

Best of the West



View of Longs Peak at Rocky Mountain National
Park (Grant Ordelheide)



See some of the West's most incredible national parks on this route through Colorado and Wyoming.



Map by Peter Sucheski

From microscopic, heat-loving bacteria that turns Yellowstone's hot springs into colorful pools, to mighty elk, bison and wolves, this road trip is full of wonderful wildlife that showcase just how diverse Colorado and Wyoming are.

Start in Denver before heading north to Rocky Mountain National Park. The Centennial State has the largest elk population in the world. If you visit the Moraine Park area early in the morning or in the evening, you're likely to spot some of these majestic creatures. Continue west towards the Utah border, checking out wild mustangs in Craig before swinging north to Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks, which make up a large portion of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. It's one of the biggest nearly-intact temperate ecosystems in the world and is home to abundant wildlife from ungulates like elk, moose, bison and pronghorn to predators like wolves, grizzly bears and mountain lions.

After exploring both parks, point your wheels back south where you can spend time soaking in the hot springs of Saratoga, a welcome respite since Yellowstone's hot pools are too scalding to enter. Check out the university town of Laramie, with a great craft beer scene, and ride a train through a bison herd in the classic Western town of Cheyenne. The state's capital is also home to the world's largest outdoor rodeo, Cheyenne Frontier Days, where riders on bulls and saddle broncs compete. Back across the border in Colorado, watch longhorn cattle march through downtown Greeley, get to know the state's prairies at the serene Jackson Lake State Park near Fort Morgan—a great spot for birding—and near Keenesburg, find the curious sight of lions, tigers and bears roaming the Great Plains. These rescues are part of the oldest wildlife sanctuary in the country.

This is one road trip you won't want to forget your camera on.

PHOTOS: Grand Teton National Park (Grant Ordelheide), Bison (Howard Litvack)





Beware the Rut

Starting in mid-September the air grows cool in Rocky Mountain National Park and the aspens begin to turn golden. It's also mating season for the park's hundreds of elk. Known as "the rut," fall is a popular time to see majestic bull elk put on a show. Their goal? To attract the attention of females, known as cows. During this season, bulls become more aggressive, charging at each other and locking antlers in a show of machismo. You'll often hear the sound of bugling—the male's call to attract and maintain his harem—echoing through the park's valleys. Elk can be spotted in many grassy meadows throughout Rocky Mountain, but the Moraine Park area on the east side offers a great chance to spot the creatures, especially near dawn and dusk. While beautiful to watch, elk are dangerous wild animals and have gored park visitors who got too close. Stay at least 75 feet from elk and other large ungulates and note that some trails and most off-trail use is restricted from 5 p.m. to 10 a.m. during the rut to protect visitors from aggravated elk.

Elk bugling in Rocky Mountain National Park (Getty Images)



Wet & Wild

Mustangs, elk, dinos and rapids await in this beautiful part of the state.

By Tori Peglar

Tucked in the northwestern corner of Colorado with views that rival those of the Grand Canyon is unexpected Dinosaur National Monument, a pretty spot surrounded by small town charm.

A little off the beaten path and away from the crowds, Moffat County encompasses the towns of Craig, Maybell, Hamilton, Massadona and Lay, plus is home to two-thirds of Dinosaur National Monument. See more on page 61.

To raft the Yampa River outside the monument, reach out to Good Vibes Rafting Gear for a Yampa River Access brochure listing all launches from Steamboat Springs to Dinosaur National Monument. It's also available from Visit

Moffat County. Both the Green River and Yampa River offer single and multi-day adventures, which enable you to experience the region in a unique and adventurous way.

"It's absolutely gorgeous," says Tom Kleinschnitz, Visit Moffat County's tourism director. "The views along the Yampa and Green River corridors and on the Yampa Bench Road in Dinosaur National Monument are better than overlooks in the Grand Canyon."

On the monument's eastern edge is Deerlodge Park where elk live year round.

"There are times in the middle of the winter where they'll bunch up into a herd

of hundreds," Kleinschnitz says.

To get there, go west from Craig on Highway 40 to mile marker 44. Take Deerlodge Park Road north for 12 miles, following the paved road to the campground.

If you seek more wildlife, head east to Maybell and then north to the Sand Wash Basin area where one of the largest wild mustang herds still roam. Their DNA can be traced back to horses brought over by early explorers from Europe. Sand Wash Basin is 45 miles west of Craig. Drive west on Highway 40 past Maybell. Turn north on Highway 318 and drive about 15 miles. Turn right on County Road 67 to begin your search.

