

Colorado: The Heart of the Rockies

Rocky Mountain National Park & The Continental Divide with Naturalist Journeys



July 9 – 15, 2023

w/ South Park Ext. July 15 – 18

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Join Naturalist Journeys on an adventure to the heart of Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Stretching some 3,000 miles, from Alaska to Albuquerque, the Rocky Mountains create a spine through North America, separating east from west. Colorado is home to 30 of the highest peaks in the range, with 58 peaks above 14,000 feet, offering vast, uninterrupted wilderness supporting a unique and diverse avian population.

Over the course of the tour, we travel through five distinct life zones—moving from grassland plains, foothill shrublands, montane forests, and subalpine forest to alpine tundra, primarily within the wild lands of Rocky Mountain National Park. Each day of our tour is filled with amazing views, native birds, and good company.

Our home base for exploring magnificent Rocky Mountain National Park is a comfortable streamside inn in Estes Park. Located in the heart of the Rockies at 7522 feet, with majestic views in every direction, the town is well-known for its warm hospitality, regional fare and casual, friendly atmosphere. Rocky Mountain National Park is just up the road, giving easy access to explore its spectacular mountain environments.

Enjoy a taste of the eclectic and lively town of Boulder on each end of the tour, famous for its stellar food scene and exciting downtown.

Those electing to continue on the extension have a second adventure above the tree-line, driving to the summit of Mt. Evans. At 14,256 feet, this is the highest paved road in America! Look here for Brown-capped Rosy-Finch and, with luck, encounter the resident herd of Mountain Goats. Journey next into South Park, a unique short grass "prairie" at 10,000 feet that supports breeding Mountain Plover. We also have the opportunity to experience the Pinyon Pine-Juniper Forest, seeking Black-throated Gray Warbler, Juniper Titmouse, and Pinyon Jay. And as a finale, experience the High Creek Fen Preserve, an extraordinary ecological oddity preserved by The Nature Conservancy.

Tour Details

6-Day / 7-Night Colorado Rocky Mountain National Park Birding & Nature Tour

\$3190 DBL / \$3890 SGL, from Denver

Airport is Denver International Airport (DIA)

Tour Highlights

- Experience some of the best the Rocky Mountains have to offer—from foothill grassland to montane meadows and towering mountain peaks
- Enjoy a range of stunning vistas and explore hidden pockets of RMNP with your expert guide—take your photo at the Continental Divide!
- Find classic grassland species including Lazuli Bunting, Black-headed Grosbeak, Cordilleran Flycatcher, and many more
- Experience the alpine tundra in full bloom while watching territorial displays of Horned Lark and American Pipit
- Search for high mountain Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, Townsend's Solitaire, Clark's Nutcracker and the iconic but notoriously elusive White-tailed Ptarmigan
- Hike to waterfalls looking for Black Swift nests, along with American Three-toed Woodpecker, Dusky Grouse, and Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets among others
- Stay in a comfortable streamside inn in the heart of the Rockies, with fireplaces in every room

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sun., July 9 Arrival in Denver, Colorado

Welcome to Colorado! Please arrive today at Denver International Airport (DIA) no later than 1:30 PM. Our expert guide is at the airport to greet you. Relax from your flight and get to know your fellow travelers on an hour and a half drive to Boulder where you can begin to acclimatize to the higher altitude. Settle in to your comfortable hotel, and rest or enjoy some optional late afternoon birding before dinner at one of the city's fun dining destinations.

Accommodations at Hotel Boulderado, Boulder (D)

Mon., July 10 Estes Park

After breakfast, we pack up and head for the mountains. Stop halfway in Lyons where at about 6,000 feet, the foothill shrublands begin. We take a leisurely stroll through low-growing mountain mahogany, antelope bitterbrush, currants and sumac, home to MacGillivray's Warbler, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Lazuli Bunting, and Black-headed Grosbeak.

Continuing on into the heart of the Rocky Mountains, we climb to iconic Estes Park. Above 8,000 feet, the montane forest begins, dominated by ancient ponderosa pines with stands of Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, Engelmann spruce and quaking aspen. Here we encounter Steller's Jay, Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Tanager, and Plumbeous Vireo. A break along the way at the Matthews-Reeser Sanctuary allows us to check for American Dipper, White-throated Swift, Wilson's Warbler, and waterfowl.

We reach the heart of the Rockies in Estes Park in time for lunch, then afterwards we meet with a local bander for a fascinating presentation on which birds are found locally and the chance to hold and release captured birds. Dine tonight at the Cascades Restaurant in the historic Stanley Hotel, a stunning and gracious landmark.

Accommodations at the Inn at Fall River, Estes Park (B,L,D)

Tues., July 11 & Wed, July 12 Rocky Mountain National Park

Having acclimated to the elevation, we spend two days birding and exploring Rocky Mountain National Park. Start each day with an early morning drive up to 12,000 feet in search of the notoriously elusive White-tailed Ptarmigan.

