

Get Wild: Lingerin summer snow

Stasia Stockwell



Patches of snow up high and flowing water down low are pictured in the Tenmile Range.

Stasia Stockwell/Get Wild

It's not uncommon to find snow in the Colorado High Country on just about any month of the year, but some seasons the snow lingers a little longer than others. This past winter, some parts of the state (like the San Juan Mountains to the south) saw above-average snowfall while others, like here in Summit County, finished the season with an about-average snowpack. Spring and early summer weather is a big part of what determines how long that snow will stick around for.

While summer in Summit County feels like it's in full swing now, there was a slow start to the warm and sunny days. Snow storms continued late into the spring while late May and early June stayed cool and cloudy. That concoction of weather has helped the snow stick around, even as we head into July. Down in the valley, the lush green of spring is beginning to give way to sunny, dry Colorado summer days. But up in the Alpine, you're likely to still find snow — even several feet of it in some areas. Hikers have reported snowy conditions at high elevations around the county, which shouldn't be too surprising if you glance up at the summits and ridgelines.

All of this is good news for the mountains, since that snow is an important part of the environment and ecosystem, even in the warm months of the year. When the snow sticks around in the Alpine longer and melts slower, it fills the rivers and streams without excessive flooding, and keeps them gushing longer through the season. That snow also seeps into the ground, which is beginning to burst with flora. Summer snow often causes the wildflowers to peak a little later in the season, but that extra moisture in the ground typically makes for a more lush and vibrant bloom. In many areas, especially at lower elevations, the wildflowers have already begun to pop. As that snow continues to melt, the colorful show will take off in the Alpine. Don't forget that all that moisture that helps the wildflowers grow also gives bugs [a perfect breeding ground](#). Keep the bug spray on hand, and don't be surprised if you have to share the trail or campsite with a few thousand mosquitos.

As you're adventuring in the Alpine this summer, remember that the higher you get, the more likely you are to see snow. Don't be surprised when patches (and even large sections) of high-elevation trails are still buried. Use caution and know you might end up postholing your way across

certain sections of trail. While it may not be fun to punch through snow on your summer hike, it's actually better for the delicate tundra underneath. If you do see a patch of snow on the trail ahead of you, it's best to trudge right through it — don't create a new path on the dry or muddy tundra around it. Hiking boots do serious damage to the tiny plants that grow on these high-Alpine hillsides, and when they're harmed they [can take decades to recover](#).

So, when you hike up high this summer, remember to stick to the trail, even if it looks less like a path and more like a snowfield. Remember, you can always turn around and come back another day. And don't forget to pack the bug spray and the camera to capture the blooms. Either way, whether you're a die-hard still seeking out mid-summer snow to ski or a hiker reveling in the beauty mountain wildflowers, enjoy the gifts of the lingering summer snowpack safely and responsibly.



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