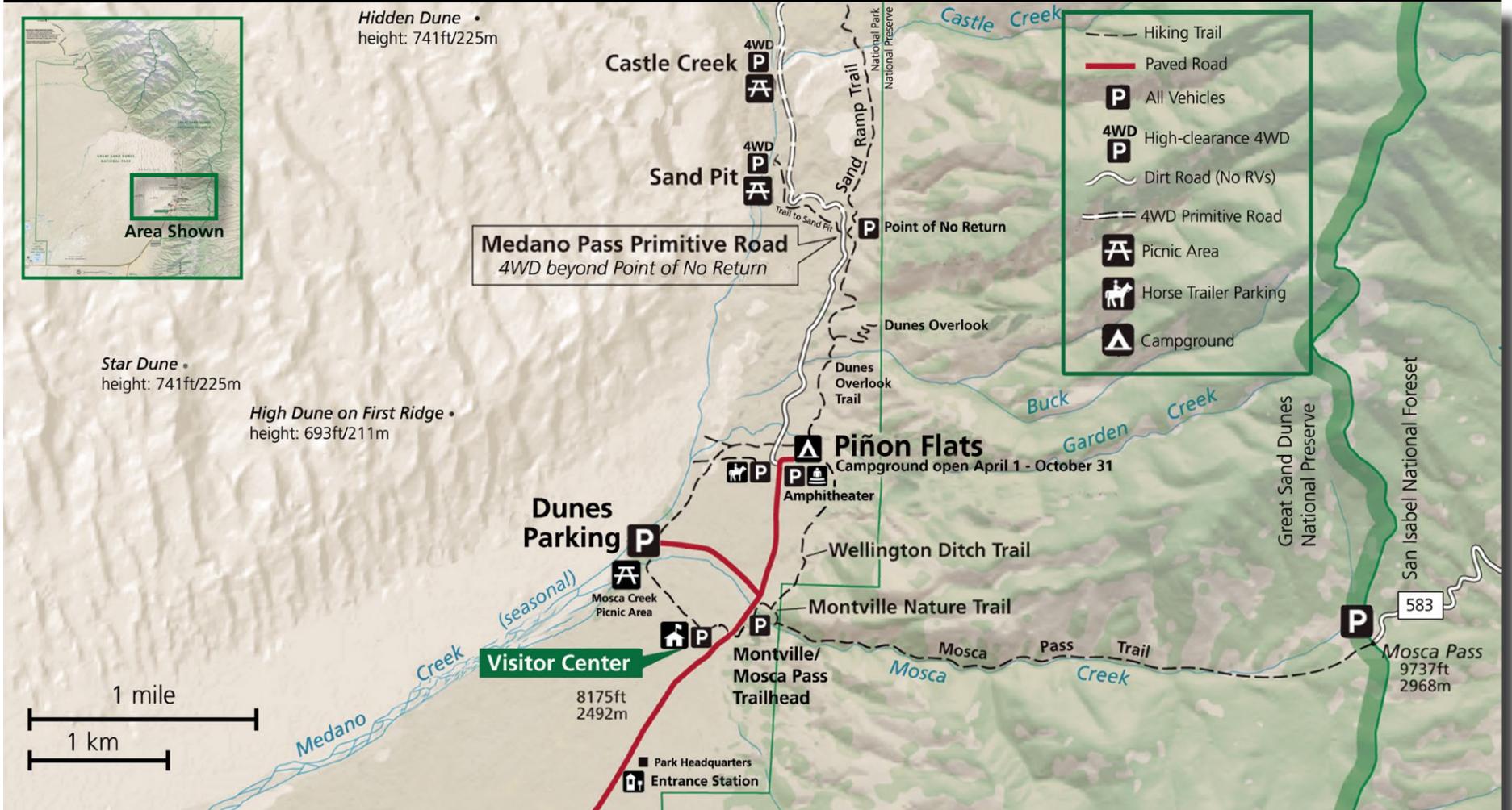
**Marijuana** Even though recreational marijuana is legal in the state of Colorado, the consumption and possession of marijuana is ILLEGAL on federal lands, including national parks in Colorado. Individuals will be cited and fined for illegal activity within Great Sand Dunes.

