NATIONAL PARK SERIES · GUIDE 010

3 Days in Rocky Mountain

Bear Lake, Trail Ridge Road, and the reservation system that catches almost everyone out — because there isn't one permit, there are two.

⚠ READ THIS BEFORE YOU BOOK

A regular Timed Entry reservation does not get you onto Bear Lake Road. Bear Lake, Dream Lake, Emerald Lake, Alberta Falls, Sky Pond, Glacier Gorge, Moraine Park and Sprague Lake are all in that corridor — most of what a first-time visitor came to see.

They run on different clocks. Most of RMNP is controlled 9 AM to 2 PM. Bear Lake Road is controlled 5 AM to 6 PM — so entering the park at 8 AM without a permit does not mean you can drive the corridor at 8 AM.

QUICK FACTS BEFORE YOU GO

- **Two reservations, two clocks.** Timed Entry 9 AM–2 PM. Timed Entry + Bear Lake Road 5 AM–6 PM.
- **$2 per reservation**, non-refundable, one per vehicle per day — separate from admission.
- **$30 per vehicle** for one day, $35 for seven. RMNP annual pass $70.
- **2026 season:** May 22–October 12, and to October 18 for Bear Lake Road.
- **No lodging inside the park.** Estes Park is the base for a three-day trip.
- **Trail Ridge Road** opens around the last week of May and closes about mid-October.

The Two Reservations

Read this page before you book anything

There isn't one permit. There are two.

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They also run on different clocks, so entering the rest of the park at 8 AM without a reservation does not mean you can drive onto Bear Lake Road at 8 AM.

RESERVATION	COVERS	HOURS
Timed Entry	All of RMNP **except** the Bear Lake Road Corridor — Trail Ridge Road, Alpine Visitor Center, the west side, Wild Basin, outlying areas	**9 AM – 2 PM**
Timed Entry + Bear Lake Road	The corridor **and** the rest of the park — Bear Lake, Glacier Gorge, Moraine Park, Sprague Lake, Park & Ride	**5 AM – 6 PM**

A timed-entry reservation does not guarantee parking. NPS says so outright. Bear Lake and Glacier Gorge both fill early — when they do, the answer is the Park & Ride and the shuttle.

How reservations are released

It is **not** a rolling 30-day window. There are two chances at any date: the **1st of the month at 8 AM MDT** for the following month, and **7 PM MDT the night before**, when NPS releases 40% of the next day's inventory. NPS warns those go quickly.

- Reservations are **two-hour entry windows**. Enter during your window; no required departure time.
- **Bear Lake re-entry:** leave the corridor and you can't return until after 2 PM.
- **Campers** at Aspenglen, Glacier Basin or Moraine Park are covered including Bear Lake Road, entering from 1 PM on day one. Timber Creek covers the park but **not** Bear Lake Road. **Longs Peak Campground does not include timed entry at all.**
- **Outlying areas count.** NPS names Lily Lake, Longs Peak, Lumpy Ridge, Wild Basin, East Inlet and North Inlet — being outside the main gates doesn't exempt you.

THE QUESTION EVERYBODY ASKS

"I Couldn't Get a Bear Lake Reservation"

Five ways round it — and one is better than a reservation

1 Try the 7 PM night-before release

NPS holds back **40% of each day's reservations** and releases them at 7 PM MDT the night before. The biggest second chance in the system.

BE THERE AT 7 SHARP | SELLS OUT FAST

2 Arrive before 5 AM

The Bear Lake clock starts at 5 AM. Before that, **no reservation is required at all**. A brutal alarm, and also how you get Bear Lake to yourself at sunrise.

NO PERMIT NEEDED | BEST LIGHT

3 Arrive after 6 PM

The window closes at 6 PM. Summer evenings here are long, and the corridor at dusk is a genuinely good experience rather than a consolation prize.

NO PERMIT NEEDED

4 Take the Hiker Shuttle

Runs from the **Estes Park Visitor Center to the park's Park & Ride**, where you transfer onto the Bear Lake Road shuttles. Its own reservation, separate from timed entry. In 2026: daily May 22–September 7, then weekends September 12–October 18.

SKIPS CORRIDOR PARKING | OWN RESERVATION

5 Spend that day somewhere else

Trail Ridge Road, the Alpine Visitor Center, the west side, Wild Basin and Lumpy Ridge all work on the regular Timed Entry permit. Swap your days and do the corridor later.

REGULAR PERMIT ONLY

Timed entry gets you into the corridor. It does not reserve you a parking space. Those are two different problems, and the Park & Ride solves the second one.

The shuttle system

Bear Lake Route — 2026: May 22 to October 18, roughly 6:30 AM to 7:30 PM, every 10 to 15 minutes. Stops at the Park & Ride, Bierstadt Lake, Glacier Gorge and Bear Lake.

Moraine Park Route — same season, roughly 7 AM to 7:30 PM, linking the Park & Ride with Sprague Lake and the Moraine Park / Fern Lake area.

Both are free with admission. Don't confuse the Hiker Shuttle with Estes Park's own town transit — the Hiker Shuttle is the one built to reach the park.