Learn more at VisitMoffatCounty.com.



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Make Memories Last

By Mikaela Ruland

Visiting a national park, whether it's Rocky Mountain, Grand Teton or Yellowstone, is an experience you won't soon forget, but sometimes it's nice to have something tangible to remember your trips by.

Commemorate your favorite trails, most exciting wildlife encounters and million-dollar views with a hand-illustrated Xplorer Map of your favorite park. Artist Chris Robitaille hand draws every line, letter and icon on each map and includes interesting details that will help cement your memories. On the map of Rocky Mountain, you'll find a wildflower guide and renderings of the park's important historical characters. As a member of 1% for the planet, a portion of proceeds go to conservation organizations.

Xplorer Maps' beautiful designs are available on tote bags, coffee mugs, coasters, blankets and even jigsaw puzzles.

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A Land Before Time

Find tons of dinosaur fossils and some of the West's best whitewater rafting in this uncrowded national monument on the Colorado-Utah border.

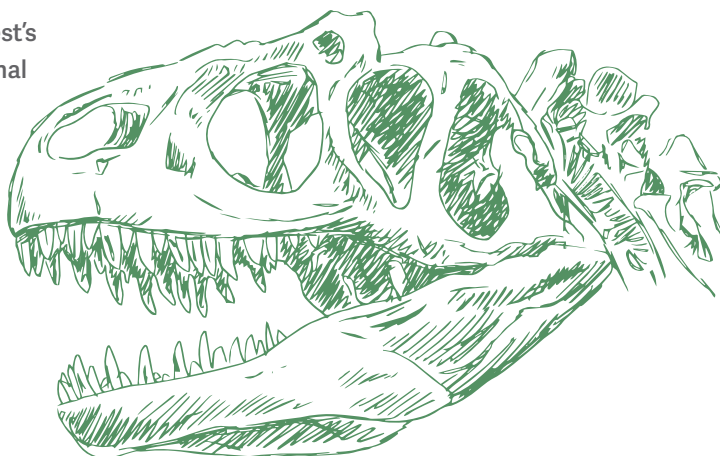
By Mikaela Ruland

John Wesley Powell began his journey to the Grand Canyon on the Green River through what's now Dinosaur National Monument in 1869. More than 150 years later, you can still experience that sense of adventure and awe as you explore gorgeous sandstone formations and dinosaur fossils at the confluence of two of the West's most influential rivers: the Yampa and the Green.

While Dinosaur has been a national monument since 1915, in 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt broadened protections to include the sandstone cliffs and canyons of Echo Park, where the two rivers meet. The wild beauty of this section of the Yampa was so important to conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts alike, its forever protection from the impedance of dams was traded for nearby Glen Canyon's. Today, what's left of that part of canyon country lies underneath Lake Powell thanks to the Glen Canyon Dam, but Echo Park's Yampa River remains one of the last wild rivers in Colorado. Book a trip with OARS to experience this beautiful stretch of river. Four and five-day trips navigate Class III and one Class IV rapid, passing through tall sandstone walls striated with black lines. A one-day trip through Split Mountain Canyon on the Green River, or a multi-day trip through Gates of Lodore are also fantastic adventures.

Situated between Highway 40 and Interstate 80, Dinosaur straddles Utah and Colorado with several different entrances and two visitor centers. The two most popular areas of the park are the Quarry accessed from Jensen, Utah, and Harpers Corner Road, which you can reach from Dinosaur, Colorado. There are no internal park roads that connect the different areas of the park.

Go back in time and see the ancient inhabitants this spot was named for—well, their bones at least. Hike from the



Quarry Visitor Center to the Quarry Exhibit Hall along the 1.2-mile Fossil Discovery Trail. You'll see three fossil areas along the way before reaching the exhibit hall. Here, you'll be awestruck by a wall of 1,500 dinosaur bones and get the chance to touch fossils that are 150 million years old. Skip the walk back and ride the free shuttle on the return trip to your car.

Dinosaurs weren't the only ancient population to call this region home. Drive Cub Creek Road from the Quarry Visitor Center to see two petroglyph panels from the Fremont people. The McKee Springs Petroglyphs, on Island Park Road, are another fascinating spot, but note that a high-clearance, four-wheel-drive vehicle is required to access them. To soak in Dinosaur's natural beauty, hike the 3.2-mile roundtrip Sound of Silence Trail which sweeps through stream beds, badlands and slickrock.

