

Rocky Mountain News

This information easy to interpret

Rangers' knowledge of Mount Evans leads to heightened awareness

**By Janet Reese, Special to the News
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Those who want to learn more about the plants, wildlife or geology have an outlet in Colorado: an interpretive program at Mount Evans.

Daily, from June through September, the U.S. Forest Service offers free interpretive programs on geology, alpine ecology, animals and alpine and subalpine vegetation in the Mount Evans area.

Interpretive rangers share knowledge on these family-friendly programs that begin at three locations on the Mount Evans road: Goliath Peak parking lot, Summit Lake and the summit parking lot.

With its drive-up access and proximity to Denver, the 14,264-foot Mount Evans is ideal for experiencing a Fourteener without the arduous climb. But there's more to see than spectacular vistas. The wilderness area is home to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, mountain goats, ptarmigan, pica, yellow-bellied marmots, ancient bristlecone pines and arctic plants.

"Mount Evans is one of the few places south of the Arctic Circle where arctic tundra is found, as well as alpine tundra," said Jeremiah Hyslop, interpretive ranger for the U.S. Forest Service.

For his programs, Hyslop tells why the tree line stops where it does, how marmots hibernate, how mountain goats and bighorn sheep live at altitude and more.

Goats and sheep

"One of the main reasons people come here is to see the mountain goats and bighorn sheep," Hyslop said. "But people often confuse the two animals."

Hyslop gave a 20-minute "goats and sheep" program at the ruins of the Crest House, a shelter that burned in 1979. Nearby, five mountain goats licked minerals and salt from the soil.

"Unrelated to domestic goats, mountain goats and bighorn sheep are similar but different," Hyslop said. He displayed two hides - one from a goat, and the other from a sheep. Mountain goats have white, woolly hides that shed; bighorn sheep have brown, dense fur marked by white patches on their rumps.

Goats and sheep have different horns but are herd animals with hooved feet.

Using a skull of a male bighorn sheep, Hyslop role-played with a 13-year-old guest to illustrate how rams butt horns during mating season. The boy held the huge curled horns of a ram above his head while Hyslop played another sheep moving toward the ram.

"Sheep have been known to butt heads for up to 20 hours," he said. "The horns of a ram can weigh as much as 15 percent of its body weight."

Mountain place names

Hyslop gives another program, called "Mountain Place Names." Leading a group from the summit parking lot up the quarter-mile trail to the top, he oriented them to surrounding mountains and peaks and their namesakes.

"Everywhere you look, you can see faces of Colorado history," he said. "Mount Bierstadt was named after Albert Bierstadt, an artist who came here from Germany in the 1860s and painted huge murals that lured people to the West. When you see Mount Bierstadt, you'll remember this face," he said while showing a laminated picture of Bierstadt.

Bierstadt was one of the first known people to climb Mount Evans, which was named in 1895 after John Evans, the second territorial governor of Colorado and co-founder of the University of Denver. Some peaks were named after botanists such as Edwin James and Charles Perry, the namesakes of James and Perry peaks.

"Perry was king of Colorado botany," Hyslop said. "He studied under armchair botanists Asa Gray and John Torrey, for which the 14,000-foot Grays and Torreys peaks are named."

Alpine to subalpine hike

Nick Scholz, a University of Montana intern student working as an interpretive ranger at Mount Evans, leads a two-hour "alpine to subalpine" hike starting at the Goliath Peak parking lot at mile marker No. 5 on the Mount Evans road.

"This is one of my favorite programs because it encompasses everything wrapped up in one hike - wildflowers, animals, bristlecone pines, characteristics of the alpine tundra and transition zone," he said.

"Some bristlecone pines here are over 1,000 years old, an amazing life span considering the harsh environment of high winds and 30 to 40 feet of snow in the winter. Dense wood and flexible branches make the tree resilient, and it grows as little as one inch per century."

Interpretive guides

While interpretive guides educate, their primary motive is to communicate a universal message: Natural resources are important and worth protecting, Scholz said. "We hint how people can help by not feeding animals, not walking on the fragile tundra and leaving no trace."

Said Hyslop: "It's an art to develop an interpretive program with a theme, message and objectives and deliver it in an interesting way. Charisma and passion are qualities of a good interpretive guide."

Mount Evans interpretive rangers are certified by the National Association for Interpreters based in Fort Collins. Certification involves a 32-hour course and passing an exam and oral presentation.

"The biggest benefit of the interpretive programs is to help people connect to the land," said Linda Hecker, U.S. Forest Service regional coordinator for interpretive services.

Mount Evans Road

- Directions: The Mount Evans road is 50 miles from Denver. From Interstate 70, take exit 240 in Idaho Springs. Follow Highway 103 south past Echo Lake, then turn right on Highway 5 (Mount Evans Road) to the top of Mount Evans.
- Visitor fee: \$10 per vehicle is collected at the entrance booth. The road is open to the top from Memorial Day through Labor Day, weather permitting. After Labor Day, the road is open to Summit Lake and closes the first Monday in October, or earlier.

INTERPRETIVE PROGRAMS AT MOUNT EVANS

- Goats and Sheep: 20-minute talk, daily at 11:30 a.m. and 2 p.m., summit parking lot.

- History at "The Top": 15-minute talk about the history of the University of Denver research activities, the Crest House and the fire lookout building. Daily at 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, summit parking lot.
- Mountain Place Names: 20-minute talk/walk about the people for whom the surrounding peaks and mountains are named. Daily at 10:30 a.m., and 3:30 p.m. Friday-Sunday, summit parking lot.
- Geology: 30-minute talk/walk about the geology of the Summit Lake area. Daily at 1 p.m. and 10:30 a.m. Saturday-Wednesday, Summit Lake.
- Alpine Ecology: 30-minute talk/walk about the living things in the alpine tundra. Daily at 4 p.m. and 11 a.m. Friday-Sunday, Summit Lake.
- Alpine to Subalpine Hike: 2-hour talk/hike about transition zones, how elevation affects the landscape, living things and the oldest tree on Earth, the bristlecone pine. Offered 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Friday-Sunday, Goliath Peak parking lot, Mile Marker No. 5.
- For information: Call the Clear Creek Ranger District at 303-567-3000 or visit the Web site www.fs.fed.us/r2.

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