

Visitor Guide

Web Version

Great Sand Dunes
National Park
and Preserve



Welcome to one of the world's most diverse national parks!



Golden cottonwood and aspen trees color the Montville Trail each fall. *Inset photos, from left:* Check out a dunes wheelchair at the Visitor Center (see page 2 for more accessible options); Medano Creek provides a natural beach environment for all ages in spring; Lower Sand Creek Lake in mid-summer offers an experience quite different from the dunes.



2-3 Getting Started
¡Bienvenidos!
Information you'll need to prepare for your visit. Facilities, camping, programs, and local services. *Información en español, página 2.*



4-5 Exploring Your Park
Suggested trails, destinations, and time planning for your trip. Color map, photos, distances, and average travel times are included.



6 Natural Wonders
Other nearby San Luis Valley features including Zapata Falls, Blanca Peak, South Zapata Lake, national wildlife refuges, and nearby wetlands.

For Your Safety

Weather The weather changes rapidly at Great Sand Dunes; be prepared! Storms and cold temperatures can occur any time of year. If you see a thunderstorm approaching, get off the dunes immediately. **Lightning** strikes can be fatal. For general weather information, see page 2.

Hot Sand On summer afternoons, the sand surface can reach 140°F (60° C). **Bring closed shoes**, and be careful with your pets' feet. Hike the dunes early morning or evening during summer. Although the sand surface can become hot, summer daytime highs are typically in the low 80s F (upper 20s C).

Wildlife Never feed wild animals. It is unhealthy for them, and dangerous to you. **Drive slowly** on park and area roads to prevent accidents with crossing animals. **Bears and mountain lions** may be encountered; pick up the "Wild Ways" handout at the Visitor Center to learn more about these animals. In the campground, always store food, toiletries and trash in the bear-proof boxes provided at each site. While there are no poisonous snakes or scorpions in this high elevation park, there are rattlesnakes at lower elevations elsewhere in the San Luis Valley. Wear insect repellent to deter mosquitoes and no-see-ums, especially near water.

Altitude Park elevations range from 7,515' to 13,604' (2291m to 4146m) above sea level. The Visitor Center and campground are at approximately 8,200' (2499m). Altitude sickness may affect a few. Symptoms include shortness of breath, headaches, and nausea. **Drink plenty of water**, take it slow, and avoid alcoholic drinks. Seek medical attention if your symptoms are severe.



Keep wildlife wild. Use bear-proof boxes provided.

Emergency Contact a ranger or call 911. Telephones are located at the Visitor Center, Dunes parking lot, and at the campground kiosk.



Facilities

The Visitor Center is open daily from 9 am to 6 pm from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Hours vary the rest of the year; please call for times. Ranger assistance, introductory movie, interactive exhibits, and bookstore. Phone: 719-378-6399.

Interpretive Programs



Free nature walks, short talks, and evening programs are offered most days spring through fall. Weekly schedules are posted at the Visitor Center, campground bulletin boards, and the Dunes parking area.

Free programs for groups may also be reserved in advance by calling 719-378-6344.

Accessibility

The Dunes parking lot has an accessible mat to the creek as well as a viewing platform. Two sand wheelchairs are available for loan; inquire at the Visitor Center. Accessible restrooms are at the Visitor Center, Dunes



parking lot, and campground. The Visitor Center, amphitheater, and ranger programs held at these locations are accessible. Three accessible campsites are located in the campground. For a backcountry experience, Sawmill Canyon Backcountry Site offers a graded trail to a tent pad and accessible privy. Contact the Visitor Center to reserve it.

Weather

Weather is often sunny, but temperatures are relatively cool all year, thanks to our high elevation (Visitor Center is at 8200 feet/2499m). Summer highs average in the 80s F (20s°C), with lows in the 40s F (4°C); however, the sand surface can get very hot in the sun. Summer evenings are cool; winter nights are frigid. Spring may bring swimsuit weather or blizzards. Fall is usually pleasant and dry. Bring warm, layered clothing any time of the year.



Camping in the Park

The National Park Service offers developed car camping, 4WD backcountry camping, and backpacking. Pinyon Flats Campground contains 88 sites with picnic tables and fire grates. Forty-four sites are reservable at www.recreation.gov. There are

no hook-ups, but restrooms include flush toilets and sinks. Sites cost \$20.00 per night for a maximum of 6 people, 2 tents,



and 2 vehicles. Some sites may not fit larger RVs. Three sites for groups of 15 or more may be reserved at recreation.gov. Group sites cost \$65-\$80 per night depending on size. Check-out is 1:00 pm for all campsites.