If you want to fall asleep under the stars at the monument, be sure to make reservations for one of the six campgrounds at [Recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). Three are located on the Colorado side (Echo Park, Gates of Lodore and Deerlodge Park) and the others are in Utah: Green River, Split Mountain and Rainbow Park. There aren't any RV hookups or dump stations, so if you're traveling in your rig and want more than a bare bones site, choose to stay in an RV park outside the monument. Be sure to look up after the sun goes down. Dinosaur is an International Dark Sky Park, so the stars are truly incredible.

Desert Oasis

By Tori Peglar

Cool down in the heat of summer by renting a stand-up paddleboard at Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area in Utah.

A number of wakeless paddling trails near the dam and near Sheep Creek Overlook enable you to explore canyons that rise anywhere between 100 and 1,000 feet. You won't even have to worry about waves from motorized boats.

"It's really spectacular," says Ryan Kelly, Flaming Gorge marketing director. "It's a great way to get that deep canyon experience without going on a commercial trip downstream."

Below the Flaming Gorge Dam runs a mellow stretch of the Green River that's great for family float trips. Rent a raft and journey seven miles downstream to Little Hole takeout where a pre-arranged shuttle can pick you up. Or rent a houseboat to explore the 91-mile-long reservoir.

For great scenery, visit Red Canyon Overlook, the area's most Instagrammed spot.

Learn more at [FlamingGorgeCountry.com](https://www.FlamingGorgeCountry.com).



A Weekend in Yellowstone

Short on time? You can still have an incredible vacation in the park, even if you only have 48 hours. Here's the plan.

By Mikaela Ruland

DAY ONE

6 a.m.

Watch Wildlife in Lamar Valley

Called "America's Serengeti," this grassy valley supports huge numbers of bison, grizzly bears, elk, wolves and more. For your best chance of seeing a wolf, get up before sunrise and use binoculars or a spotting scope at pullouts. Remember to always stay at least 100 yards from predators like bears and wolves, and at least 25 yards from other animals like bison and elk.



10 a.m.

Stroll the Boardwalks of Mammoth Hot Springs

Near the park's North Entrance, stop at this unique thermal feature where you can see colorful travertine terraces. These terraces are formed by hot springs rising to the surface and depositing dissolved limestone in dramatic patterns. Mammoth Hot Springs is composed of two loops. If you do them both, you'll see approximately 50 hot springs as you follow the boardwalks for 1.75 miles.

2 p.m.

See Gibbon Falls

Enjoy views of 84-foot Gibbon Falls cascading over the edge of the Yellowstone Caldera on an easy, half-mile roundtrip walk. Keep your eyes peeled for Arctic Grayling, a fish that can occasionally be seen swimming under the falls in the Gibbon River. Start along Grand Loop Road, east of Madison Junction.



6 p.m.

Dine at Old Faithful Inn

A trip to Yellowstone wouldn't be complete without seeing the largest log structure in the world. Finished in 1904, the Old Faithful Inn is a stunning hotel worth visiting if for no other reason than to experience its lobby and check out its architecture. The inn's flagship restaurant, the Old Faithful Inn Dining Room, is very popular, so be sure to make reservations well in advance.



DAY TWO

7 a.m.

Hike Beyond Old Faithful

Start the morning by watching the park's most famous geyser erupt. After the show, follow the boardwalks into Upper Geyser Basin. You can walk up to six miles through the highest concentration of geysers in the world here. Along the way you'll pass stunning blue, orange and yellow hot pools, have to duck from the mist of erupting geysers and get to watch the Firehole River steam. Once you get away from Old Faithful, the crowds tend to disappear. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife.



10 a.m.

See Grand Prismatic

Head to Midway Geyser Basin and walk along the boardwalk to see one of the world's largest, deepest hot springs. It's bigger than a football field at 370 feet across and deeper than a 10-story building at 125 feet. Grand Prismatic's colors are spectacular and range from deep blue in the center to green, yellow and orange on the edges. Its coloring comes from various species of heat loving bacteria that thrive at different temperatures.



12 p.m.

Picnic Alongside Yellowstone Lake

When your stomach starts growling, beeline for Yellowstone Lake, the largest high elevation lake in North America with 141 miles of shoreline. If you're coming from Grand Prismatic, the West Thumb or Grant Village picnic areas are the closest spot to have lunch with a view of the water. If you didn't bring your own food, stop by Grant Village Camper Services for sandwiches, snacks and drinks. It's open 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily.



