VISITOR FIELD GUIDE · SAWATCH RANGE, COLORADO

Granite Basin

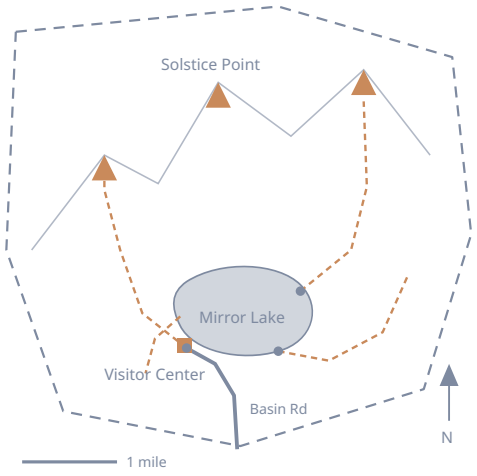
Thirteen glacial lakes in a bowl of two-billion-year-old granite, ninety miles of trail, and the darkest measured night sky in Colorado. One road in, no road through — the basin asks for a little planning and repays it all season long.

A LANDSCAPE WRITTEN IN STONE

The rock beneath your boots is among the oldest exposed stone in the Rocky Mountains. The gray cliffs that wall the basin are Precambrian granite, crystallized twelve miles underground almost two billion years ago and carried slowly upward ever since. Every ledge on the Rimline is older than animal life; the youngest thing about this landscape is its shape.

The shape is the work of ice. At least eight times in the last two million years, glaciers filled the basin to the brim, plucking boulders from the headwall and grinding the valley from a V into a U. When the last ice melted, ten thousand years ago, it left a chain of thirteen paternoster lakes descending the valley floor like beads on a string — Mirror Lake the largest and the last.

Frost is still at work. On quiet October mornings you can hear it: a crack and clatter of rockfall off the headwall as meltwater freezes in the joints and pries the cliff apart, grain by grain — the slow demolition that keeps the talus fields below alive and growing.

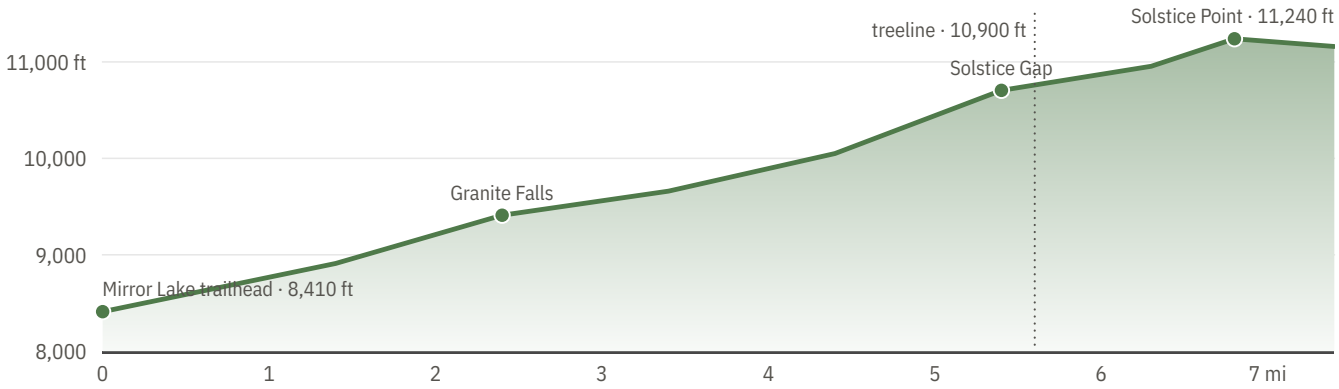


One road in, five trailheads, ninety miles of trail.

TRAILS OF THE BASIN

Ninety miles of maintained trail leave from five trailheads along Basin Road, and every walk in the park is a variation on one theme: up. Distances below are one-way from the visitor center; the effort index folds distance, climbing, and exposure into a single 100-point scale.[t]

TRAIL	DISTANCE	CLIMB	RATING	EFFORT
Lakeshore Loop	2.1 mi	140 ft	Easy	**15**
Basin Overlook	1.6 mi	380 ft	Easy	**24**
Granite Falls	3.2 mi	610 ft	Moderate	**42**
Cirque Meadows	5.4 mi	980 ft	Moderate	**55**
Solstice Gap	7.0 mi	1,870 ft	Strenuous	**78**
Rimline Traverse	9.4 mi	2,830 ft	Strenuous	**96**



The Rimline Traverse in profile — the last two miles above treeline do half the climbing.

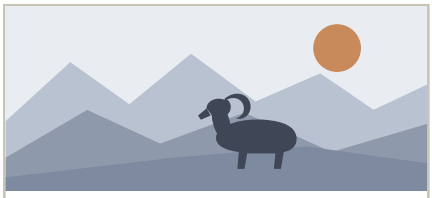
The Rimline is the basin's signature walk and its most serious one. Two-thirds of the climbing waits in the final two miles above treeline, where the trail becomes a line of cairns across bare granite and the weather has a vote. Start before six, turn around at the first thunder, and give the summit ridge the morning it deserves.