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



Keep wildlife wild. Don't leave food out in your campsite or picnic site.

# Hiking and Exploring the Main Use Area



Arrive early to avoid crowds at popular destinations in the main use area. Parking areas fill quickly on busy summer days.

## from Dunes Parking

### Exploring the Dunes

- Hike early morning or evening to avoid 150°F (66°C) sand temperatures, high winds, or lightning
- No trails or markers
- Hike on tops of ridges for easier travel



High Dune on First Ridge, July

### High Dune on First Ridge

- Not the highest or tallest, but a popular hike with a view of the entire dunefield
- Round trip hike: 2.5 miles (4 km)
- Elevation gain: 693 feet (211 m)
- Average Time: 2 hours
- GPS: 37.74908, -105.532775



Star Dune, September

### Star Dune

- One of two tallest dunes in North America, it rises well above other dunes in the area
- Round trip hike: 6 miles (9.6 km)
- Elevation gain: 741 feet (225 m)
- Average Time: 5 hours
- Hike down Medano Creek bed 2 miles, then ascend ridges to its summit.
- GPS: 37.7517639, -105.5580583

## from Visitor Center

### Sand Sheet Loop Interpretive Trail

- Short interpretive trail
- Round trip hike: 0.25 miles (0.2 km)
- Elevation change: 50 feet (15 m)
- Average time: 20 minutes



Grasslands along the trail, July

## from Montville/ Mosca Pass Trailhead



Mosca Pass, late September

### Montville Nature Trail

- Forested trail along a small creek
- Borrow a trail guide at the trailhead
- Round trip hike: 0.5 mile (1 km)
- Elevation gain: 200 feet (61 m)
- Average time: 30 minutes

### Mosca Pass Trail

- Views of forest and wildflowers
- Round trip hike: 7 miles (11 km)
- Elevation gain: 1400 feet (427 m)
- Average time: 3.5 hours



View from Wellington Ditch Trail, June

### Wellington Ditch Trail

- View of first ridge of dunes
- Round trip hike: 2 miles (3.2 km)
- Average time (including Montville Trail): 1.5 hours

## from Piñon Flats Campground, Loop 2



View from Dunes Overlook, August

### 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 Castle Creek Picnic Area (4WD only)



Dune slope, Castle Creek Picnic Area, June

### Eastern Edge of the Dunefield

- Tall dune faces rise from Medano Creek
- Round trip hike: 1 mile (1.6 km) to the top of the ridge for views of the entire dunefield
- Elevation gain: 400 feet (121 m)
- Average round trip time: 1 hour
- Vault toilet at picnic area
- Access Castle Creek Picnic Area on foot from Point of No Return. Hike down to Sand Pit Picnic Area, then continue along the creekbed to Castle Creek. This hike is 3 miles (4.8 km) round trip, hiking time of 1.5 hours.



Hidden Dune, late April

### Hidden Dune

- Round trip hike: 4 miles (6.4 km) - no trails
- Elevation gain: 741 feet (225 m)
- Average Time: 5 hours
- Hike west/northwest into the dunefield from Castle Creek Picnic Area
- Vault toilet at picnic area
- GPS: 37.775916, -105.531912
- Can also be accessed from Dunes Parking Lot by hiking north/northwest 3 miles (4.8 km) into the dunefield. A false summit, at left in the photo, hides Hidden Dune for much of the hike.

# General Information

## Visitor Center

Open daily year round except for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Ranger assistance, passport stamp, lost and found, vending machine, restrooms, exhibits, and park store.

Stop by to check out new exhibits installed in 2023!