Wood gathering is not permitted; firewood is sold at the Visitor Center, campground, or the Oasis store. Quiet hours are from 10 pm to 6 am; generators may run between 7 am and 8 pm.

Backpack into the dunes, one of 7 designated sites along the Sand Ramp Trail, or into the national preserve. A free permit from the Visitor Center is required.

Backcountry vehicular camping is permitted in 23 forested sites along the Medano Pass Primitive Road. This requires a high-clearance 4WD vehicle, and a minimum 5-mile drive on a soft sandy road. Camp along the road only in designated first-come, first-served campsites in the national preserve.

Nearby Camping, Lodging, and Dining

- Great Sand Dunes Oasis (camping, restaurant, store, and 2-room motel) 719-378-2222 www.greatdunes.com

- San Luis Lakes State Park (campground) 1-800-678-2267 www.coloradostateparks.reserveamerica.com

- Great Sand Dunes Lodge (seasonal motel) 719-378-2900 www.gsdllodge.com

- Zapata Falls Campground (primitive; BLM) 719-852-5941

Entrance Fees

- \$3 per person age 16 and up
- Children free
- Great Sand Dunes Annual Pass: \$15
- America the Beautiful Annual Pass for all nat'l parks: \$80
- Senior lifetime pass: \$10

Pets

Leashed pets are permitted in the main day use areas and in the national preserve. *Pets are not permitted in the national park backcountry; ask for a map of permitted pet areas.* Please clean up after your pet. During summer months, avoid hot mid-day sand on the dunes.



¡Bienvenidos!

¡Bienvenidos al Parque Nacional de las Grandes Dunas! Mientras que usted esté visitando, esperamos que aproveche la oportunidad de explorar algunas de las características únicas del parque. Desde las dunas más altas de Norteamérica hasta algunos de los picos más altos de los Rocky Mountains, este rico ecosistema sorprende continuamente a los visitantes con la estupenda diversidad de vida y paisaje.

Cosas populares para hacer:

¡Suba a las dunas! El paseo desde el Centro de Visitantes a la cima de la duna más alta toma como 2 horas para dar la vuelta. La elevación y la arena lo hace algo difícil, pero ¡vale la pena! Esté preparado para la temperatura alta de la arena, y lleve protección para el sol y agua para tomar.

¡Disfrutar el Arroyo del Medano! En la primavera y el verano, el arroyo corre por la base de las dunas. Los niños de todas las edades gozan en chapalear, jugar, o aunque sea nada más que remojar en el arroyo.

¡Compartir una comida en el campo! El área de comer que esta cerca de las duna tiene mesas, parrillas y baños sanitarios cerca. Se permiten fuegos de carbón en las parrillas; por favor extíngalos totalmente antes de irse. Y por favor: no haga fuego con leña ni alimente a los animales.

Para Su Própia Seguridad

En el verano, las temperaturas en la superficie de la arena pueden alcanzar hasta los ¡140 grados F (60 grados de C)! Use calcetines y zapatos en vez de sandalias para proteger sus pies contra quemaduras severas. También, recuerde traer protección para el sol, bastante agua, un sombrero, y alimentación adicional.

El Centro de Visitantes está a 8200' (2.470m) de altura sobre el nivel del mar. Usted puede sentir la respiración entrecortada, o sentirse mareado. Vaya despacio, descanse a menudo, y tome bastante agua.

Se permiten las mascotas en las dunas pero deben siempre mantenerse con correas. Camine temprano en la mañana o bien de tarde para proteger los pies de la arena caliente.

Los basureros de basura están situados en el estacionamiento, en las áreas de la comida y de acampar. Nunca deje el alimento donde un oso u otro animal podría encontrarlo. Manténgase alejado de los animales salvajes: alimentar a los animales salvajes es malsano para ellos y peligroso para usted. ¡Usted está en el territorio del oso! No deje alimentos o los refrigeradores desatendidos en ningún momento. Cuando usted no está comiendo, almacene todo el alimento y bebidas en su vehículo con todas las ventanas cerradas.

Esté preparado para el clima fresco, también en el verano. Esperamos que usted disfrute de su visita a las Grandes Dunas de Arena. Pida más información en español en el Centro de Visitantes.

