

# Wilderness.net's Sangre de Cristo Wilderness Fact Sheet



## Introduction

The United States Congress designated the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness in 1993 and it now has a total of 219,776 acres. All of the wilderness is in Colorado and is managed by the Forest Service and the National Park Service.

## Description

Sangre de Cristo is Spanish for "Blood of Christ," but no one is quite sure why the region was given this name. Was it because of the bloody hues washing the slopes at sunset, or the cry of the dying priest, "sangre de Cristo," as his martyred blood flowed onto the ground near here? Of the long and colorful Spanish influence in these mountains and in the San Luis Valley below there is no doubt. Two four-wheel-drive roads over Medano Pass and Hayden Pass, as well as access to Lily Lake, were slim exclusions from Wilderness designation and split the area into four distinct sections. Unlike most of Colorado's mountains, the high and magnificently rugged Sangres were uplifted suddenly in massive blocks, creating a range of dramatic vertical proportions. Four fourteeners are clumped together in the midsection of the Wilderness, including Crestone Needle (14,197 feet). Many climbers, consider the Needle to be Colorado's most challenging 14,000-foot peak. Three more fourteeners stand together just south of the boundary. Melting snow feeds many creeks and small lakes, and nourishes a forest of oak, aspen, and spruce. Black bears and a few mountain lions live here, along with elk, deer, and bighorn sheep. Long (about 70 miles) and narrow describes the area, the state's third largest, and the going is rough for the hiker. Most of the 180 miles of trails end at alpine lakes set against virtually unclimbable walls. Great Sand Dunes National Preserve is now part of the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness.

## Leave No Trace

How to follow the seven standard Leave No Trace principles differs in different parts of the country (desert vs. Rocky Mountains). Click on any of the principles listed below to learn more about how they apply in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness.

1. [Plan Ahead and Prepare](#)
2. [Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces](#)
3. [Dispose of Waste Properly](#)
4. [Leave What You Find](#)
5. [Minimize Campfire Impacts](#)
6. [Respect Wildlife](#)
7. [Be Considerate of Other Visitors](#)

For more information on Leave No Trace, [Visit the Leave No Trace, Inc. website.](#)

## **Location**

A portion of the wilderness area is located within Great Sand Dunes National Preserve which is located adjacent to Great Sand Dunes National Park. The Medano Pass 4-wheel drive primitive road passes through a corridor within the wilderness area and can be accessed from the west side through Great Sand Dunes National Park or from the east side off Colorado Highway 69 about 25 miles south of the town of Westcliffe. Two other roads, one leading to the top of Mosca Pass and the other leading to the east side of Music Pass provide access to hiking trails leading into the wilderness area and preserve.

## **Area Management**

The Sangre de Cristo Wilderness is part of the 109 million acre National Wilderness Preservation System. This System of lands provides clean air, water, and habitat critical for rare and endangered plants and animals. In wilderness, you can enjoy challenging recreational activities like hiking, backpacking, climbing, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, horse packing, bird watching, stargazing, and extraordinary opportunities for solitude. You play an important role in helping to *"secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness"* as called for by the Congress of the United States through the Wilderness Act of 1964. Please follow the requirements outlined below and use Leave No Trace techniques when visiting the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness to ensure protection of this unique area.

## **Forest Service Information**

### **General Wilderness Prohibitions**

Motorized equipment and equipment used for mechanical transport is generally prohibited on all federal lands designated as wilderness. This includes the use of motor vehicles, motorboats, motorized equipment, bicycles, hang gliders, wagons, carts, portage wheels, and the landing of aircraft including helicopters, unless provided for in specific legislation.

In a few areas some exceptions allowing the use of motorized equipment or mechanical transport are described in the special regulations in effect for a specific area. Contact the Forest Service office or visit the websites listed below for more specific information.

These general prohibitions have been implemented for all national forest wildernesses in order to implement the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Wilderness Act requires management of human-caused impacts and protection of the area's wilderness character to insure that it is "unimpaired for the future use and enjoyment as wilderness." Use of the equipment listed as prohibited in wilderness is inconsistent with the provision in the Wilderness Act which mandates opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation and that wilderness is a place that is in contrast with areas where people and their works are dominant.