## Free Ranger Programs



Ranger-guided hike

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

## Accessibility



Dunes wheelchair

Accessible restrooms are available at the visitor center, campground, and dunes parking lot. The Amphitheater has some accessible areas for programs or night sky viewing. The Sand Sheet Loop Trail is accessible to standard wheelchairs. Sand wheelchairs are available for the dunes by reservation at 719-378-6395, or in person at the visitor center.

## Entrance Fees

Park passes are available at the entrance station upon arrival. Digital park entrance passes are available on recreation.gov at no additional cost.

7-day pass	Fee
Non-Commercial Vehicle and Occupants	\$25
15+ passenger vehicle, age 16+	\$15/person
Motorcycle and riders	\$20
Annual Passes	Fee
Great Sand Dunes Annual Pass	\$40
Interagency Annual Pass	\$80
Interagency Annual Senior Pass	\$20
Active Military, 4th grader, Veteran, Gold Star Family	Free
Lifetime Passes	Fee
Interagency Senior Lifetime Pass	\$80
Interagency Access Pass (permanent disability)	Free

## Weather

Plan your visit according to daytime and nighttime highs and lows, possible precipitation, and potential wind. Check weather forecasts on the park website or at the visitor center.

Month	Average High	Average Low	Precipitation	Snowfall
April	56°F (13°C)	28°F (-2°C)	0.9 in (2 cm)	5.5 in (14 cm)
May	66°F (19°C)	37°F (3°C)	1.1 in (3 cm)	1.3 in (3 cm)
June	76°F (24°C)	45°F (7°C)	0.9 in (2 cm)	0
July	81°F (27°C)	51°F (10°C)	1.9 in (5 cm)	0
August	78°F (25°C)	49°F (9°C)	2.0 in (5 cm)	0
September	71°F (22°C)	42°F (5°C)	1.2 in (3 cm)	0.1 in (0.2 cm)
October	60°F (15°C)	32°F (0°C)	0.9 in (2 cm)	2.8 in (7 cm)

## Pets

Leashed pets are allowed in the day use areas of the dunefield, in the picnic areas, in the campground, along the front-country trails, and in the national preserve. Get a map of pet-friendly areas on the park website or at the visitor center. Visitors who require an ADA service animal may bring them into park facilities, but pets are not allowed inside park buildings or in the backcountry areas of the national park - including Sand Ramp Trail and the Dunes Backcountry. It is unlawful to leave your pets unattended for any amount of time in your vehicle, campsite, or in public spaces.



Dog on leash climbing the dunes

Stop by the visitor center to learn how to help your pets enjoy the park and become official B.A.R.K. Rangers!

## Junior Ranger Program

Kids age 3 and older can pick up a free Junior Ranger activity booklet at the visitor center to earn a badge or patch upon completion. The booklet takes 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete, depending on age group. The park store in the visitor center has Junior Ranger items such as vests, hats, and other memorabilia. Collect junior ranger badges at over 400 national park units across the continent!



Junior Ranger with collectible badge

# Camping Options in the Park and Preserve

## Piñon Flats Campground

This National Park Service campground is open April through October by reservation only.

- Visit recreation.gov or call 1-877-444-6777 to make your reservation, up to 6 months in advance, or 1 year in advance for group sites.
- Individual sites are \$20/night for a maximum of 8 people and 2 vehicles. With a senior or access pass: \$10/night. (Tents only) group sites range from \$65-\$80.
- 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.
- There is a fill station and 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. Hammocks on trees are prohibited.
- A camp store with limited hours is located between Loop 1 and 2 for the sale of firewood and other amenities.
- Firewood collection is strictly prohibited in the park.



Tent in Piñon Flats Campground, May

## Backpacking

Backpacking permits are available year-round only by reservation on recreation.gov. Reservations can be made up to 3 months in advance, or the same day as your trip.

