
Stop 50. Rocky Mountains

Arrival datetime: Thursday, July 11, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Rocky Mountain National Park
Accommodations: Grand Lake Lodge
States traveled: Colorado

We had a few errands to do on the way out of Vernal, pick up laundry, get the car washed, get Michael's haircut. We stopped at a big sign that said, "Any haircut, \$7.00." It was a private home. Michael went in while Jennifer stayed in the car and made phone calls. The house was a mess. There were no mirrors. A small child was running naked around the house. But the woman was nice and the haircut was fine. She mentioned that the drought was so bad that tomorrow, the town will no longer be allowed to irrigate. All those pipes on wheels will lose their rainbows.

The horizontally tiered and painted cliffs and the fossilized sand dunes continued for a while, then we found ourselves in what had been blue mountains in the distance. Close up, they were green hills. We stopped at a used bookstore in Craig, Colorado to see if we could get a cheap audio book. We ended up selling the owner everything we had already listened to and read on our trip, except for *Undaunted Courage*, which we had not quite yet finished. After totaling it all up, he found that his checkbook was not in the store. Michael was ready to leave, but Jennifer told him he could mail us a check. She was just so happy to get the books out from where they had been clutter in the car. It was after 1:00PM and we asked him where to have lunch. He

suggested Steamboat Springs, even though it was still 40 miles away. We took his advice.

The mountaintops started to get tinges of pink and gray, stark ridges with tree lines hidden by tree-covered foothills. We came upon Granby Lake which was severely depleted from the current drought. It was surrounded by sandbars that had recently been submerged. Now they looked like undeveloped beaches. One marina was more than 200 yards from the water's edge. Next we came upon Grand Lake. We were surprised to see it was full. The dam between it and Granby Lake was keeping the water at tree's edge, and in line with all the boathouses that lined the shore like the two car garages of an upscale suburb. We wondered how the community managed to keep all the water for themselves, but were nonetheless grateful, since our Lodge overlooked Grand Lake.

We checked in and had dinner on the porch overlooking the lake. Beyond the lake, a triangular mountain peak had gathered a small cloud in the shape of a halo. The midpoint of the halo rose until it took the shape of the peak below it, a white triangle sitting on top of a gray one. Then the cloud expanded and reflected a setting sun that we could not see. Its edges moved horizontally in both



Rocky Mountain high (Colorado)

directions as its pink hue deepened. A blueberry-colored horizontal cloud seeped between it and the mountaintop, looking like a piece of blueberry meringue pie with raspberry compote. The gray mountain beneath grew darker. The shape of the mountain range was the only constant on the horizon as the clouds dissipated with the sunlight.

Breakfast was a buffet but was the only game in town, so we did it. But we made sure later in the day to buy some cereal and milk, and to bring the cooler into our room and plug it in. We set off for Trail Ridge Road. We passed meadows of willow, aspen, and ponderosa pine, tracing a winding river, slowly climbing into the juniper and lodgepole pine. We stopped at overlooks of rocky mountains, literally and no pun intended. The peaks were formed by geologic uplift and the valleys carved by glaciers. As in the Colorado side of the Dinosaur National Monument, they called these valleys

“parks.” They looked like parks, green stretches of grass dotted with large boulders perfect for a picnic lunch. There were trees in the parks, and ponderosa pines far enough apart to provide some shade but still allow plenty of room to walk between them. Wildflowers were so thick patches of them were visible from several hundred yards away.

At the top of Trail Ridge Drive, we were at over 12,000 feet. It was alpine tundra that we had not seen since traveling to Denali National Park in Alaska last year. Little wildflowers and dull green brush clung to rocky dry soil. However, no loose rock littered the area as strong winds routinely blew it away, or it sunk into soil made soft with snow melt.

The views were the most expansive we had ever seen, even after the Tetons. Huge mountains were dwarfed by our perspective. Some of the peaks below us

bore scars of glacial ice cracking and crumbling the surfaces facing us. We looked down into glaciers and kettle lakes below them. Other peaks remained apparently uncut, rectangular masses eroded only by evenly sloping wind and water. A thousand or more feet below, we could sometimes make out green grassy meadows, with scattered trees thickening at the base of the mountains.

The distinction between alpine and subalpine was strikingly clear to us from this view, as was the concept of different types of plants and trees thriving at different elevations. Remembering our respectful concentration as our Sante Fe tour guide taught us this concept made us aware that it had now become utterly intuitive. The views from Trail Ridge

illustrated it in a glance, and we took them in without hesitation.

We had to leave our car in a shuttle parking lot to get to Bear Lake, but managed to make it to the Kodak Photography Tip Walk to Dream Lake by 10:30AM. The Kodak photographer was late getting started then handed the five or so of us gathered a plastic card with ten tips for good photos. His instruction consisted solely of leading us on the hike and stopping at places that he thought made good pictures. He sometimes told us how to take the picture, to get some of the tree in the foreground, for instance. But he never gave us any theory on why these pictures were good. He did not even quote the plastic cards. We learned from them that placing a close object in the



View from Trail Ridge Road.

foreground gave a photo depth. But we did not get any theory on why depth is good. The place was so beautiful, it did not matter how little we learned for the time spent with the Kodak man.

We stopped at Nymph Lake, a quarter acre green pool half covered with lily pads boasting yellow flowers with very thick petals. Its border of continuous hedge-like pines was occasionally interrupted by white rock that reflected below the lily pads. From another viewpoint, the lake also reflected an angular rock formation that was most likely a mountaintop, though we saw only a large rock, very picturesque.

