To ascend Rocky Mountain National Park’s Trail Ridge Road is to leave this world and enter another. It carries you, breathless with wonder and altitude, toward a fragile alpine realm, the tundra. Most animals hibernate or migrate during the harsh winters. No trees can live here.

Despite the brief, six-week growing season, plants survive. Most conserve energy by miniaturizing. Each July thousands of brilliant alpine sunflowers, Alyssum grandiflorum (above), burst from the thin blanket of soil that covers parts of the tundra. For decades these hardy plants have worked toward this moment. Many tundra flowers track the sun to maximize their intake of light, required for photosynthesis.

Nature’s Knife Edge

To park your vehicle at the Alpine Visitor Center and behold 360-degree views of astonishing peaks, lakes, snowfields, canyons, forests, and meadows spread over 400 square miles. For a close look at the alpine ecosystem walk the Tundra Communities Trail to the east. To the west, the Rockies’ spine divides the continent into two watersheds. One flows west to the Pacific, the other east to the Atlantic.

On the park’s drier east side, snow blows in from the westerly, replenishing the few remaining glaciers. All rest in cool, dark valley cirques, or bowl-shaped depressions. Higher summer temperatures since the 1990s have caused the glaciers to melt back. On the park’s west side, in the Never Summer mountains, the Colorado River begins as a tiny stream fed by snowmelt. Downstream, it will provide water to 40 million humans.

Thrust skyward by Earth’s forces between 40 and 70 million years ago, then sculpted by three glacial episodes, the Rockies are “new” in geologic terms. In 2009 Rocky Mountain National Park, a small neighborhood within this vast mountain range, became one of the nation’s “newest” designated wildernesses. Nature has always ruled this wild, fantastic place. But as human-triggered events outside park boundaries increasingly affect life within the park, how will nature respond? What is our role?

Subalpine

9,000–11,400 feet

Snow that falls in the alpine zone blows down to the subalpine, creating a vast ecosystem with over 10 inches of precipitation annually. Sharp-shouldered, pointy-leafed Engelmann spruce and flat-needled fir (below) reach towering heights. The unapologetic supports shrubs like blueberry, wax currant, huckleberry, and Wood’s rose. Wildflowers like arnica, fairy slipper, penstemon, and purple salpiglossis (left) outline the path, adding color to the understory.

On the park’s southern edge, the water course, or American dipper, defies fast-running streams to dwell for food: Dimy and hairy woodpeckers, bold Steller’s jay, and the yellow-rumped warbler share the woods. Look for the pocket gopher and golden-mantled ground squirrel.

Alpine

above 11,400 feet

Extremely thin soil, strong ultraviolet light, freezing winds, and bitter cold define the few. Many plants hug the ground in dense rosettes (sunflower, below). Light, presence moisture with waxy leaf surfaces, or trap warmth against stems and leaves with hairs.

Animals also must adapt or die. Marmots store fat, then draw upon their reserves as winter advances. For birds, the alpine is an exception. This bird stays all winter, migrating only for a few months in the northern mountains. As summer temperatures since the 1990s have caused the glaciers to melt back, on the park’s west side, in the Never Summer mountains, the Colorado River begins as a tiny stream fed by snowmelt. Downstream, it will provide water to 40 million humans.

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Roaming Rocky Mountain National Park

**Park Information** Check your free park newspaper for current information about visitor centers, safety and high country survival, ranger-led programs, services, hiking trails, wildlife, shuttle buses, and more. Find lodging and visitor services at Estes Park and Grand Lake.

**Safety** Avoid lightning. Begin your hike early in the day. Get below treeline or to a shelter by afternoon, when thunderstorms begin. If caught above treeline in a storm, run from summits and isolated trees and rocks. Avoid small cave entrances and overhangs. Crouch down on your heels.

- Many park visitors experience altitude sickness. Consult your doctor if you have a respiratory or heart condition.
- The park’s swift-running streams, waterfalls, falling trees, and sudden weather changes present many natural hazards.
- While driving, stay alert for wildlife crossing the roads.

**Pets** Pets are prohibited in all areas not accessible by motor vehicle, including trails and meadows. Do not leave pets unattended in vehicles. Where allowed, pets must be on a six-foot leash.

**Hunting, Fishing, and Firearms** Hunting is prohibited in the park.

- For firearms regulations check the park website.
- Fishing requires a Colorado fishing license.

**Regulations** Abide by park regulations and restrictions, available at visitor centers and entrances. Camp only in designated campgrounds. All backcountry camping requires a permit. Do not leave property unattended for more than 24 hours without permission.

- All vehicles, including bicycles, must stay on roads or in parking areas. Stopping or parking on roads is prohibited.
- Overnight parking requires a permit. Do not feed, approach, or try to touch any wild animal.
- Leave wildflowers and other plants for others to enjoy.
- Open alcoholic beverage containers in vehicles on park roads are illegal.

**Accessibility** We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

- Rocky Mountain National Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

**Emergencies**
- Emergencies call 911
- For information call 970-586-1206
- For Trail Ridge Road status call 970-586-1222

**Preserving Wilderness**

In 2009 Congress protected most of Rocky Mountain National Park as wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Wilderness is a gift to people today and to future generations. The designation protects forever the land’s wild character, natural conditions, opportunities for solitude, and scientific, educational, and historical values. In wilderness people can sense being a part of the whole community of life on Earth.