Choose from designated sites along the Sand Ramp Trail at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, or camp within the tallest dunes in North America.



Tent in the dunefield, August

Learn more: [nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/backpacking.htm](https://nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/backpacking.htm)

## 4WD Camping on Medano Pass Primitive Road

There are 21 free, first-come, first-served primitive campsites along Medano Pass Primitive Road (page 6). A 4-wheel-drive vehicle is required for sections of soft sand, rocks, and creek crossings. Campsites are accessible late spring through fall as conditions permit. Visit [nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/medano-pass-road.htm](https://nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/medano-pass-road.htm) or check at the visitor center for details, current conditions and a road map.



Campsite on Medano Pass Road, June

# Best Ways to Experience the Dunes

## Sandboarding and Sand Sledding



*Please note: The National Park Service does not rent sand sleds or sandboards.*

Rental equipment from local businesses is the best way to make your sledding or boarding experience a success. Snow sleds and cardboard do not slide on dry sand. Contact the following businesses to rent proper equipment:

Sandboarding, August

- Oasis Store, near park entrance on CO 150. Open seasonally, 719-378-2222
- Spin Drift Sandboard Rentals, Blanca, 25 miles (40 km) from the park on US 160. Open seasonally, 719-379-4410
- Sand Dunes Swimming Pool, Hooper, 32 miles (51 km) from the park on CO 17. Open year round, 719-378-2807
- Kristi Mountain Sports, Alamosa, 35 miles (56 km) from the park on US 160. Open year round, 719-589-9759



Sand Sled Sandboard

## Splash in Medano Creek (seasonal in spring)



Medano Creek, late May

- Follow current and forecast flow on the park website: [nps.gov/grsa](http://nps.gov/grsa). In an average year, the creek flows at the Dunes Parking Area April through June, with peak flow around late May.
- Medano Creek is easily accessible from the Dunes Parking Area with a standard 2WD vehicle, or Sand Pit and Castle Creek Picnic Areas with 4WD high-clearance vehicles. Other access points such as the Horse Trailer Parking Lot or Point of No Return Parking Lot require a short hike to enjoy the creek. See page 2 for more information.
- ‘Surge flow’ is a globally rare phenomenon, occurring during high flow. When sufficient water flows across sand, ‘antidunes’ or sand dams form on the creekbed, gathering water. When the water pressure is too great, the dams break, sending down a wave about every 20 seconds.
- **Avoid May and June weekends due to especially large crowds and long traffic lines.**
- **Mosquitoes may emerge in large numbers when water levels are low from mid-June through July.**

## Discover Life



There are 4 species of colorful tiger beetles living in the dunes; pictured is the

Beautiful Tiger Beetle. Look for insects in morning or evening away from the main use area. Kangaroo rats emerge at night, and bobcats, coyotes, and owls hunt them. Scurfpea and skeletonweed blossom in early summer, and thousands of prairie sunflowers bloom in mid-August.

## Wilderness Exploration



Prairie sunflowers, August

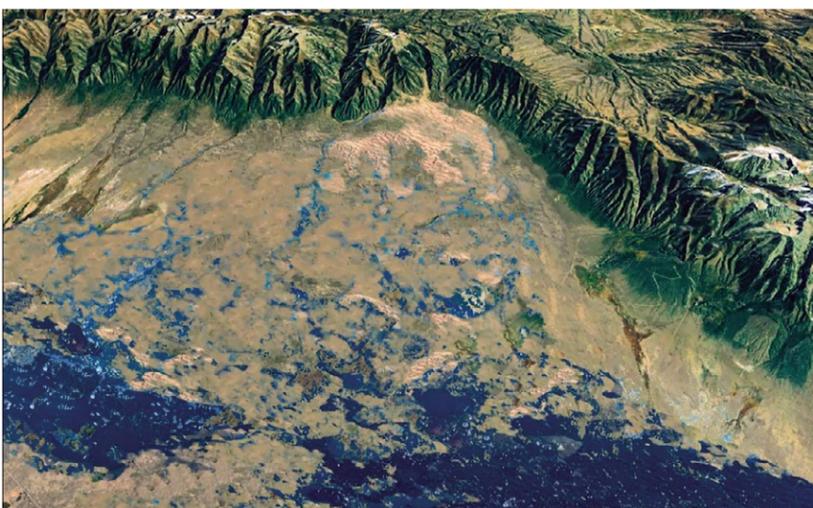
The Great Sand Dunes Wilderness was designated in 1976 to protect this wild, primeval environment