### **Wilderness-Specific Regulations**

Wilderness managers often need to take action to limit the impacts caused by visitor activities in order to protect the natural conditions of wilderness as required by the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Managers typically implement 'indirect' types of actions such as information and education measures before selecting more restrictive measures. When regulations are necessary, they are implemented with the specific intent of balancing the need to preserve the character of the wilderness while providing for the use and enjoyment of wilderness.

The following wilderness regulations are in effect for this area. Not all regulations are in effect for every wilderness. Contact the Forest Service office or visit the websites listed on the 'Links' tab for more specific information about the regulations listed.

## ALL VISITORS

- Group size is limited to 25, including pack and saddle stock, with no more than 15 people in any one party.
- Do not cut switchbacks. Doing so can cause severe erosion.
- Camping is prohibited within 300 feet of lakes and 100 feet of streams or trails. Obey posted signs prohibiting camping or other activities. Some campsites may be closed to allow the area to recover from overuse.
- A lightweight camp-stoves are recommended. Campfires should be at least 300 feet from lakes, streams, and trails and built in a manner that minimizes impact. Collect only dead and down wood, that is less than three inches in diameter (if you can't break it by hand, don't use it). Do not build a fire on exposed rock surfaces to prevent scarring. If possible, build fires on a fire blanket or a fire pan.
- Soap, even biodegradable, pollutes the water. Dispose of wash water at least 300 feet away from any water source.
- Pack out all garbage. It is NEVER acceptable to bury trash.
- Bury human waste in a 6 to 8 inch deep hole at least 300 feet away from any open water, trail, or campsite.
- With increasing visitor use in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, the Forest Service is considering a self-issuing permit system. Please contact the San Carlos Ranger District (719) 269-8500.

## STOCK USERS

- All pack or saddle stock feed must be CERTIFIED WEED-FREE hay or pelletized food.
- Restraining or grazing of pack or saddle stock is not permitted within 300 feet of lakes or 100 feet of streams.
- Tie a highline between two trees and tether pack or saddle stock to it. Hobbling or loose grazing stock will prevent the "ring" appearance caused when stock are tied to trees.
- To minimize damage to vegetation and prevent erosion, keep pack or saddle stock in single file on the trail.

## National Park Service Information

Some regulations vary between portions of the wilderness administered by the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. The following regulations apply within that portion of the wilderness located within Great Sand Dunes National Preserve:

Group size limit is 15 people. Groups with livestock may have a combination of up to 25 people and livestock, of which no more than 15 of the group may be people.

Camping is not allowed within 100 feet of streams, 200 feet of trails, or 300 feet of lakes except for campsites that have been posted as open for camping within these areas. Camping is not allowed above timberline.

Campfires are not allowed above timberline but may be kindled in existing fire rings below timberline. Dead wood on the ground that is less than four (4) inches in diameter may be collected for use as fire wood.

Food, garbage, or other items that could attract bears must be stored in a solid, non pliable container or suspended at least 10 feet above the ground and 4 feet horizontally from a post or tree trunk.

Toilet paper must be carried out of the wilderness area. Human body waste shall either be carried out or buried in at least six inches of soil at least 100 feet from any water source.

Dogs are allowed in the wilderness but must be kept leashed at all times (except when engaged in legitimate hunting activities).

Livestock must be picketed at least 100 feet from streams and 300 feet from lakes. They must be picketed in a manner that prevents damage to trees and pawing around tree trunks, grazing to an extent that plants are eaten to ground level, or causing denuding of vegetation by grazing or trampling.

Livestock must be fed weed-free hay at least 24 hours before entering the wilderness. Only certified weed-free hay, grain, or processed pellets may be packed into the preserve.

Caches of food and equipment are allowed provided the NPS is notified in advance of when and where the cache is to be made. Caches may be set in no sooner than one week in advance of the trip, must be removed within one week after the trip, and must be stored in a wildlife proof manner without digging or altering natural conditions.

## Contacts

**San Carlos Ranger District**  
3028 EAST MAIN STREET  
CANON CITY, CO 81212

Phone: 719-269-8500

**Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve**  
11999 Highway 150  
Mosca, CO 81146

Phone: 719-378-6399

Fax: 719-378-6310

Email: [grsa\\_interpretation@nps.gov](mailto:grsa_interpretation@nps.gov)

Restrictions: Visitor Center hours are 9:00 a.m -4:30 p.m in the off season and 9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. from mid-May to mid-September.