Nature and Science

Pikas in Peril Research Project

The National Park Service is now monitoring population dynamics and habitat of American pikas, small mammals living primarily on alpine tundra. In a warming climate, pikas may be uniquely affected because in some locations they cannot move to higher and cooler elevations.

Great Sand Dunes is one of the National Park Service areas chosen for pika research due to its combination of high elevation mountains and southern latitude.

This project is funded through the National Park Service Climate Change Response Program. A large team of academic researchers and National Park Service staff will work together to address questions regarding the vulnerability of the American pika to future climate change scenarios projected for the western United States.

For more information, please visit: http://science.nature.nps.gov/im/units/ucbn/monitor/pika/pika_peril/index.cfm



After the Medano Fire



In 2010 a lightning strike started a wildfire that eventually burned over 6000 acres (2400 ha) in Medano Canyon, part of the watershed of Medano Creek. Scientists are already studying the area to observe the processes of change and regeneration. Park biologist Phyllis Pineda Bovin gives insights about aspen, wildflowers, bighorn sheep, and more in a video “After the Medano Fire” available online: <http://www.nps.gov/grsa/naturescience/wildfires.htm>

For your safety, be aware that:

- Burned trees may fall at any time, especially at windy times
- Thunderstorms may produce flash floods or debris flows
- In lower parts of the canyon and around the dunes, Medano Creek contains some soot and ash

Your Fees at Work

At Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, your fees directly benefit you and wildlife. This year’s work includes burying overhead utility lines in the park. This will improve power reliability, reduce risk in the event of wildfires, and improve the natural viewshed.



Utility poles near the entrance road will be removed, including the one in this photo of elk and pronghorn.

Area Contact Information

The towns of Mosca, Hooper, Blanca, Fort Garland, and Alamosa offer some facilities and services, but not all services are available in each town. *In winter, the closest gas and food are in Mosca or Blanca.* For a full list of area lodging and camping, visit:

www.nps.gov/grsa/planyourvisit/lodging.htm

County websites: www.alamosa.org, www.saguache.org, and www.custercountyco.com

Medical Facilities (in Alamosa)

24-hour Emergency Care and by Appointment
San Luis Valley Regional Medical Center 719-589-2511
Alamosa Family Medical Clinic 719-589-3658
Convenient Care Clinic (1-10pm, 7 days/wk) 719-589-2562

VIPs and Artists in Residence

At Great Sand Dunes, *volunteers-in-parks* (VIPs) work with nearly every division, and become an integral part of the park staff. To learn more, contact Volunteer Coordinator Libbie Landreth at 719-378-6342, or email libbie_landreth@nps.gov
Web: www.nps.gov/volunteer



Artists in Residence are volunteers who spend two weeks in the park creating and sharing art with the public. Visit: www.nps.gov/grsa/artists-in-residence.htm to learn more about the program at Great Sand Dunes; call 719-378-6343 with any questions. Thanks to all the volunteers at Great Sand Dunes!

Junior Rangers and Park Explorers

Get a booklet at the Visitor Center for fun learning! Kids 3-12 complete required sections to become Junior Rangers; visitors 13 and older complete required sections to become Park Explorers. All ages earn a badge or patch upon completion!

Completion of required sections and activities usually takes one to three hours, depending on your age group.





The park map is also available separately, distributed at the Entrance Station or Visitor Center. Download it at www.nps.gov/grsa/playyourvisit/maps.htm Area topographic maps are available for purchase at the Visitor Center.

- **Dunes Parking Lot:** 1 mile (1.6 km) from Pinyon Flats Campground or Visitor Center
- **Montville/Mosca Pass Trailhead:** 1/8 mile (100 m) north of Visitor Center, on east side of park road
- **Medano Lake Trailhead:** 1/2 mile (0.8 km) west of Medano Pass (high-clearance 4WD access only)
- **Music Pass Trailhead:** 4.5 miles (7.2 km) south of Westcliffe, turn off Highway 69 at Music Pass sign. At the "T" junction, turn left. 2WD drivers park at Grape Creek Campground (USFS). 4WD drivers may drive another 2.5 miles (4 km) to Music Pass Trailhead. From there, hike 1 mile (1.6 km) to Music Pass, or 4 miles (6.4 km) to either Sand Creek Lake. Allow 2 1/2 to 3 hours drive from Visitor Center to upper Music Pass trailhead, via Pass Creek Pass; ask a ranger or visit www.nps.gov/grsa/playyourvisit/directions.htm for directions from Visitor Center.