We thanked the Kodak man at Dream Lake, and took the path .7 mile further to Emerald Lake. The lakes were actually ponds by most lake community standards. Both reflected the same cleft between two mountains. Both were surrounded by rocks that were overrun by families eating lunch in varying degrees of relative harmony. One eight year old whined constantly that he wanted water, so much so that we gave him one of our bottles.

We had an apple with us, so we sat on a rock at Emerald Lake and ate it. We strolled back, stopping to admire wildflowers and mountaintops framed by trees, taking pictures as demonstrated by the Kodak man. We drove into Estes Park for lunch, on the way back stopping at the Visitor Center at Beaver Creek. As was our custom, we saw the video, examined a relief map of the park, and bought a bookmark and some interpretive guides.

Armed with a 25¢ guide, we headed back to Trail Ridge Road. We now had time to stop at the overlooks, take the short hikes, and take more time to admire the views we had seen on the way. The views were not entirely the same. The afternoon sun brought out more detail to the east, more shadows to the west. At Rock Cut, we walked through the tundra, to the top of a rock outcropping. At the bottom of the rock pile, there was a dedication to a past superintendent of the park, someone who had run Mount Rainier, then Rocky Mountains, then Yellowstone. We guessed the National Park System hierarchy promotes superintendents according to how many visitors the parks get.

The rock pile was a capped with a cryptic metal map of the park, and signs pointing to other National Parks, Grand Canyon, Mount Rainier, and Yellowstone, included, giving their distances from our summit. It gave the elevation of our summit as 12,307 feet. Michael took a picture of Jennifer on top of the rock pile, but she towered above the expansive views so very little of the mountains showed up in the background. Michael then tried to hand the camera to Jennifer but missed her hand, and it went crashing, one hard bounce at a time, down the rock pile. Luckily, a man climbing up caught it on the fourth bounce. The lens would not retract all the way. It was definitely broken. Our luck continued as Michael was able to fix it with only a few minor adjustments.

We ate dinner, watched a folk singer in the lounge for twenty minutes or so, then went to sleep. We arose early to drive Trail Ridge Road again in order to hike Deer Mountain, which was on the other



A "Kodak Moment" at Nymph Lake.



Jennifer at 12,307 feet, just before the camera dropped.

side of the park. Soon after we passed the western park entrance, we came across an animal jam. We thought it was most likely elk, which we had seen in abundance. But we slowed down anyway, rolled down the window, and called to a family standing along the roadside, “What is it?”

A little blond in pigtails turned her wide-eyed face to us, “A moose!”

We go to New England several times every year, we have been to Arcadia in Maine, Denali, Glacier Bay, and the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska in addition to all the National Parks on this trip, yet we had never seen a moose in the wild. We were excited to say the least. We stopped the car for our first ever moose.

Jennifer got out of the car with the binoculars and camera while Michael

parked the car properly so the Ranger would not chase us away. We watched a moose buck and doe for almost a half hour straight. They walked purposefully along Onahu Creek, frequently ducking behind trees and obscuring our view. When the buck disappeared for good and the doe obscured herself below some willows, we resumed our drive on Trail Ridge Road.



Our first ever moose sighting!

Our Deer Mountain hike started on a grassy hill though widely spaced pine trees and assorted wildflowers. It gradually ascended into more dense pine forest and rocky slopes. Then it descended into a cool grassy forest before making a final ascent to a rocky embankment. The summit had 270° views. The town of Estes Park and the YMCA camp were clearly visible. Mountain ranges poked out in all directions. It was sunny and warm. We ate lunch.

Back on Trail Ridge Road, we were a mile away from the trailhead when it started to rain. But it passed quickly. We had not done the stairs behind the Alpine Visitor Center yet, and so we were headed there. As we approached, several



View from Deer Mountain.

people were descending and one older man advised us that we should not walk to the top of that hill while there was lightening about. But we saw no lightening and the rain did not come back the whole time we were there. Again, the flower-strewn tundra and expansive mountain views provided one unforgettable landscape after another.

We slowed as we approached the location of our morning moose jam, but were still surprised to find another one. This one was for two does lying in tall grass beside the road. We took what pictures we could and hung out for twenty minutes waiting for them to stand, but were lured away by reports of a buck further down the road. Jennifer scanned the willows as Michael drove, and sure enough saw a buck step

out from behind some evergreens. There were no cars, so this was not the buck to which we had been referred. So we started our own moose jam. We got out the tripod and periodically moved it south as the buck, a doe, and a calf with small budding antlers walked along a creek that paralleled the roadway. This moose sighting turned out to be unique because there was an elk grazing along with the moose and even the attending Ranger acknowledged that this was very unusual. By the time we gave up to make to our dinner reservations, we had attracted a dozen or more cars.

We had just enough time to make our 6:00PM dinner reservation at the Rapids. The food and atmosphere overlooking a bubbling stream were just perfect, and the

*View from
the Kayak
on Grand
Lake.*



excellent service allowed us time to shop around Grand Lake a bit before the summer theatre's production of 1776 started at 8:00PM. The production was typical summer theatre, and very entertaining.

The next day, we took it easy on the driving and stayed near Grand Lake. We kayaked from the small part of the lake to a peninsula on the south side. We

found a sunny rock along the shore where we could haul out the two-person sit-on kayak and eat lunch. Back in town, we wandered about shopping and eating ice cream. We knew that in our room, a mail package from home awaited. We spent a few hours in the afternoon taking care of bills and such. We strolled the grounds again before dinner, and went early to bed.

Miles traveled: 454
Departure datetime: Monday, July 15, 8:30AM
Departure weather: 57° Sunny