3 p.m.

See Giant Waterfalls

Did you know Yellowstone has its own Grand Canyon? The powerful Yellowstone River formed the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, which is home to three incredible waterfalls. The Lower Falls are visible from Red Rock Point, Artist Point and Lookout Point. If you want to stand on top of the falls, hike the 0.75-mile steep, roundtrip trail to Brink of Lower Falls to witness the water the moment it plunges down the canyon. Head to Brink of Upper Falls Overlook, which is accessible via a short paved path, to see this waterfall. You can also see Upper Falls from Uncle Tom's Point. The smaller, lesser known Crystal Falls can be seen from the South Rim Trail which is a great hike to see all three.



PHOTOS: Bison in Lamar Valley (Grant Ordelheide), Palette Spring at Mammoth Hot Springs (NPS/Jim Peaco), Gibbon Falls (Grant Ordelheide), Old Faithful Inn Dining Room (Grant Ordelheide), Midway Geyser Basin (Liem Bui), Grand Prismatic Spring (Unsplash/Dan Meyers), Yellowstone Lake in autumn (Eric Souza), Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River (Deposit Photos)



SARATOGA, WY

Soak It All Away

From stunning scenic drives to relaxing hot springs, this is the spot to recharge.

By Tori Peglar and Mikaela Ruland

Get off the beaten path to explore one of Carbon County's most stunning and least visited scenic drives: Battle Highway. A 57-mile scenic route that spans across the Sierra Madre Mountains from Encampment to Baggs, you'll find breathtaking views and few crowds. This route has wide shoulders and little traffic so it's also a great option for road bikers.

Visit historic sites like Battle ghost town and take in mountain views, mixed aspen and conifer forests and stop to hike at the many trailheads in Medicine Bow National Forest. Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife like deer, moose, pronghorn and bighorn sheep.

When you reach Saratoga, stop at Snowy Mountain Brewery, which may be the only one in the country with its own hot springs resort. Soak in the 70-foot mineral hot springs pool or the teepee-covered smaller mineral pools. Then dry off and sip great local microbrews in the Snowy Mountain Biergarten or indoor taproom that serves pub style food from sandwiches and handmade pizza to grilled steak.

Spend the night in one of the rustic rooms at the on-site Saratoga Springs Resort. In the morning, play golf at the nine-hole public golf course that runs along

the North Platte River. Or turn on the adventure by renting a UTV at the resort. Choose from UTVs that accommodate two to six passengers for half-day or full-day adventures.

For an unforgettable foodie excursion, book a stay at Brush Creek. This sustainable cattle ranch offers tons of culinary experiences like pasta making, or cheesemaking tutorials where you can meet the resident goat herd. Or, book a full-day farm experience.

Learn more about Carbon County at WyomingCarbonCounty.com.



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Snowy Range Mountains (Courtesy of Albany County Tourism Board / Brian Guice)

The Outpost

Lose the crowds in Laramie's great outdoors and cultural attractions. Here are the best places to visit.

By Tori Peglar

1 Snowy Range Scenic Byway Highway 130

This stunning road enables you to bypass Interstate 80, taking you past glacial lakes, dazzling quartzite peaks, gorgeous meadows and over the second-highest mountain pass in Wyoming. The breathtaking route reaches its high point at 10,000 feet and is closed mid-November to Memorial Day weekend. Head to the Green Rock Trailhead to hike the 3.2-mile, moderate Barber Lake Trail or the more difficult Libby Creek Trail that's three miles. For exceptional views and some rock scrambling, head to Gap Lakes Trail.

2 Wyoming Territorial Prison State Historic Site

Go on a guided or self guided tour of this historic prison site built in 1872. For three decades, it housed some of the West's most notorious criminals. The property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the only prison in the world to have held the notorious Butch Cassidy.

3 University of Wyoming Geological Museum

See a 75-foot Apatosaurus skeleton, along with other dinosaurs, in this museum. When it roamed Wyoming, a living Apatosaurus ate one ton of vegetation daily and weighed 25 tons. The museum's hours are Monday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free. Disney-Pixar's *The Good Dinosaur* featured a Wyoming Apatosaurus named Arlo who meets a human friend while navigating an unfamiliar landscape.

