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## Nature's Bounty

Visiting Colorado's National Parks

## Contents

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### COVER PHOTO

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## 2

Colorado's Contours,  
Part I: – Flying To and Touring  
Colorado's National Parks  
*by Matthew McDaniel*



## 12

King Air Gathering 2021 –  
Register Now!  
*by Kim Blonigen*

## 18

Ask The Expert –  
Practice Demonstration of VMCA  
*by Tom Clements*

## 24



## 24

In History –  
Bigger and Better –  
The Model 100  
*by Edward H. Phillips*

## 28

Value Added

## 32

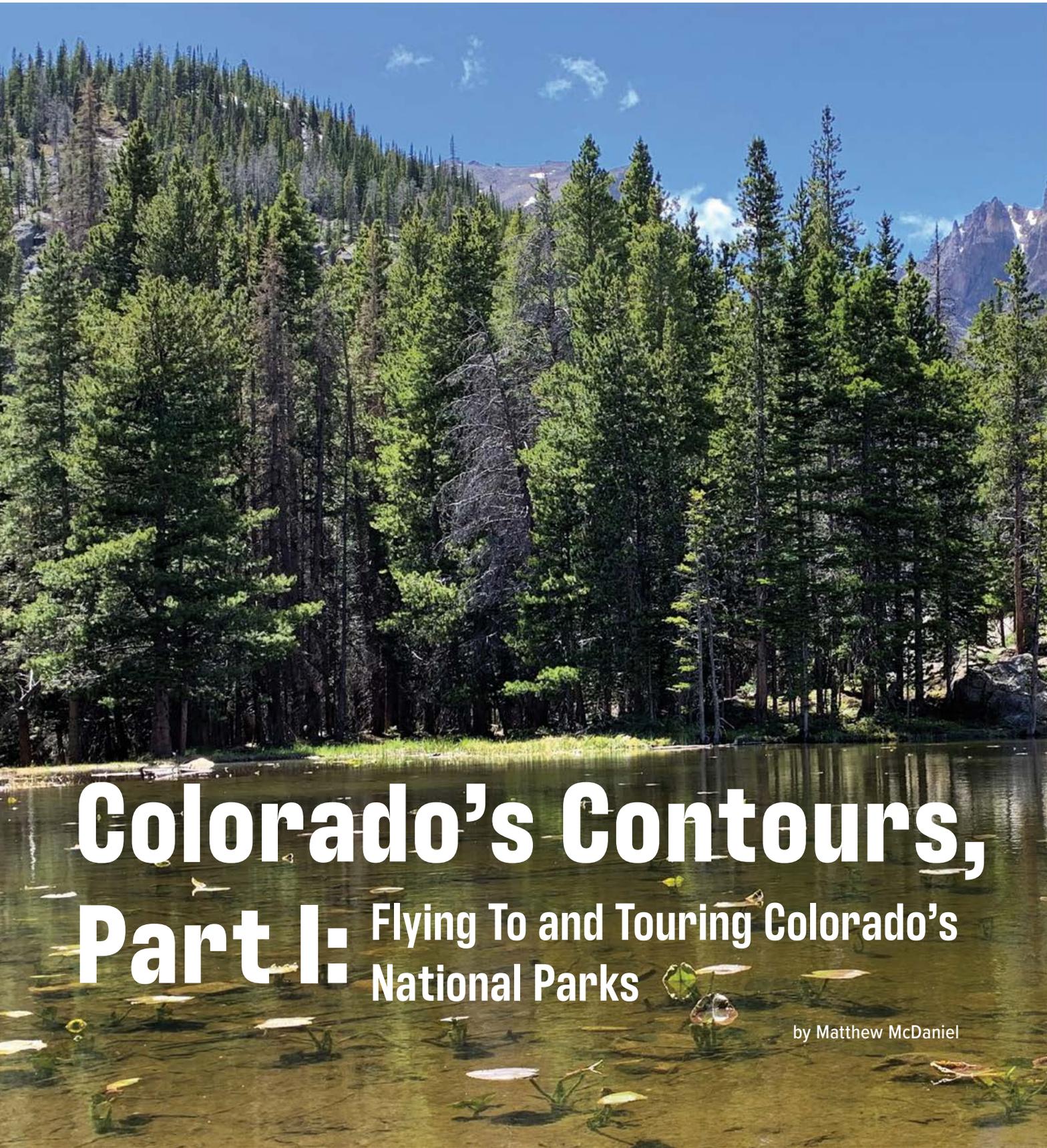
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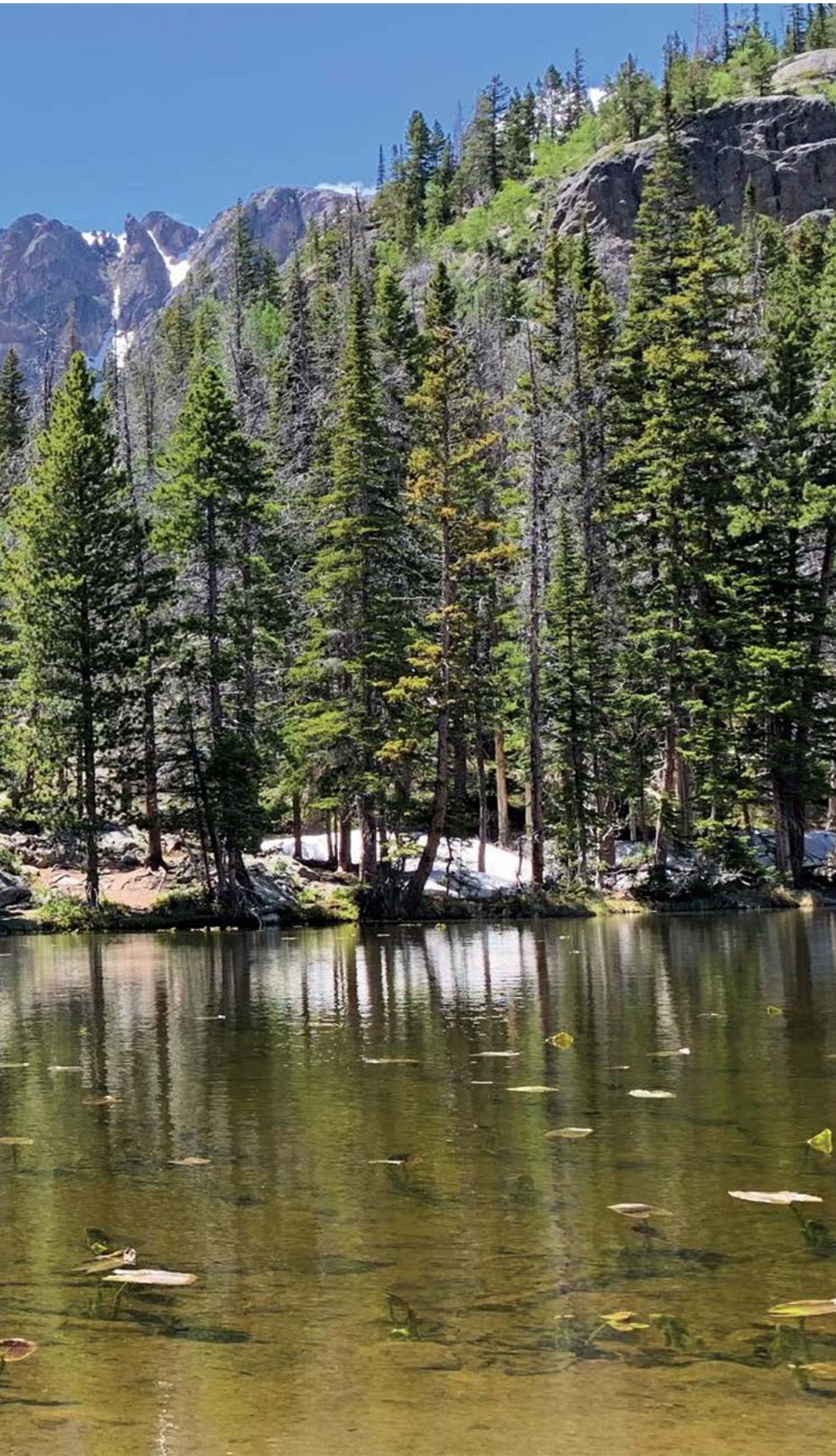
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# Colorado's Contours, Part I: Flying To and Touring Colorado's National Parks