and unique ecosystem. Here, rare species can thrive, and visitors can play and explore without the noise and danger of vehicles.

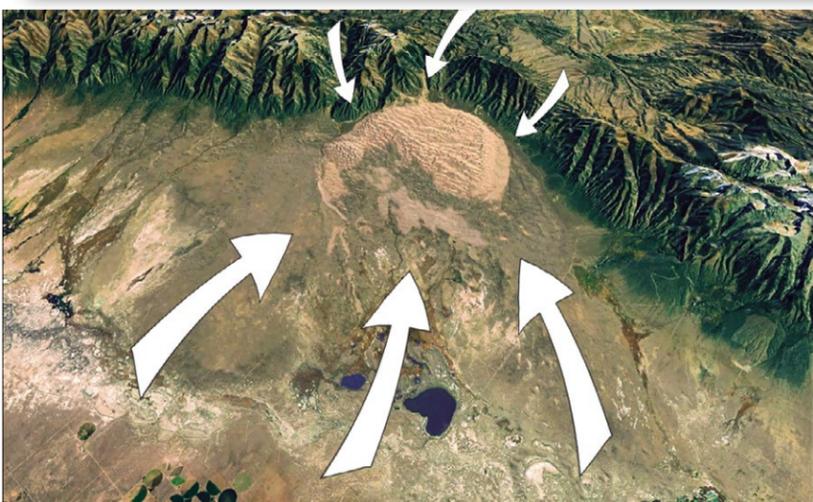
Explore away from the main use area to experience natural quiet, solitude, and renewal. Adjacent to the dunes is the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, a rugged mountain range that was designated as federally protected Wilderness in 1993.

## A Geological Wonder

### How did the dunes form?



During a wetter time thousands of years ago, ancient lakes covered much of the valley floor. Streams carried eroded sediments from the San Juan Mountains and Sangre de Cristo Mountains into these lakes. Over time, a thick layer of sand was deposited at the bottom of these lakes.



Through natural climate change, the lakes have largely diminished, leaving a vast sheet of sand on the valley floor. Predominate winds from the southwest funnel sand into a low curve of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Storm winds from the mountains push sand back, forming the tall dunefield.

### Colors of the Wind



Pick up a handful of sand: how many colors can you see? These sand grains are pieces of over 200 types of rocks and minerals originating in the San Juan Mountains and Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and carried here by water and wind. This view of the

sand through a microscope shows some of the colorful minerals. *Please leave sand and rocks here for future generations to also enjoy and study. They are protected by federal law.*

### Dune Types

Great Sand Dunes is home to a variety of dune types, shaped by different wind patterns and the presence or lack of vegetation. Can you identify these dune types during your visit?



Star dunes have three or more arms



Barchan dunes migrate near Medano Creek



Parabolic dunes migrate through grasslands



Most of the dunefield is made of reversing dunes



Nebkha dunes form around shrubs or trees

# Best Ways to Experience the Night



Milky Way over dune ripples, early September

Great Sand Dunes is a certified International Dark Sky Park. Our distance from urban areas, dry air, and high elevation make 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.