Alpine tundra, the "land above the trees," is home to a surprisingly diverse collection of dwarf plants and lichen. After the snows melt, usually in late June, the alpine tundra becomes a sea of flowers that have adapted to the short growing season. Experience the alpine tundra in full bloom while enjoying the songs of White-crowned Sparrow and the territorial displays of Horned Lark and American Pipit. Stop for a photo at the Continental Divide.

After a picnic in the park or lunch in Estes Park, return to search for Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, Townsend's Solitaire, Clark's Nutcracker, Pygmy Nuthatch, Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Wood-Pewee, and more. Explore through the park, enjoying stunning views and birding for Williamson's Sapsucker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Canada Jay, and other mountain species.

Dine both nights in Estes Park eateries, with a chance to stroll and explore the lively street scene if desired.

Accommodations at Inn at Fall River, Estes Park (B,L,D)

Thurs., July 13 RMNP Wild Basin

After breakfast, today we make our way to the southeastern Wild Basin section of Rocky Mountain National Park. Walk through subalpine spruce/fir forest and along streams to find a hidden Black Swift nest, along with American Three-toed Woodpecker, Dusky Grouse, Hairy Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, and more. After lunch in Gold Hill, we wind our way back to Estes Park with stops at Allenspark and Lily Lake.

Accommodations at Inn at Fall River, Estes Park (B,L,D)

Fri., July 14 Rocky Mountain Foothills

This morning, bid the park adieu as we gradually head to lower elevations. Pause for hummingbirds at a private residence's feeders and then visit a local park searching for foothills species like Dusky Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, Rock and Canyon Wrens, Lesser Goldfinch, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Western Tanager.

After lunch in Lyons, we drive the remaining half hour then stretch our legs and bird a park in Boulder before arriving at our hotel to rest and perhaps to pack before adjourning to dinner on Boulder's famous Pearl Street. Celebrate a fantastic week of exploration at one of Boulder's fine restaurants before strolling back to our nearby hotel or further exploring Pearl Street's lively scene.

Accommodations at Hotel Boulderado, Boulder (B,L,D)

Sat., July 15 Departures

After packing the van and heading out, on the way to the airport we visit the Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR. Formerly a chemical weapons development area operated by the Army, the arsenal was closed in the 1980s and declared a superfund site. After discovering large numbers of wintering Bald Eagles, a multi-agency cleanup ensued and today the refuge is home to a small bison herd and over 250 bird species.

We end our tour with a short drive to Denver International Airport, planning to arrive at noon; please make your flights out after 3:00 PM. (B)

South Park Extension

Sat., July 15 Echo Lake

Those continuing with the extension drive on from the Denver International Airport for lunch in historic Golden, Colorado and then continue to Echo Lake.

Accommodations at Echo Lake Lodge, Echo Lake (L,D)

Sun., July 16 Mount Evans

In the morning we drive to the top of Mt. Evans, at 14,264 the 14th tallest 14er in Colorado. On the way up, stay alert for Bighorn Sheep and make a few stops to find and view White-tailed Ptarmigan and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch. At the summit, we enjoy the view and appreciate the resident Mountain Goats.

After a quick lunch in Evergreen, we continue on to South Park where we meet with a Colorado University doctoral student studying the Mountain Plover population that breeds in this unique sub-alpine prairie at 10,000 feet. Travel on to Salida with time to rest and refresh before dinner.

Accommodations in Salida (B,L,D)

Mon., July 17 Pinyon Juniper Forest

Spend the day birding in Pinyon Pine—Juniper habitat looking for special species including Black-throated Gray Warbler, Juniper Titmouse, Pinyon Jay, and others.

Accommodations in Salida (B,L,D)

Tues., July 18 Departure

Enjoy a morning visit to High Creek Fen Preserve. This extraordinary wetland is the most ecologically diverse, floristically rich fen in the Southern Rocky Mountains, containing more rare plant species than any other wetland in Colorado. A surprising variety of birds are possible including shorebirds, waterfowl, and passerines.

From here, it is a 2.5-hour drive back to Denver International Airport where we say our goodbyes before catching afternoon flights. Please make your departing flights for after 3:00 PM. *(B,L)*

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Please note, as of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is **\$3190 DBL / \$3890 SGL**, from Denver, Colorado. Cost includes: all accommodations; all meals as stated in the itinerary; group airport transfers; ground transportation; professional guide services; park, preserve, and other activity fees; and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour price does not include: round trip airfare to and from Denver, Colorado, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, portage, telephone charges, or alcoholic beverages. Gratuities for your guides and other staff are not included; these are at your discretion, but highly appreciated and recommended.

Travel Details

Please plan to arrive in Denver no later than 1:30 PM on July 9. Please make your departure flights for after 3:00 PM on July 15, or July 18 if staying for the extension.

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