DAY 01

The Bear Lake Road Corridor

The lakes everyone comes for, before everyone gets there

Needs the **Timed Entry + Bear Lake Road** reservation. Bear Lake sits at **9,475 ft**, so everything today is under four miles round trip — deliberately. **Sleep: Estes Park.**

1 Pre-dawn — into the corridor

The Bear Lake clock starts at 5 AM. Arrive before it and you need no reservation at all. With a permit, use the earliest window you could get.

BEFORE 5 AM = NO PERMIT

2 Sunrise — Bear Lake · ~0.5 mi loop

Flat, paved in part, and rated easy by NPS. Walk it before the day builds. The lot fills early — if it's full, carry on to the Park & Ride and shuttle back up.

EASY · PARKING FILLS EARLY

3 Morning — Nymph, Dream and Emerald Lakes

Three lakes on one climbing trail from Bear Lake. Nymph **~1 mi RT**, Dream **~2.2 mi RT**, Emerald **~3.4–3.6 mi RT**. Turn around at any of them.

NPS gives Emerald's elevation gain as **roughly 605 ft on one page and 771 ft on another**. We print both rather than pick — it's a wide enough spread to change who attempts it.

DON'T MISS · NPS FIGURES DISAGREE

4 Midday — lunch

Back into Estes Park, or eat what you carried at Sprague Lake, which is flat, easy and on the way.

5 Early afternoon — Alberta Falls · ~1.6 mi RT

From the Glacier Gorge trailhead. NPS specifically warns this lot fills early and recommends the Park & Ride and shuttle rather than counting on a space.

PARKING FILLS EARLY · USE THE SHUTTLE

6 Late afternoon — Sprague Lake · 0.8 mi loop

Flat the whole way, with the divide reflected in the water on a still evening. The easiest big view in the park.

ACCESSIBLE · FAMILY-FRIENDLY

7 Sunset — Moraine Park

A wide meadow that's one of the park's best evening wildlife spots, and a main elk rut area in September and October. Several rut areas carry seasonal restrictions roughly **5 PM to 10 AM** — check current closures before settling in.

WILDLIFE · SEASONAL CLOSURES

DAY 02 · LATE MAY – MID OCTOBER

Trail Ridge Road

Forty-eight miles across the park, eleven of them above the trees

Needs only the **regular Timed Entry** reservation, and only if you arrive between 9 AM and 2 PM. Start early — you'll be near 12,000 feet at midday and want to be descending as the afternoon builds. **Sleep: Estes Park.**

1 7:00 AM — out of Estes Park

In through Beaver Meadows and straight onto the climb. Before 9 AM you're outside the reservation window entirely.

BEFORE 9 AM = NO PERMIT

2 Morning — the climb above treeline

NPS describes Trail Ridge as a **48-mile road between Estes Park and Grand Lake with roughly 11 miles above treeline**. Stop often. The change from forest to open tundra happens faster than you expect.

ABOVE TREELINE

3 Mid-morning — Alpine Visitor Center · 11,796 ft

Seasonal, and open only while the high section of road is accessible. The road's own high point is **12,183 ft**, which NPS calls the highest continuous paved road in the United States.

SEASONAL HIGHEST POINT

4 Midday — walk on the tundra

Short and slow. You are close to 12,000 feet and it will feel like it. Stay on the marked surfaces — tundra takes decades to recover.

STAY ON TRAIL

5 Early afternoon — west into Kawuneeche Valley

A different park on this side — wetter, greener and quieter, and where visitors most often see moose. Keep **120 feet** from them.

MOOSE · 120 FT

6 Afternoon — Grand Lake, or turn back

Grand Lake is the full 48 miles from Estes Park, so this is a long day out and back. **The Alpine Visitor Center is the honest turnaround** — by then you've seen the tundra and the high point, which is the reason to drive it.

NPS doesn't publish a standard end-to-end drive time, so don't plan tight around one.

NO OFFICIAL DRIVE TIME

Start early and be below treeline before the afternoon storms. Trail Ridge puts you roughly eleven miles above the trees with nowhere to shelter, and summer thunderstorms build fast over the high country.

DAY 02 · WHEN THE ROAD IS CLOSED

The East-Side Day

Mid-October to late May, the two sides stop being one destination

With Trail Ridge Road shut to through traffic, the drive between Estes Park and Grand Lake becomes roughly **143 miles, and NPS says to allow three to four hours**. Don't attempt it as a day trip. Spend the day on the east side instead.

1. **Morning — Wild Basin · Ouzel Falls, ~5.4 mi RT**

   About 950 feet of gain through a quieter corner of the park most visitors skip entirely.

   QUIET

2. **Or — Lumpy Ridge · Gem Lake, ~3.2 mi RT**

   Roughly 1,000 feet of gain, with big views back over Estes Park.

   SHORTER

3. **Afternoon — Moraine Park and Upper Beaver Meadows**

   Wildlife at the end of the day, then whatever you didn't finish on day one.

   WILDLIFE

Timed entry still applies to outlying areas in season. NPS names Lily Lake, Longs Peak, Lumpy Ridge, Wild Basin, East Inlet and North Inlet — being outside the main entrance gates does not exempt you.