## Safety at Night

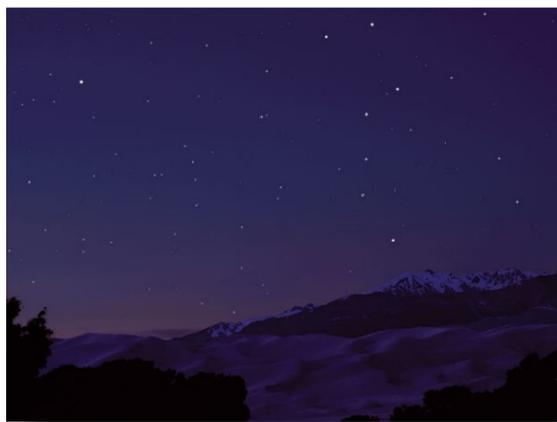
- To protect our dark skies, there are no outdoor lights illuminating the parking areas or dunes. Carry a flashlight at all times, but keep flashlight use to a minimum to protect your own night vision as well as that of other visitors and wildlife. Don't use your phone flashlight; preserve its battery in case of emergency. If possible, use a red light, which does not affect night vision.
- 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. As you return from the dunes, the parking area is near the left end of the trees.
- Even in summer months, temperatures drop at night. Bring warm, layered clothing, snacks, and water.
- Black bears and mountain lions are active at night, primarily in forested areas. Always stay aware of your surroundings and hike with others if possible. If you encounter a bear or lion, stop, stay calm, speak firmly but quietly, and slowly leave. If attacked, fight back with rocks, sticks, flashlight, or bare hands. Report any wildlife sightings to park staff when possible by calling the visitor center, or talking with a ranger at the visitor center during operating hours.
- Check forecasts, and watch and listen for approaching storms. Lightning tracking apps can also help to alert you of lightning in the area.

## View Stars and Constellations

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 brightest part of the Milky Way is most visible in the evening in late summer.

The dunefield has open views of the sky. Just a short stroll into the sand from the Dunes Parking Area provides excellent viewing. Alternatively, the park Amphitheater provides paved access for night sky viewing.

Bring your own telescope, binoculars, or just use 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, interactive kits and models, and red LED flashlights to protect your night vision.



Big Dipper over the dunes, April

## Attend an Evening Program



Amphitheater program, August

Free ranger programs are offered at the park Amphitheater, adjacent to Piñon Flats Campground, on many evenings during summer and fall. Check the program schedule on campground bulletin boards or on the park website for 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 Amphitheater parking lot.

## Enjoy a Full Moon



Moonset over dunes, June

Though few stars are visible during a full moon, you can explore the dunefield in moonlight without artificial lights. The dry, high-elevation air makes moonlight brighter. Bring a flashlight along for safety.

## Discover Night Life

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).



Western Screech Owl

Walk anywhere in the dunefield to observe nocturnal creatures and their tracks. Kangaroo rats can jump 5 feet (1.5 m) in the air to avoid bobcats, coyotes, owls,

and other predators that hunt them in the dunes. Giant sand treader camel crickets emerge at dusk to feed and



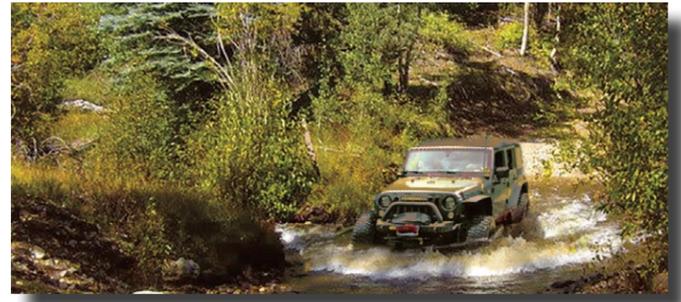
Plains Spadefoot

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.