Plan Your Visit

If you have...

2 hours

Watch the 20 minute movie and enjoy the interactive exhibits at the Visitor Center.

If Medano Creek is flowing, explore creekside habitats, look for "surge flow", wade, or splash!

Explore the dunes on foot or in a dunes wheelchair. If possible, hike to the top of the first ridge of dunes for a view of the entire dunefield (see "High Dune" hike, page 4). *During summer months, plan to hike the dunes in early morning or evening to avoid hot sand.*



a half day - you can also

Explore Zapata Falls for a refreshing water experience and panoramic view of the San Luis Valley (page 6). During warm summer months, this is a good option for afternoon.

Attend a free nature walk or kids' program - find out more at Visitor Center.

Walk the Montville Trail to explore a shady creekside environment where a tiny town once existed (page 5). During warm summer months, this is a good option for afternoon.

Drive the Medano Pass Primitive Road (high-clearance 4WD only); photo at left.

Explore the eastern ridge of dunes, where Medano Creek flows at the base of tall dune faces (page 4). Start from Castle Creek Picnic Area (4WD) or Point of No Return (2WD).

Hike to 750' (229m) Star Dune, the tallest dune in North America (see page 4). *During summer months, plan to hike the dunes in early morning or evening to avoid hot sand.*

Hike to the Escape Dunes (top left photo), where migrating dunes have produced a small "ghost forest". From the Dunes Parking Lot, walk upstream 1 mile (1.6 km); look east.



a full day or more - you can also

Explore a wetland (see page 6)

Attend a free interpretive program at the Amphitheater - see schedules throughout the park

Backpack to spend a night on the dunes, or in a forested site near the dunes; (get information and a free permit from the Visitor Center)

Hike Mosca Pass (see page 5) or South Zapata Lake (see page 6). With a 4WD vehicle, access trailheads for Medano Lake (see page 4) or Sand Creek Lakes (see page 4).



Photos from top:

Hike up Medano Creek about 1 mile (1.6 km) to find the "Escape Dunes" (at right in photo).

With high-clearance 4WD, travel around the eastern edge of the dunes and up Medano Canyon.

The most enjoyable part of climbing the dunes is coming down!

Even in late summer, there are still a few patches of snow melting into Medano Lake. This alpine basin is part of the watershed of Great Sand Dunes.

Nearby Natural Features

These nearby natural features reveal more of the San Luis Valley's beauty. The map below also indicates area historical museums.

Zapata Falls Recreation Area This 30 foot (9m) high waterfall cascades within a narrow chasm about 10 miles south of the dunes. It is especially refreshing on a summer afternoon. From the park entrance, drive south on Highway 150 to the Zapata Falls Recreation Area sign. Turn left and drive 3 miles (4.8km) up the gravel road, then hike 1/2 mile (800m) to the creek. Wade upstream into the narrow cave to view the falls. **Watch for falling rocks. Water is swift and deep in early summer. Primitive campground near trailhead.** Bureau of Land Management, 719-852-5941.

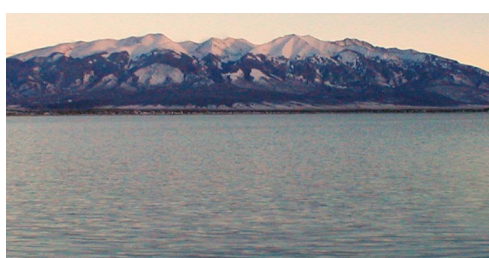
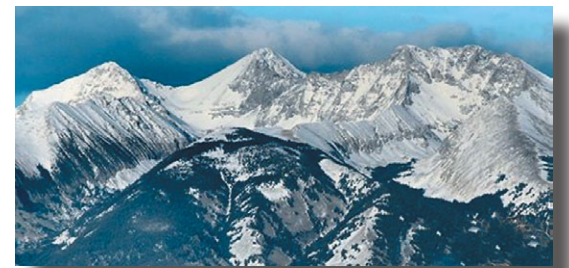


South Zapata Lake This is a good option for those who want to hike to an alpine lake, but don't have high clearance 4WD to access alpine trailheads in Great Sand Dunes National Preserve. For day hikes to the lake, use the Zapata Falls trailhead listed above; overnight backpackers are required to use the trailhead 1 mile (1.6km) below the day use trailhead. From Zapata Falls, hike 4 miles (6.5km) farther along a maintained trail to the lake (2300' or 701m elevation gain). Marmots and pikas chirp and whistle from the tundra slopes above. Twin Peaks, 13,580' (4139 m) may be climbed by ascending the steep tundra west of the lake. US Forest Service, Rio Grande National Forest, 719-852-5941.



