

Rocky Mountain News

Roxborough Park tour illuminating

By Janet Reese, Special to the News
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Roxborough State Park, 25 miles southwest of downtown Denver, is famous for its intriguing rock formations. Red, tilted sandstones rise at 60-degree angles from the ground. The sharp-ridged Dakota Hogback, the petrified sand dunes of the Lyons Formation and the Fountain Formation's towering red fins anchor the park's 3,400 acres.

At night, the park takes on a mystical quality as the full moon bathes the 300 million-year-old rock formations in a silvery glow. Visitors can view the park on guided moonlight hikes offered once monthly, May through October.

With reservations for the moonlight hike May 11, my husband and I anticipated seeing the spring "planting moon" and experiencing a hike in the park under a full moon. Clear skies and gentle breezes made the evening ideal.

Close to Denver in proximity, Roxborough is worlds away in serenity and nature. At the entrance, we saw four deer grazing, a good start to our adventure. We arrived at the visitors' center at dusk, where volunteer coordinator Bobby Sheffield greeted us.

"The moonlight hike is an opportunity to experience the park after dark on a relaxed, enjoyable hike," she said. "It's magical when the moon comes up and shines on the rocks."

Fifteen people registered for this hike, but on some evenings, as many as 60 have, Sheffield said. The Friends of Roxborough State Park sponsors the moonlight hikes and uses the proceeds - it costs \$7.50 a hiker - to cover the cost of refreshments and for nature education at the park.

We joined a group of hikers walking the three-mile South Rim Trail. Another group gathered for a 2.2-mile hike on the Fountain Valley Trail.

"The South Rim is fun and not technical," said volunteer naturalist guide Wayne Sheffield, Bobby's husband. "The only test is to make it back to the visitor center for food at the end of the hike."

Starting our hike at 7:15 p.m., we traveled a loop that begins and ends at the visitors' center. Volunteer guide Dave Mills brought up the rear. At the start, Wayne pointed out a variety of plants and animal tracks.

"Roxborough is unique for its natural state, wildlife and plant zones," he said. "You can walk through six habitats here, including bare rock, marsh, ponderosa, grassland, scrub oak and woods of aspen and Douglas fir."

Roxborough Park is a designated State Natural Area, a National Natural Landmark and a National Archaeological District. To preserve its pristine state, the park does not allow bikes, horses, pets, rock climbing, fires, camping, firearms or hunting.

Pointing to a tall stock with fernlike leaves, Wayne identified the poisonous hemlock.

"Don't use these branches for roasting hot dogs," he quipped.

We paused at an open meadow.

"There are over 180 species of grass in the park, many not native to Colorado," he said. "Scrub oak soon will blossom with leaves. Prickly thorns on the hawthorne tree are used by the shray, a tiny bird that impales its prey on the thorns. Mullen, also known as Indian tobacco, is a soft, feltlike plant that miners used for torches."

Wildflowers, including Canada violets and Golden Banner, carpeted the ground. Fox, elk, mountain lions, black bear, deer and snakes reside in the park.

Much to our surprise and delight, we spotted a lone black bear meandering in the brush about 50 yards from the trail.

"We don't have aggressive bears here," Wayne reassured us.

The bear went on its way, as did we, with a backward glance.

At 8 p.m., the full moon was visible, rising over the ridge like a shining silver dollar. We stopped at a park bench with a view of the Fountain Formation. Here, we could see how the age-old formation gets its name - the red rocks erupt from the Earth, fountains of iron rock stone lifted upward by forces unleashed millions of years ago.

At 8:45, we reached the South Rim overlook. In the distance, Denver's downtown lights flickered, and a blanket of lights covered the Front Range.

We descended the east side of the loop on a moonlit trail that was easy to navigate without using flashlights. Wayne pointed out the Big Dipper overhead.

We reached the visitors' center at 9:50, where volunteer and astronomer Paul Thayer invited us to look through his telescopes on the patio. Here, we saw

Jupiter and three of its moons, Mars and the Beehive star cluster. He said the moonlight hikes are held two days before the official full moon because the moon rises earlier, allowing an earlier start time.

Inside, we enjoyed fresh fruit, mini crème puffs and cookies while looking at nature exhibits.

Everyone agreed the adventure was a magical experience.

"Between the trail, moon and group, the hike was better than I thought it would be," Jeff Nielsen said. "The food was great, too."

His wife, Adele, added, "Seeing a bear up close and the city lights at a distance is exactly what we wanted to see."

Moonlight hikes

- Reservations are required and tickets cost \$7.50 apiece. Colorado State Parks require a \$5 per vehicle entrance pass. Call 303-973-3959 for reservations.
- Moonlight hikes will take place at 7 p.m. July 9, 6:30 p.m. Aug. 8, 6 p.m. Sept. 6 and 6 p.m. Oct. 6.
- Wear closed shoes and bring a rain jacket and warm clothes for a change of weather, and insect repellent, Bobby Sheffield said. If needed, special flashlights that do not impair night vision are available at the park. Turn off cell phones or leave them behind.
- A variety of guided, easy hikes are offered, including the 1.4-mile round-trip Willow Creek Trail, the 2.2-mile Fountain Valley Trail, the 1.3-mile Lyons Overlook Trail and the 3-mile South Rim Trail. Well-behaved children age 7 and older can accompany parents.
- For directions to Roxborough State Park, visit www.Parks.State.CO.US.

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