# Best Ways to Experience the Mountains



## Medano Pass Primitive Road



Creek crossing on Medano Pass Road, September

- High-clearance 4WD (4-wheel-drive) is required beyond Point of No Return for soft sand, creek crossings, and rocks.
- Road mileage guide and current road conditions available online and at the visitor center.
- Vehicles must be highway-legal in Colorado. ATVs and OHVs are not permitted.
- During dry times, 4WD vehicles may have to reduce tire pressure to drive through soft sand. A free tire pressure station is available at the Amphitheater during warmer months.
- Catch-and-release fishing available for Rio Grande cutthroat trout (state permit required)

## Alpine Lakes and Summits



Medano Lake and Mount Herard, early June

### Medano Lake

- A day hike or overnight trip to forested areas and a small alpine lake
- Fishing (with license, catch and release only)
- Trailhead accessible with high-clearance 4WD vehicles on Medano Pass Primitive Road
- Round trip hike: 7.4 miles (12 km)
- Elevation gain: 1,918 feet (585 m)
- Average time: 5 hours
- Continue 1.5 steep miles (2.4 km) to the summit of Mount Herard (13,297 feet/4,052m)



Lower Sand Creek Lake, July

### 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 (4 km) each way to hike
- Round trip hike to either lake from Music Pass Trailhead: 8 miles (13 km)
- Elevation gain: 2000 feet (610 m)
- Average time: 6 hours
- Check with a ranger at the visitor center for off-trail hiking options
- Fishing (with license, catch and release only)

# Science, Culture, and Recreation Highlights

## Native Trout Restoration



Rio Grande cutthroat trout, native to the San Luis Valley in Colorado and New Mexico



In July 2021, crews transport Rio Grande cutthroat trout from Medano Creek by helicopter to Sand Creek Lakes.

In Sand Creek, and Upper and Lower Sand Creek Lakes, native Rio Grande cutthroat trout had been displaced by non-native species. In 2020, the non-native species were removed, and the native Rio Grande cutthroat trout are now being reintroduced to their former home. This will help Sand Creek and Sand Creek Lakes return to a more natural state. For more information on this ongoing project, visit the park's News Releases page: [nps.gov/grsa/learn/news/newsreleases.htm](https://nps.gov/grsa/learn/news/newsreleases.htm)

For information on fishing in the creeks and lakes of the national preserve, visit the park's Fishing page: [nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/fishing.htm](https://nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/fishing.htm)

## Dragonfly Mercury Project



Dragonfly larvae thrive in wetlands west of the dunefield.

As dragonfly larvae grow up and hunt in their ponds and creeks, they accumulate mercury over time. Park biologists go out and collect these larvae to measure the amount of mercury in their systems, giving us an indicator as to how much mercury is in the environment. This helps us track how air pollution levels change in the national park and preserve and the San Luis Valley.



A National Park Service employee inspects a larva from a wetland.

Learn more about this project at: [nps.gov/articles/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm](https://nps.gov/articles/dragonfly-mercury-project.htm)

## Great Sand Dunes National Preserve: A Long Heritage of Hunting

The establishment of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve (NP&P) in 2000 authorized expansion of Great Sand Dunes National Monument into a national park and established Great Sand Dunes National Preserve. A national preserve is a unique National Park Service (NPS) unit that permits certain natural resource extractive activities. Great Sand Dunes National Preserve is one of 19 national preserves managed by the National Park Service that allows fishing and hunting. The preserve is 41,686 acres, approximately 1/3 of the park and preserve's 149,137 total acres. The preserve is home to lush forests and meadows, high alpine lakes, and rugged mountain peaks.

The preserve provides recreational opportunities unlike those you would experience in the national park such as hunting. While hunting is not permitted in Great Sand Dunes National Park, hunting as a recreational activity attracts licensed hunters to the Great Sand Dunes National Preserve during designated seasons. NPS works cooperatively with Colorado Parks and Wildlife to administer and enforce hunting regulations within the boundaries of Great Sand Dunes National Preserve.