Zapata Falls

Blanca Peak The fourth highest peak in Colorado is part of a massif containing four fourteeners and four thirteeners. From the national park, drive south on Hwy 150 to the dirt road between mile markers 3 and 4. This road is considered one of the roughest roads in the state; 2WD vehicles can generally travel about one mile up the road and 4WD vehicles average about two miles before the road becomes extremely rough. From the highway turnoff, the summit of Blanca Peak is about eight miles away with an elevation gain of 6000 feet (1829m). Minimum-impact camping is permitted on Forest Service land at least 200 feet from water. Please follow "Leave No Trace" guidelines. US Forest Service, Rio Grande National Forest, 719-852-5941.



San Luis Lakes State Park and Wildlife Area The park features a recreational lake; the state wildlife area hosts diverse shore birds. The state park is open year round; the wildlife area is closed February 15 - July 15 for nesting. <http://parks.state.co.us/Parks/SanLuis> 719-378-2020.

Blanca Wetlands Wildlife Habitat Area This area offers ideal habitat for waterfowl and shorebirds not found elsewhere in the San Luis Valley or Colorado. Trails weaving between the shallow ponds provide excellent wildlife observation opportunities. From Highway 17, take County Road 2S east about 7 miles. The wetlands are closed for nesting February 15 to July 15.



Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge Alamosa NWR contains thousands of acres of wetlands within the floodplain of the Rio Grande. Meadows, river oxbows, and riparian corridors support high species diversity and create ideal conditions for viewing waterfowl, songbirds, and other wildlife. The Visitor Center is open March-November. Contact for Alamosa and Monte Vista refuges: 719-589-4021 www.fws.gov/alamosa

Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge This refuge is home to thousands of shore birds. The refuge is open during daylight hours, 7 days a week.



Alamosa Wetlands is a city-owned open space area protecting wetlands near the Rio Grande adjacent to Alamosa. Developed with easy hiking trails and parking, there is close access

