

Get Wild: Happy trails — How to practice responsible recreation on the trails and at camp

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Stasia Stockwell
Get Wild



A campsite at Willow Lakes in the Gore Range in Summit County. With warm weather comes new outdoor recreation opportunities, and an obligation to enjoy the outdoors responsibly.

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It's the time of year when the snow races to the rivers in a melting frenzy, the sun lingers long in the sky, and we flock to dry trails and campsites for summer adventures. Summit County is home to hundreds of miles of trails for outdoor recreation, from paths that backpackers follow as they meander through the Eagle's Nest Wilderness to singletrack on forest land where mountain bikers breeze by. There are places to pitch a tent along the edges of Dillon Reservoir and at the base of the Gore Range's imposing peaks.

This access to wilderness and other public lands is part of what makes Summit County so special. It's also something we can help to maintain for ourselves and for future visitors to these beautiful nooks in the mountains. And more importantly, if we can respectfully recreate on the trail and at camp, we can lower our impact on the wild spaces we travel through and play in.

One of the primary rules of trail use is simple: Use the trail! Instead of wandering off the beaten path, stay on the trail whenever there is one present. This helps to concentrate our human impact in one smaller area instead of spreading it across the land and doing more harm to it. When you stick to the trail, you avoid trampling over delicate forest and Alpine flora, like wildflowers, moss, fungi, lichens and other species. This encourages a mountain environment rich with a diverse array of plants.

Another basic set of rules to abide by when out on the trails or at camp are the Leave No Trace principles. In essence, these rules help minimize our impact when recreating in wild spaces by leaving nothing but footprints and taking only memories from the trails and camp. Pack out every piece of trash, including things like orange peels and coffee grounds. And, as much as the vibrant wildflowers may tempt us, refrain from plucking them so they can flourish and be left for others to enjoy.

When it comes to finding a campsite, some spots are easier to know where to pitch your tent than others. At developed campgrounds, stick to the spots that are designated for tents, like concrete slabs or cleared out patches of dirt instead of venturing off to find an alternative location. When primitive camping in the wilderness, pitch your tent where it will have the least impact on the land. Think of ground that is durable, like a rock slab or packed dirt instead of a meadow of flowers, and remember to camp at least 200 feet from water sources like lakes and streams.

When it's time to wind down at camp, it's worth reconsidering whether you really need to use that fire ring. Although campfires are almost ubiquitous with camping, they have a large impact on the land and the potential to spark dangerous wildfires. Before heading out to camp, check if there are any fire restrictions and follow suit. But, even if there are no fire bans in effect, consider stargazing instead of staring into the flames.

If you're looking to learn more about how to recreate responsibly on our trails and at camp, study the Leave No Trace principles at [LNT.org](https://www.lnt.org/). And if you'd like to help keep our Summit County trails and wilderness campsites nice, consider volunteering with the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance ([EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://www.EagleSummitWilderness.org/)), or Friends of the Dillon Ranger District ([FDRD.org](https://www.FDRD.org/)).



Stasia Stockwell

Stasia-Stockwell

Stasia Stockwell is a Breckenridge local and avid backcountry skier. A true mountain dweller, she feels most at home in the Alpine. Stasia writes primarily for the outdoor adventure realm, with the desire to connect readers from all backgrounds with nature in a meaningful way.

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