Existing evidence indicates that Indigenous peoples hunted what is now Great Sand Dunes NP&P as early as 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Through time, the region appears to have been continuously used on an intermittent basis because of its reliable water and plentiful food resources. This evidence has revealed that hunting large prehistoric mammals such as Columbian mammoth and bison using primitive hunting practices was part of survival and subsistence.

Individuals interested in hunting within Great Sand Dunes National Preserve should be familiar with Colorado Parks and Wildlife hunting regulations for the species they are hunting, and NPS rules and regulations regarding access and game transport.

A hunter watches for elk from a forested ridge, November.

Wearing orange or other bright colors is recommended for hikers in the national preserve during the fall hunting season.



## Cultural Highlight: Historically Modified Trees at Great Sand Dunes



Members of the Hopi and Hopi Tewa tribes meet with park staff beside one of the 200 culturally modified trees found in the park and preserve. Though a significant portion of the bark on one side of this ponderosa pine was removed in the 19th century, the tree is still alive and healthy today.

Hidden among the woodlands and forests of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve are unique living artifacts - trees that were ceremonially modified by generations of tribes. Sections of bark were removed for food, medicine, cradleboards, and other uses in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The inner bark of various pines and firs is highly nutritious, containing calcium, vitamin C, and antibiotic properties. Each variety of tree has a different scent and flavor: ponderosa pines smell like vanilla or butter-scotch, while white fir smells like citrus.

Over 200 culturally modified trees have been identified throughout the park and preserve. In 2000,

a concentrated grove of modified ponderosa pines just east of the dunefield was added to the National Register of Historic Places as 'Indian Grove'.

Great Sand Dunes staff learned of their significance during tribal consultation meetings with numerous culturally affiliated tribes. These insights help park staff better understand, manage, and appropriately communicate the diverse cultural resources of the park and preserve. Tribes value visiting these modified trees as it connects them with this special part of their heritage.



## 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

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

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

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

### Planning Your Time

#### 2-3 Hours

- Explore the dunefield from the main Dunes Parking Area to walk, splash in Medano Creek (seasonal during spring), or sand sled/sandboard. See page 4 for sled rental information.
- Hike to the top of the first ridge of dunes (page 2) for a view of the entire dunefield
- Hike Montville Nature Trail (page 2)
- Drive your 4-wheel-drive high-clearance vehicle on the Medano Pass Primitive Road (seasonal during summer and fall)



East side of the dunefield, June

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

- Explore the east side of the dunefield, starting from Point of No Return, Sand Pit, or Castle Creek Picnic Areas
- Hike Star Dune (page 2), one of the tallest dunes in North America
- Watch the sunset and stay into the evening to watch the moonrise or first stars and planets appear



Colorado columbine wildflowers, Mosca Pass Trail, July

#### If you have more time:

- Attend a free daytime or evening ranger program
- Walk in the dunes after dark to experience the night (page 5)
- Hike Mosca Pass to view wildflowers and listen to songbirds (page 2)
- Hike Hidden Dune, one of the tallest dunes in North America (page 2)
- Hike to a high-elevation lake (page 6), accessible from Music Pass Trailhead or Medano Lake Trailhead

### Park Partners

#### Western National Parks Association



Since 1938, WNPA has advanced education, interpretation, research, and community engagement to ensure national parks are increasingly valued by all. Net proceeds from the park store have recently supported diverse cultural programs, youth programs, and dark night sky program supplies. Learn more at: [wnpa.org](http://wnpa.org)



Founded in 1989, Friends of the Dunes is a non-profit group supporting cultural, educational, and research activities at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. In recent years, the Friends have generously supported dunes wheelchairs, new exhibits, Montville Nature Trail posts and guide, a new viewing scope at the visitor center, cultural and scientific research grants, and the Junior Ranger program.

Learn more on the Friends of the Dunes website: [greatsanddunes.org](http://greatsanddunes.org)



Children learn about creatures, fossils, and artifacts at Junior Ranger Day, an annual event sponsored by Friends of the Dunes.