4 Atmosphere Mountainworks

This cool outdoor store creates handmade and designed, one-of-


a-kind gear in historic downtown Laramie. Focused on sustainability, makers use fabric end rolls to keep material out of landfills. From apparel to bags and backpacks, you can pick up affordable gear for your park trip that's guaranteed to be unique. Then, check out Laramie's Brewery Tour that brings you to five microbreweries within a few blocks of each other downtown. Start at Accomplish Mycro-Pub and end at The Library Sports Grille & Brewery.

5 Vee Bar Guest Ranch

Experience horseback riding, river tubing, evening campfires and incredible food at this gorgeous guest ranch. The main lodge was built in 1891 and served as a stagecoach stop and a post office in its early days. From May through September you can enjoy all-inclusive three-night or six-night stays. The rest of the year, the ranch offers overnight bed and breakfast stays, including an outdoor hot tub, yard games, trails and à la carte dude ranch activities.

Learn more at VisitLaramie.org.

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CHEYENNE, WY



Frozen Fury on the Plains bronc riding contest (Courtesy of Visit Cheyenne)

The New West

Old West charm meets a vibrant, fresh cultural scene in Wyoming's capital.

By Mikaela Ruland

In Cheyenne, two worlds collide. Just outside of town, herds of bison roam at the Terry Bison Ranch where you can go on a trail or train ride to see these iconic creatures up close. Each July, you can visit Cheyenne Frontier Days, a world renowned festival full of pro rodeo, country music and Western heritage. If you're not visiting in July, the Hell on Wheels Rodeo Series on select Friday nights throughout the summer, complete with a chuckwagon dinner, will give you a taste of cowboy culture.

The Old West traditions are still a vital part of Cheyenne's culture, but there's so much more to this city than cowboy charm.

"For one thing, the music scene here is exploding," says Jim Walter, director of sales and marketing at Visit Cheyenne. "It's really incredible for an Old Western town."

Take Ernie November, a quirky record store which occasionally hosts heavy metal concerts. Or the newly restored Lincoln Theatre, which first opened in 1927 and now hosts live shows from every genre you could imagine, including stand-up comedy. It attracts big names, like Ice Cube, and has become a staple of downtown. Before attending a show, have dinner at the Metropolitan Downtown, which has a moody art-deco interior and sleek menu featuring ahi crudo alongside a chili cheeseburger. It's something you'd expect to find in hip neighborhoods in Seattle or Denver. Afterwards, grab a nightcap at the Paramount Ballroom near the theater which serves craft cocktails.

There's also the incredible outdoor scene, from rock climbing mecca Vedaauwo Recreation Area (pronounced vee-da-voo) to Curt Gowdy State Park, both of which are approximately 30 minutes from

downtown. At Curt Gowdy, hike the 3.6-mile Hidden Falls Trail, a family friendly loop with great views.

Before your hike, head to Mort's Bagels, another surprising twist for this Western town, featuring more than 17 different types of cream cheese. "I'm a New York kid, and these are the real deal," says Walter.

And after your hike? Stop by Black Tooth Brewing Co., one of five craft breweries in town. Here, saddle broncs and mules adorn the cans, a nod to an Old West that lives on despite craft beer, underground music and a burgeoning scene of North Face-clad millennials in town. That's the charm of Cheyenne. It's a vibrant, modern town but it holds its roots close.

Don't know where to start? Purchase a Legendary Pass which costs \$35 and is good for admission to three museums, a ride on the iconic trolley and exclusive discounts to Curt Gowdy State Park and the Terry Bison Ranch. Or, upgrade to the Saddle Up Pass, with a trail ride, roping lessons and old time photos added.

Learn more and get passes at Cheyenne.org.



OUR ADVENTURES ARE THIS AWE-INSPIRING

If you're looking to bask in Wyoming's natural beauty, there's no better place to start than Cheyenne. With everything from thrilling rock climbing destinations to edge-of-your-seat biking trails, there's no shortage of ways to revel in the great outdoors. But there's so much more to explore beyond rugged terrain and wide-open spaces. Extend your stay and discover Cheyenne's chic side, with tempting cuisine, unique shops, and vibrant local art in the bustling downtown area. Your Wyoming journey begins here, and we can't wait to welcome you.

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GREELEY, CO

Local Flair

From craft brews to disc golf and a rattlesnake-wearing woman, this city is full of character.