## Links to Other Websites

### [Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve](#)

Home address for Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve which administers all of the Great Sand Dunes Wilderness and that portion of the Sangre De Cristo Wilderness within Great Sand Dunes National Preserve.

### [Sangre De Cristo Wilderness](#)

## Links on Wilderness.net

### [National, Regional and Local Wilderness Organizations \(NGOs\)](#)

A listing of societies, organizations, coalitions and other wilderness-related advocacy and stewardship groups.

### [Career and Volunteer Opportunities](#)

A listing of sites providing information about wilderness- and environmentally-related career and volunteer opportunities.

## Applicable Wilderness Law(s)

Law	Date	Acreage Change (in acres)
<b>Public Law 103-77</b>	<b>August 13, 1993</b>	<b>226,455</b>
Colorado Wilderness Act of 1993 - Public Law 103-77 (8/13/1993) Colorado Wilderness Act of 1993		

— [download 103-77](#)

<b>Public Law 106-530</b>	<b>November 22, 2000</b>	<b>0</b>
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Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000 - Public law 106-530 (11/22/2000) To provide for the establishment of the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve and the Baca National Wildlife Refuge in the State of Colorado, and for other purposes

*NOTE:* 41,676 acres were transferred to the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, making the Sangre De Cristo multi-managed by both the FS and NPS.

— [download 106-530](#)

## General Trip Planning Information

To visit the portion of the wilderness located in Great Sand Dunes National Preserve from the San Luis Valley (west) side, drive east on U.S. Highway 160 from Alamosa for about 16 miles. Turn north onto Colorado Highway 150 and proceed 15 miles to Great Sand Dunes National Park. Stop in at the visitor center for more details and maps of the area. Visitors planning to drive over the primitive Medano Pass road will need a high clearance 4-wheel drive vehicle to negotiate soft sand, stream crossings, and a road that can be rough in places.

## **Recreational Opportunities**

Music Pass/Sand Creek Lakes/other alpine peaks provide stunning alpine scenery. The eastern trailhead for Music Pass is accessed via Highway 69, 4.5 miles south of Westcliffe. Turn off Highway 69 to the west at the sign for Music Pass and South Colony Lakes Trailhead. At the 'T' junction turn left onto South Colony Road. At the end of the ranch fence on the right, you'll see another sign for Music Pass. 2WD drivers should park at the Grape Creek Trailhead which is where the Rainbow Trail crosses. From here it's about 4 miles to the top of the pass. 4WD drivers may drive another 2.7 rough miles to the end of the road (this road requires very high clearance). From here it's just a steep one mile hike to the pass. From the top of the pass descend into the basin to two alpine lakes or to any one of the 13,000' peaks above the basin.

Medano Lake/Mount Herard: Access this trailhead from the Medano Pass 4WD road. Beginning at 10,000' elevation, the trail climbs through lush meadows and forests, ending at an alpine lake just above timberline. For advanced hikers, continue on to the summit of 13,297' Mount Herard for a spectacular view of the Great Sand Dunes.

Mosca Pass Trail: This trail may be accessed from the west near the Great Sand Dunes Visitor Center or from the east via Huerfano County/USFS Road 583 which will take you right to the top of Mosca Pass. The trail is 3.5 miles one way. Indians and early settlers used this route for travel into the San Luis Valley.

## **Climate and Special Equipment Needs**

Elevation of the wilderness area varies from 8,500' to over 13,000' above sea level. Winter snows result in road closures approximately 5-6 months of the year. At higher elevations snow drifts may cover trails into late June or early July. Weather is typically sunny but temperatures are relatively cool all year. Summer highs can approach the low 80s F (21 C) with lows in the 40s F (4 C). High winds can develop at any time creating cold wind chill factors. Afternoon thundershowers are common from July through September.

## **Safety and Current Conditions**

Be sure to bring rain gear, layers of clothing, and sunscreen. All water should be treated before drinking. Bears are common in the area so take appropriate precautions with food, garbage, and other items that may attract them. Plan to complete ascents of alpine peaks prior to noon each day as thunderstorms with lightning are common.

Drink plenty of water. At over 8,000 feet (2,499 m) above sea level, altitude sickness can be a problem, especially if you're accustomed to lower elevations. Symptoms include shortness of breath, headaches, and nausea.