[t] The effort index is calibrated so that 100 equals the Rimline Traverse on a dry day: 9.4 miles, 2,830 feet of gain, and two miles of exposed ridge above treeline.

> **The basin is a bowl of time — rock two billion years old, ice ten thousand years gone, meadows six weeks a summer.**

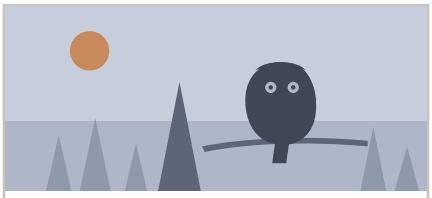
WILDLIFE YOU MAY MEET

The basin stacks three life zones into four thousand vertical feet, and the animals sort themselves accordingly: elk and mule deer in the aspen parks, bighorn on the talus, marmots and pikas in the rock above treeline, and a resident pair of great grey owls in the old growth along Cirque Creek. Dawn and dusk are the hours that pay.



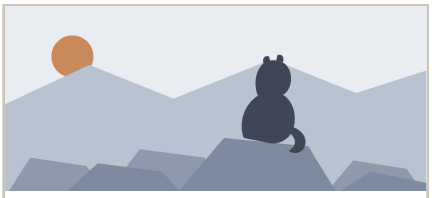
Bighorn sheep

Ovis canadensis. Bands of ewes graze the talus below Solstice Gap at first light; the rams keep to the high ledges until the November rut fills the basin with the crack of colliding horns.



Great grey owl

Strix nebulosa. A ghost of the old growth, hunting the meadow edges at dusk. Listen for a slow pulse of low hoots from the firs along Cirque Creek — then watch the fence posts.



Yellow-bellied marmot

Marmota flaviventris. The whistle you hear above treeline. Marmots double their weight by September, then sleep on the investment for eight months under the snow.

Finding them is a matter of knowing where to look and what to listen for — four field signs the basin gives up to a patient eye:

Elk at dusk

In late September the bulls fill the aspen parks with a high, breaking bugle — the wildest sound in the basin, and the easiest animal to find.

Haypiles in the talus

Clipped grass drying on a flat rock is a pika's winter larder; the little haymaker is usually somewhere close, watching you back.

Rams at first light

Scan the ledges above Solstice Gap in the first hour of sun, when the bighorn drop off the high rock to graze the talus below.

Pellets under the firs

A great grey owl's day roost is marked by pellets on the ground beneath it; follow them up into the shadows and you may find the bird.

All of it is wilder than it looks. Give animals twenty-five yards — a hundred if it is a bear or a mountain lion — store food in the lockers at every campground, and never feed anything, however persuasive the marmot.

PLANNING YOUR DAYS

The basin runs on a short calendar. Basin Road opens in late May and closes with the first serious snow, usually by the end of October, and the high country holds drifts into July. Inside those five months the park offers three different seasons, each with its own reward.

GETTING THERE

Granite Basin is 41 miles east of Silverpine on State Route 82, the last nine on good gravel. Arrive before eight on summer weekends or ride the shuttle from the Silverpine depot — the Mirror Lake lot fills by mid-morning and does not empty until dusk.

SEASONS & WEATHER

June is runoff, waterfalls, and mosquitoes. July and August bring wildflowers, warm afternoons, and a thunderstorm most days at two. September is the quiet prize: aspen gold, cold nights, empty trails. Whatever the month, pack for winter above treeline.

CAMPING & LODGING

Three campgrounds ring Mirror Lake; reserve six months ahead for July. The walk-in sites at Cirque Meadows are first-come and usually gone by noon on Friday. Backcountry zones require a wilderness permit, issued at the visitor center the day before you go.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The things that go wrong in the backcountry usually start as planning problems: too little water, too little daylight, a forecast nobody checked. What follows is the short version; the rangers at the visitor center will happily supply the long one, along with the day's storm outlook and current trail conditions.

Entrance fee	**$20 per vehicle, good for seven days**
Visitor center	**8 am – 6 pm, June through September**
Wilderness permits	**Required for every overnight stay**
Cell coverage	**None beyond the entrance station**
Nearest fuel & clinic	**Silverpine, 41 miles east**
Drinking water	**Filter every backcountry source**

> Lightning is the basin's most dangerous weather. Storms build over the headwall fast — often within twenty minutes of a blue morning — every afternoon from July through August. Plan to be below treeline by noon; if thunder catches you on the ridge, drop elevation immediately rather than waiting it out on a summit.

However far you walk, the basin's best habit is the one it teaches: pay attention. Look up from the trail once an hour and the light on the headwall will be doing something new. Pack out what you pack in, sign the register at the wilderness boundary, and leave the marmots to their whistling. The rock has been at this for two billion years; it will gladly slow you down to its pace.