By Mikaela Ruland

Situated on Colorado's high plains, with the snowcapped peaks of the Rockies serving as its backdrop, Greeley showcases the best of the Front Range, all in one spot: great trails and outdoor recreation, frontier heritage and a fantastic craft beer culture.

Northern Colorado is well known for its disc golf scene and Greeley is no exception. With three courses in town, it's a fun spot to play a round. Head to Garretson's Sport Center to pick up a disc and then check out the beautiful 14-hole course at the University of Northern Colorado.

Visit Centennial Village Museum, a seasonal living history museum, to learn more about Greeley's past. More than 35 historic buildings, alongside costumed interpreters and farm animals bring visitors back in time. One such historical figure is Rattlesnake Kate, a woman from 1920s Colorado ahead of her time—she was known to wear pants, marry and divorce as she pleased, and worked as a nurse, a taxidermist, and a bootlegger. Kate received her nickname in 1925 when she and her 3-year-old son encountered a rattlesnake migration. Separated from her child and horse, she killed 140 snakes to save herself and her son. She sewed 50 of the skins into a dress, which can be seen at the Greeley History Museum.

Rattlesnake Kate is a local hero and you'll find many spots around town with menu items nodding to her legacy. To truly order like a local, stop by 477 Distilling and ask for the Rattlesnake Kate cocktail, crafted with housemade bourbon, lime juice,

agave and spicy bitters. Or, Aunt Helen's Coffee House also has a fun, local offering celebrating Kate, a sweet and spicy latte with amaretto and cinnamon.

Cap off your day at one of the city's many breweries. There's truly an option for everyone here, but Wiley Roots is a favorite, with a fun and outgoing vibe, a large outdoor area with picnic tables and a super unique menu including frozen beer slushies and hard seltzer based cocktails. If you're looking for dinner with your beverage, head to Weldwerks, an award winning brewery with great bar style eats.

Perhaps the most well known event here is the Greeley Stampede. This modern day rodeo is a nod to the city's heritage, but has evolved into a two-week celebration over the Fourth of July. It opens with a parade through downtown where longhorn cattle are driven through the streets.

Learn more at VisitGreeley.com.

BIKE PATHS BREWRIES & A BOATLOAD of Boutiques

Whether you're in the mood to pedal in the Colorado sunshine, taste-test local craft beers or find the perfect local shop, Greeley's got it. How about hanging out this weekend and trying it all? While you're at it, bask in our 2000 acres of open space and get your foody fix at our more than 200 restaurants.



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On the Plains

Discover history, surprising eats and amazing birdwatching in this spot.

By Kristen Arendt

On your way across the beautiful prairies of eastern Colorado, take a break from the road to stretch your legs in Morgan County.

Located along the South Platte River, the town of Fort Morgan has a variety of dining options to fill your belly or satisfy your sweet tooth. Grab a bite to eat at The Block, a shared-use kitchen that hosts rotating chefs from around northeast Colorado. Be sure to order a drink at the speakeasy style After Hours Cocktail Bar on site. Or stop by Mosqueda Delicacies for housemade ice cream alongside unique snacks like fresas con crema (strawberries and cream) and elote chorreado (nacho-style corn in a cup),

which was featured on HGTV's "Home Town Takeover".

For a dose of nature, head to 2,411-acre Jackson Lake, one of the prime draws of Morgan County. The popular state park offers plentiful opportunities to swim, kayak, tube, paddleboard or boat. The nature trails and sandy shoreline provide a prime vantage point to birdwatch—in summer, many American white pelicans can be seen cruising on the water.

The state park has 251 campsites, most of which have electric hookups. If you're looking for a unique overnight experience, hammock camping is allowed at select tent sites. Even if you aren't camping,

be sure to stay out after the sun sets to stargaze at this International Dark Sky Park. The high plains location means no mountains blocking your night sky view.

Located 15 minutes east of Fort Morgan, the town of Brush was once a supply stop on the Texas-Montana Trail, a famous cattle drive. Learn more about the area's cowboy culture at the Brush Area Museum & Cultural Center. Take a historic walking tour of downtown and cap it off with a stop at the Sands Theatre on Clayton Street. This historic single-room theater shows movies every Friday and Saturday night, and Sunday matinees.

Learn at VisitMorganCountyColorado.com.



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HGTV's Home Town Takeover

Where the Wild Things Roam

On Colorado's eastern plains, more than 500 rescued lions, tigers, bears and other wild animals call The Wild Animal Sanctuary home.