Altitude

The thing most people underestimate here

WHERE	ELEVATION
Beaver Meadows Visitor Center	**7,840 ft**
Bear Lake	**9,475 ft**
Alpine Visitor Center	**11,796 ft**
Trail Ridge Road high point	**12,183 ft**
Longs Peak summit	**14,259 ft**

NPS warns that many visitors experience altitude-related symptoms and that activity is more demanding up here, particularly coming from near sea level. Anyone with respiratory or cardiovascular concerns should seek medical advice first. Our advice, not a park rule: keep day one's hiking short.

DAY 03

Choose Your Adventure

Five real options — pick one, don't combine them

OPTION A · THE BIG HIKE

Sky Pond or Chasm Lake

Sky Pond from Glacier Gorge: about **9.8 miles round trip, ~1,700 ft**. The most rewarding long day in the corridor.

Chasm Lake: about **8.4 miles round trip, 2,360 ft**, sitting directly beneath the east face of Longs Peak.

Both need an early start and both finish above treeline. Read the storm rule again before committing.

OPTION B · SOMETHING IN THE MIDDLE

Deer Mountain

About **6.1 miles round trip with 1,083 feet of gain**. NPS's current hiking database rates it **Hard** — that's their word, not ours.

OPTION C · THE HISTORIC DIRT ROAD

Old Fall River Road

9.4 miles, unpaved, one-way uphill, 15 mph, with grades reaching about 16%. No vehicles over 25 feet and no trailers.

Shorter season than Trail Ridge — roughly early July to early October. In 2026 vehicle access began July 4.

OPTION D · A WILDLIFE MORNING

Moraine Park, Horseshoe Park, Upper Beaver Meadows

Be there at first light. NPS asks for at least **75 feet** from wildlife and about **120 feet** from black bears, moose and mountain lions.

OPTION E · SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER ONLY

The Elk Rut

Elk come down to the lower meadows to breed and the bulls get loud and genuinely aggressive holding a harem. NPS names **Moraine Park, Horseshoe Park, Upper Beaver Meadows, Harbison Meadow and Holzwarth Meadow**.

Seasonal restrictions apply in several areas from about **September 1 to October 31, generally 5 PM to 10 AM**. Check current closures — rules differ for on-trail and off-trail travel.

Longs Peak is not on that list on purpose. The Keyhole Route is roughly 16 miles round trip and 4,885 feet of gain to a 14,259-foot summit, and NPS treats it as a mountaineering objective, not a day hike. Plan it as its own trip.

The Trail Table

NPS figures, round trip

HIKE	TRAIL	DISTANCE	ELEVATION
Bear Lake	Bear Lake	~0.5–0.6 mi loop	Minimal — NPS: Easy
Sprague Lake	Sprague Lake	0.8 mi loop	Flat
Lily Lake	Lily Lake	0.8 mi loop	NPS: Easy
Nymph Lake	from Bear Lake	~1 mi RT	~225–230 ft
Alberta Falls	Glacier Gorge	~1.6 mi RT	Modest
Dream Lake	from Bear Lake	~2.2 mi RT	~425–475 ft
Gem Lake	Lumpy Ridge	~3.2 mi RT	~1,000 ft
Emerald Lake	from Bear Lake	~3.4–3.6 mi RT	**605 or 771 ft** — NPS gives both
Ouzel Falls	Wild Basin	~5.4 mi RT	~950 ft
Deer Mountain	Deer Mountain	~6.1 mi RT	1,083 ft — NPS: Hard
Chasm Lake	Longs Peak TH	~8.4 mi RT	2,360 ft
Sky Pond	Glacier Gorge	~9.8 mi RT	~1,700 ft
Longs Peak	Keyhole Route	~16 mi RT	~4,885 ft — mountaineering

*The NPS master trail table often lists distances **one way** rather than round trip. Always check which a page is giving you before trusting a number — it's why half the guides out there quote you half the hike.*

Before you go

- **Three entrance stations.** Beaver Meadows and Fall River on the east side, Grand Lake on the west. First-time traffic concentrates on the east.
- **Trail Ridge Road opening is a goal, not a promise.** It opened May 31 in 2024, May 30 in 2025 and May 29 in 2026 — but the record runs from May 7, 2002 to June 26, 1943.
- **Busy season is late May to mid-October**, heaviest in summer with extra pressure on autumn weekends and through elk season.
- **No lodging inside the park.** Estes Park on the east, Grand Lake on the west. For three days, stay in Estes Park and don't split.
- **Campgrounds are seasonal** — Moraine Park, Glacier Basin, Aspenglen and Timber Creek. Longs Peak is separate and tent-focused.

The Full Guide

Scan the QR code below to open the live itinerary — with every stop, current closures, and updates whenever the reservation system changes.

SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE CAMERA

- Day 1 — Bear Lake Road
- Day 2 — Trail Ridge Road
- Day 3 — Your choice

Tip: Cell service is patchy in the park and gone entirely above treeline. Open the guide and download what you need before you leave Estes Park. And check nps.gov/romo the morning you go — road openings, water, closures and reservation dates all change here.