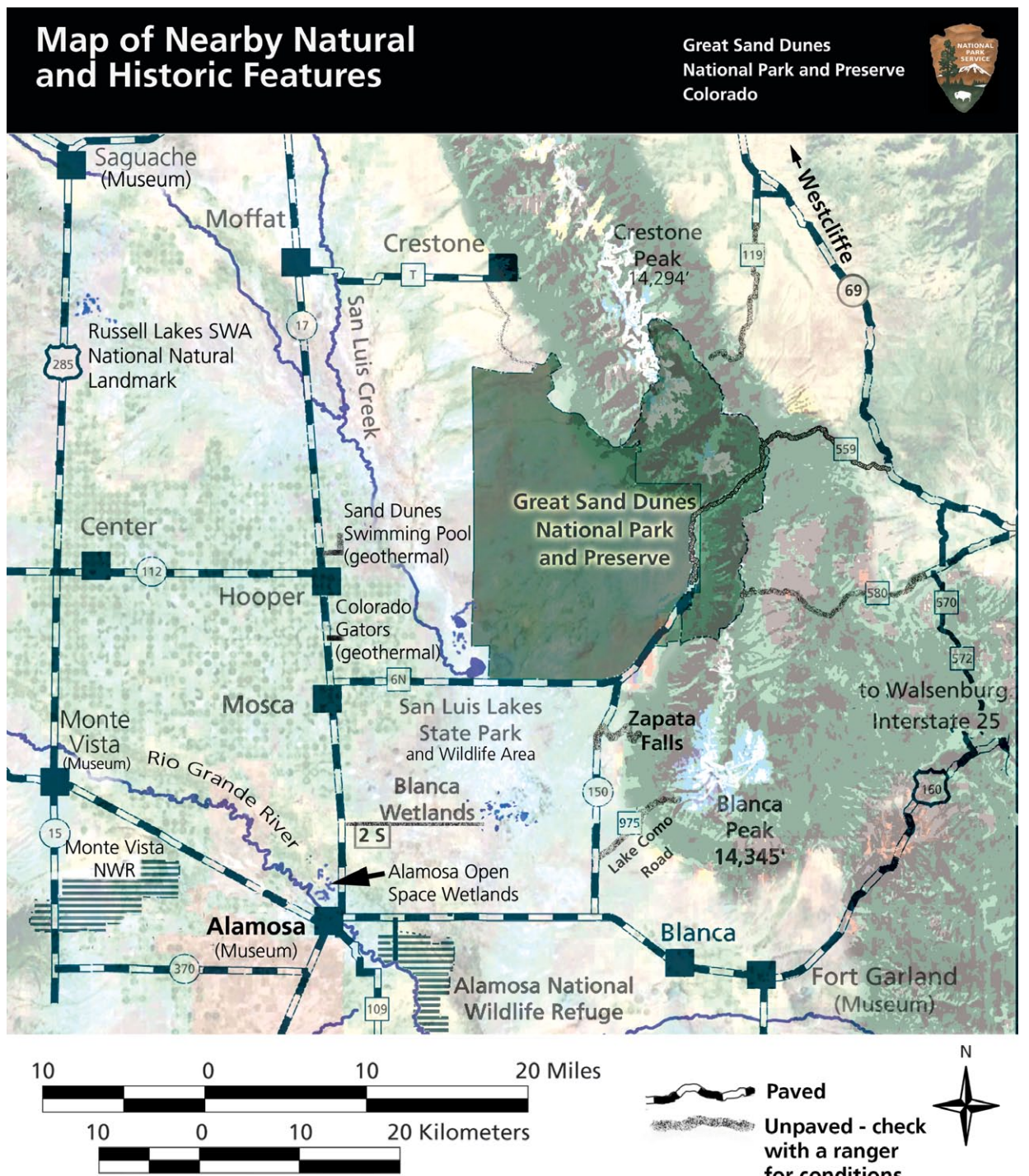
to the Rio Grande River and some wetlands. While there is less variety of mammals and birds than at other more remote wetlands, pelicans sometimes nest here. From Highway 17 one mile north of Highway 160, turn west at the Splashland swimming pool, then take the first left turn. Park along this road in designated lots.



Russell Lakes National Natural Landmark

The most extensive bulrush marsh in Colorado, Russell Lakes represents one of the few remaining large, high-altitude, alkaline marshes in the southern Rocky Mountains. Managed as a state wildlife area, most of it is closed February 15 to July 15 to protect nesting birds. Johnson Lake Trail is open year-round.

www.nature.nps.gov/nnl
<http://wildlife.state.co.us/LandWater/StateWildlifeAreas/>



