



Expect the Unexpected in Colorado's State Parks

Article & Photos By SUE EMOND

Truth be told, there's nothing I'd rather do than explore the great outdoors of Colorado. And Colorado's state parks are often the destination.

To date, I've visited 26 of Colorado's 43 state parks. Well, not just visited. I've hiked, jogged, camped, kayaked, float-tubed, fished, photographed, swum, picnicked and more. Whether I'm venturing to a state park for the first time or visiting one of my favorites, I'm always prepared with park information and trail maps that will help me make the most of my visit. And to be sure, I go in educated about the wildlife, birds and wildflowers commonly found in each park — especially important to my passion for wildlife and nature photography.

My preparations lead to certain expectations about what I might experience during each visit. But here's the thing: Regardless of my expectations, time and time again, I'm happily surprised by what I uncover. Here are a few of those memorable experiences.

Jackson Lake State Park

I had just purchased an A-frame popup camper. A weekend destination not far from my Fort Collins home, Jackson Lake was the perfect place for a trial run. I also had plans, as always, to explore park trails, plus to fish and photograph waterfowl and other birds. And with the lake just east of my campsite and clear weather ahead, I looked forward to being greeted each morning by sunrises over the lake.

After getting settled in, I forged ahead with my plans for adventure. Telephoto lens in hand, I was scanning the big cottonwoods at the edge of the lake for birds when I spotted something slithering in the grass in front of me: a new find for me and a beautiful one, the North American racer.

Also known as the yellow-bellied racer, the North American racer (*Coluber constrictor*) is a fast-moving snake that grows up to 3 feet long. Although a new reptile sighting for me, they're apparently common in eastern Colorado and less common in the valleys and canyons of western Colorado.

State Forest State Park

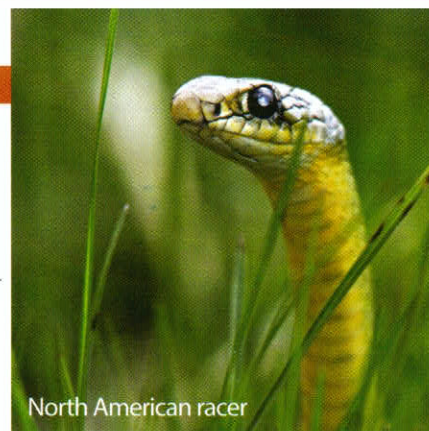
I was determined to find bull moose before they shed their antlers for the season. So, one frigid December morning before dawn, I headed up the Poudre Canyon and over Cameron Pass for a day trip to my fa-

vorite of the state parks. With the temperature at -5 degrees, I decided a wildlife drive around the park with a thermos of hot coffee in my heated SUV was in order.

Although some of the roads were closed for the winter, I still had plenty of ground to cover and a frequent view of the majestic Medicine Bow Mountains, but I failed to scare up a moose. Instead, I came upon the most beautiful red fox I have ever seen in my life. I bundled up and photographed the fox hunting in the snow for over an hour. It was a truly exhilarating experience, frozen fingers and all.

Colorado is actually home to four species of foxes, including the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). Interestingly, red foxes aren't always red, but instead can be tan, silver or even black. Females have a single annual litter and adults weigh up to 15 pounds, and they can be found in most habitats in Colorado.

A couple of other unexpected experiences in State Forest State Park: While camping in Bockman Campground a few summers ago, I was forced to share my campsite with a family of five complete strangers . . . as in golden-mantled ground squirrels (*Callospermophilus lateralis*). And while hiking on a trail in the northwest area of the park, I came upon the cherished and protected Colorado state flower, the Rocky Mountain columbine (*Aquilegia caerulea*).



North American racer



Red fox



Prairie rattlesnake

Trinidad Lake State Park

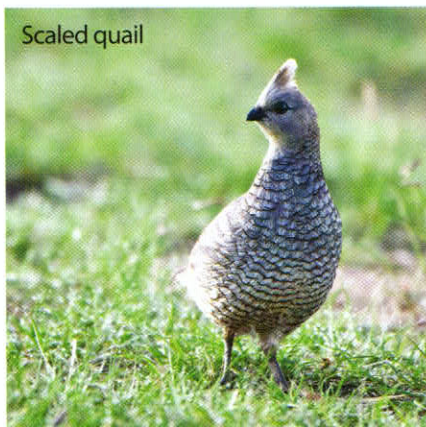
I was itching to explore some of the state parks I had never visited before. So with A-frame camper in tow, I embarked on a 10-day tour of four state parks in southern Colorado in late spring. All featured scenic lakes that are popular fishing destinations, so I made it my goal to get my kayak out on each of them and to land at least one fish in each lake. After enjoying my first stop at John Martin Reservoir State Park, I moved on to the fishing, wildlife viewing and hiking of Trinidad. I was especially anxious to hit the miles of trails winding through pinon-juniper forests, with spectacular views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Just after arriving at my campsite at the