By Mikaela Ruland

In 1979, 19-year-old Pat Craig visited a friend working as a zoo groundskeeper in North Carolina. There, he made a discovery that would change the trajectory of his life and thousands of wild animals' lives across the world. His friend showed him the back of the zoo where surplus tigers and lions that wouldn't fit in the exhibits were kept in small cages away from the public eye. Craig was horrified. When he returned home to Colorado, the animals stayed in his mind. He called the Denver Zoo to see if they could care for the big cats, but they, too, had a surplus of tigers. He called the state and federal government to see if what was happening was illegal—it wasn't. Soon, he realized that his only option to help these animals was to take them in himself. After building cages and obtaining the right certifications, Craig was approved to legally house exotic animals on his family's 15-acre farm east of Boulder.

He went to work contacting zoos across the country. Within a week, letters started pouring in. From surplus animals like the ones he'd seen in North Carolina, to elephants and chimpanzees on kill lists, he was overwhelmed with requests. His first rescue was a baby jaguar whose mother had rejected it. He flew back from South Carolina commercially with the abandoned cub, telling flight attendants it was a "Himalayan cat".

Fast forward 45 years and today he runs the largest and oldest animal sanctuary network in the country, caring for 1,000 animals across three facilities in Colorado. When you visit the original Wild Animal Sanctuary in Keenesburg, the sense of healing you'll feel is palpable. Across 1,200-plus acres of Colorado's eastern plains, lions lounge in prides, grizzly bears splash in ponds and tigers stalk each other in a



Tiger (Courtesy of The Wild Animal Sanctuary)

playful manner reminiscent of your house cat through lush reeds. From a 1.5-mile-long elevated walkway, you'll get a bird's eye view of the sprawling grounds. Craig noticed early on that the wild animals he was caring for got nervous when strangers approached their enclosures, but didn't seem to mind when he was working above them on a roof with loud power tools. The idea of the walkway was born and it's obvious to anyone who visits and has also been to a traditional zoo how much more at peace these animals are.

The sanctuary is open to visitors from 9 a.m. to sunset and you'll want to plan to stay the better part of the day. In addition to the walkway, there's a football-field sized visitor center with seating, food, drinks and ice cream. Along the walkway you'll find yourself stopping often to watch the animals whether it's Arctic foxes, lions, bears, wolves, or so many other creatures.

It's been 45 years since Craig's first rescue, but the 65-year-old's passion hasn't faded. You'll still find him working seven days a week to rescue, care for, and manage the animals and sanctuaries under his purview. In addition to The Wild Animal Sanctuary in Keenesburg, there's also a 9,789-acre facility in southeastern Colorado and the new Wild Horse Refuge near Craig, which is caring for more than 200 wild mustangs that were put up for auction by the Bureau of Land Management as a form of population control. These Colorado-born mustangs now roam in bands across 23,000 acres, 30 miles from where they were born.

"It's amazing to see a horse that was born in the wild and then chased by a helicopter, return to freedom," says Craig.

It's no easy task to run the sanctuaries. At the Keenesburg facility, the carnivores alone eat 100,000 pounds of meat each week. From medical care to habitat enclosures there's a mind-boggling amount of logistics, and cost, that go into running the sanctuaries. For most rescues The Wild Animal Sanctuary foots the bill. The sanctuary is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and relies on virtual adoptions, memberships and donations to keep doing their critical work. When you visit, make a donation, or even share the sanctuary's work on social media, you're helping these animals find healing.

Another way to support is by attending one of the sanctuary's 2025 events, drumming up excitement and fundraising for 45 years of rescuing animals. Attend a Summer Safari Dinner on the floor of the Bolivian Lion House, run or walk a 5K or 10K at the Run Into the Wild Festival with routes weaving through the sanctuary, or enjoy a summer concert series with a string quartet performing Hans Zimmer scores.

The reward for all the hard work Craig and the sanctuary staff put in is seeing wild animals who grew up in captivity, often in abusive or non-ideal conditions, get to live out the rest of their lives in peace and comfort on the beautiful Colorado plains, as wild things should.

Learn more at WildAnimalSanctuary.org and visit at 2999 County Road 53 in Keenesburg.



A 33,000-acre Network Of Sanctuaries With Over 1,000 Lions,
Tigers, Bears, Wolves, And Other RESCUED Animals That Need Your Help!

WILDANIMALSANCTUARY.ORG

*Support these rescued animals today.
Your donation helps provide them with the love and care they deserve.*