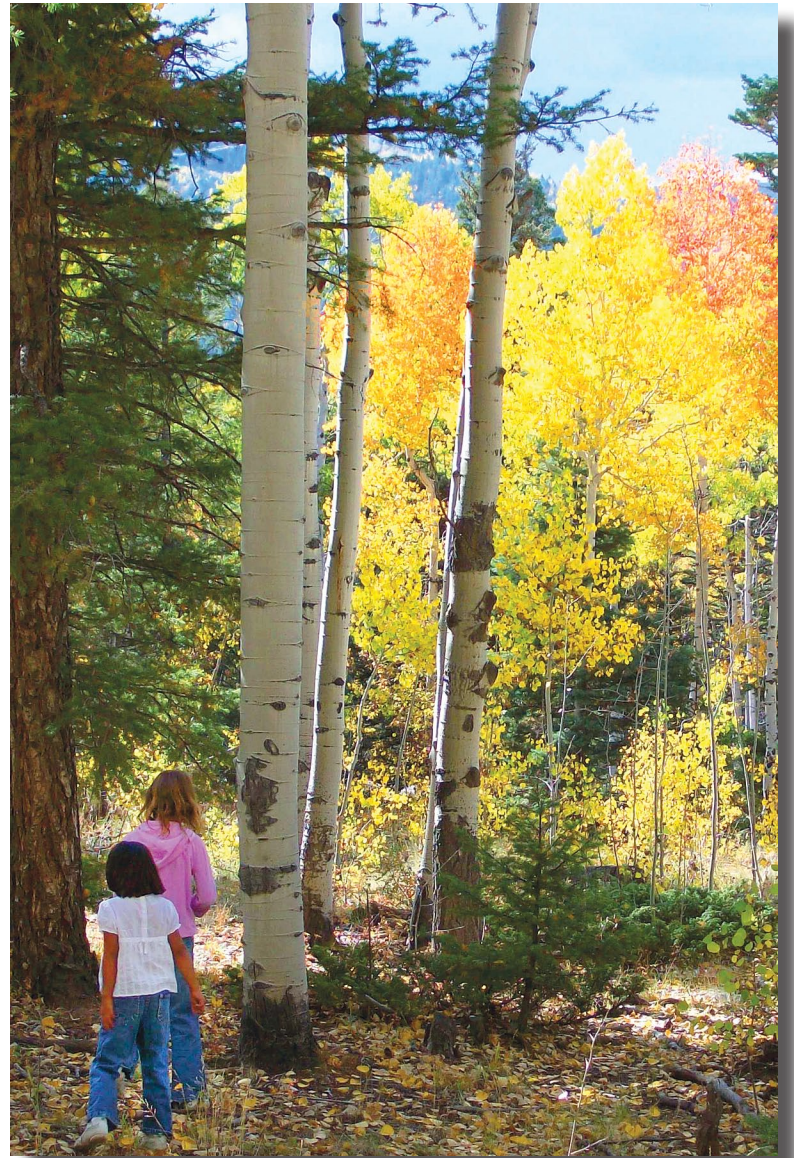


**Great Sand Dunes
National Park and Preserve**

11999 Highway 150
Mosca, Colorado 81146
General information (recorded, 24 hours)
719-378-6300
Visitor Center and bookstore
719-378-6399

www.nps.gov/grsa
email: grsa_interpretation@nps.gov

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA



Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve is more than sand. See pages 4-7 for ways to explore the park and nearby natural features.

K-12 Learning Opportunities

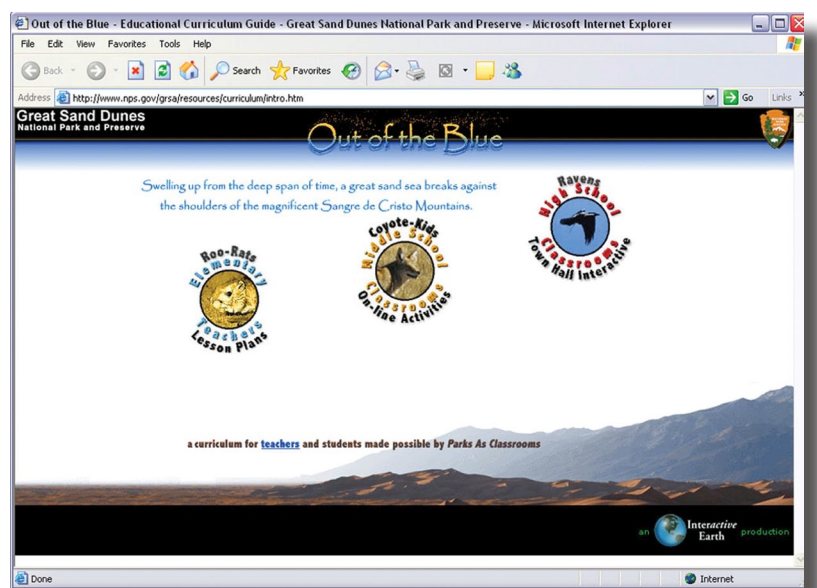
If you are a teacher or trip leader, consider scheduling an education program with Great Sand Dunes staff. Education programs are age-appropriate, correlated with Colorado Content Standards, and incorporate active learning in the park's magnificent outdoor classroom. Hands-on field and classroom learning experiences can bring wildlife, plants, history, geology, and other subjects alive for learners of all styles.



- Reserve use of the Discovery Room at the Visitor Center
- Schedule a ranger to visit San Luis Valley classrooms or educational events
- Bring your group to the park for a ranger-led education program (reserve in advance)



“Out of the Blue” is Great Sand Dunes’ online curriculum for K-12 teachers and students:
www.nps.gov/grsa/resources/curriculum/intro.htm



- Online resources provide students with an engaging opportunity to learn about geology, hydrology, ecology, and cultural history.

“The entire website is very user friendly. With the range of activities you have it is easy to find an activity suitable for the learning style and ability of any student.”
- a 5th grade teacher

To learn more about educational opportunities at the Dunes or schedule a program, please contact Education Specialist Melanie Rawlins at 719-378-6344, or email melanie_rawlins@nps.gov
www.nps.gov/grsa/forteachers/index.htm