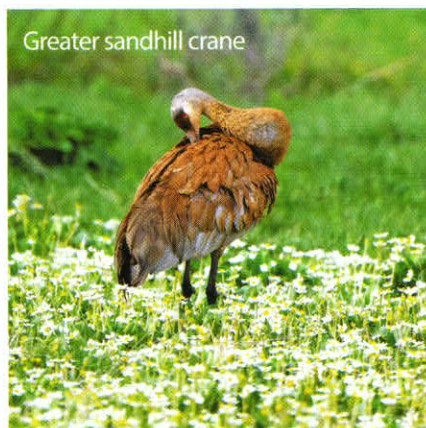
Spiny lizard



Scaled quail



Greater sandhill crane



Carprios Ridge Campground and taking in a quick view of the lake, I discovered something under a nearby shrub: a coiled, rattling prairie rattlesnake! I've crossed paths with a good number of rattlesnakes before, and I'm familiar with their striking distance, so I plopped down on the ground to take a few photographs. Second in priority to the wildlife photo op was contacting the park office to alert them of the campsite visitor. A Colorado Parks and Wildlife officer promptly and aptly captured and relocated the rattler.

Prairie rattlesnakes (*Crotalus viridis*) are, as we all know, venomous. They are found throughout most of Colorado, with the exclusion of the high mountains. We see them

at times on my family's Livermore property (near the Cherokee State Wildlife Area Lone Pine Unit). In fact, a few years ago, one of my dogs was bitten several times by a rattlesnake while we were hiking on the property one morning. I'm happy to report that Ruff survived (barely) after I rushed my unconscious pooch to the CSU Veterinary Hospital for antivenom.

Lathrop State Park

The next stop on my tour was Lathrop, Colorado's first state park. Of the four parks on my journey, I had my most successful fishing at this park's Horseshoe Lake, landing a good number of healthy bass and trout from my kayak. Besides my goal to catch fish, I also hoped to see at least one lizard while there, since I don't see many in Northern Colorado. My sweet campsite in the Pinon Campground offered a stunning view of the Spanish Peaks, and backed up to Hogback Ridge, a great area to look for lizards.

Well, I saw lizard after lizard after lizard, spending hours meandering in the nearby rocks to photograph them. And not only that, I was surprised by how colorful some of them were, being only familiar with tan-colored lizards. My favorite of the bunch? The colorful spiny lizard.

The spiny lizard (*Sceloporus sp.*) is so named due to its large spiny scales. Adults reach up to 6 inches in length, excluding the tail, and they live at Colorado elevations up to 5,000 feet.

Lake Pueblo State Park

On the last stop of my tour, I had a choice campsite in the Prairie Ridge Campground up on a bluff overlooking Lake Pueblo. Besides the excitement of landing a few walleye while out on the lake (which by the way meant I went four for four in my solo fishing competition), I enjoyed long walks along the lake. I also spent time relaxing at my campsite. Sitting quietly, I had the pleasure of watching various species of bird fluttering around.

Suddenly, a bird scurried about 50 feet away from me. The way it moved, I thought it might be a roadrunner. But upon further investigation using my trusty mobile bird app, I discovered it was a scaled quail. I know quails can be found in northern Colorado, but I rarely see them, so this sighting was especially fun. And what a cool-looking bird, with feathers that look like scales.

Yes, the scaled quail (*Callipepla squamata*) is named for the scaly appearance of its breast and back feathers. It's one of around a dozen species of upland game birds in Colo-

rado and is a common resident of southeastern Colorado's plains and mesas.

Steamboat Lake State Park

It's hard to beat the lush forests and wildflowers in and around Steamboat Lake State Park, so I headed back there for a second time. I had a great campsite in the Lupine loop of the Sunrise Vista Campground, with a perfect view from my campsite of the extinct volcano, Hahns Peak. With my recently adopted rescue dog, Winnie, on her first camping trip with me, I planned to hit the area trails, plus to hop over to nearby Pearl Lake State Park. I expected my wildlife viewing might include mule deer, elk, moose, waterfowl and songbirds.

But not on my list for a June camping weekend in Routt County? A sandhill crane in a meadow near my campsite, months removed from its spring and fall migratory seasons in Colorado. I've seen a few sandhill cranes in northern Colorado during the spring migration, but I've never seen one more colorful than this one. Just... beautiful.

These long-legged sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) are among the oldest living birds on the planet. They're known to breed in northwest Colorado and to famously stop over each year in the San Luis Valley of Colorado during spring and fall migration.

Honorable mentions

Here are a few experiences that are worthy of a shout-out: I watched a big bull moose furiously licking a car in a yurt parking lot in State Forest State Park, which I later found was for the minerals in the road salt on the car. While strolling around a meadow near my campsite in the North Michigan Reservoir Campground of State Forest, a young bull moose charged me from 75 yards away (I survived). And after lying in the grass at Jackson Lake State Park, photographing the yellow snake, I returned to my camper to discover 10 ticks on me. Ten.

Staying in the moment

All in all, I have wonderful adventures in Colorado's state parks, whether making quick day trips or going for extended stays. I arrive prepared and with certain expectations. But I also leave room to go where my nose and my heart take me — which sometimes leads me to the coolest, most unexpected things. ☞

Sue Emond is a freelance writer from northern Colorado. This is her first time writing for Colorado Outdoors magazine. This article is copyrighted by the author.