by Matthew McDaniel



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Many hikes (short and long) within Rocky Mountain National Park lead to crystal clear alpine lakes. Many will still have snow present until June or even July, as can be seen on the far right shore here.

**A**n old joke among pilots is that flying to anywhere in eastern Colorado is basically just a flight into western Kansas. Indeed, the eastern one-third of Colorado has more in common with Kansas and Nebraska than it does with the mountainous terrain that Colorado is famous for. What is easy to miss is the steady rise in elevation, even of relatively flat terrain that happens as one flies westward across the expanse of the American Great Plains toward the Colorado Rockies. In eastern Kansas and Nebraska, typical airport elevations are in the 1,000-foot range. By the time one reaches Denver, the ground has risen to over a mile above sea-level. Thus, even its non-mountainous airports, such as the massive airline hub of Denver International (DEN) lie at 5,500-plus feet.



Few national parks offer such abundant and diverse wildlife spotting as Rocky Mountain National Park. Colorful and precocious birds, as well as birds of prey, Elk, Moose and marmots are all possible sightings while venturing throughout the park.





Of course, it is the abrupt rise of the Rocky Mountains and the western two-thirds of Colorado that have made the state synonymous with high-elevation adventure. Colorado is truly a natural wonderland of mountain diversity. This applies whether you're there for that very reason or you are there for an unplanned layover. Purposeful tourists come to Colorado's mountain areas for everything from skiing, hiking and mountain climbing to motorecycling, wildlife pursuits and all manner of camping. However, Colorado's wide array of airport choices also lend themselves well to unplanned day trips or weekend excursions. One thing that Colorado has in spades is protected lands within the National Park System (NPS). Other neighboring states, such as Utah, might get more attention for their many renowned National Parks. However, Colorado's NPS lands, while somewhat lesser known, are no less spectacular.

### Mountain Flying Precautions and Agendas

Flying deep into the heart of mountainous areas should never be taken lightly by any pilot. Being equipped with turbine power is



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The stately and sometimes ominous Stanley Hotel in RMNP's gateway city, Estes Park, Colorado. This century-plus-old hotel helped to inspire Stephen King's book (and later, movie) *The Shining*.

no guarantee of adequate performance, aeronautical knowledge or airmanship for coping with situations that only mountain flying can conjure up. The purpose of this article is not to teach mountain flying techniques. But, I would be remiss to write anything about flying within Colorado without also emphasizing how critical specific mountain flying instruction is. Colorado is home to some of the most challenging commercial airports in the United States. For visiting pilots there is almost no airport west of Colorado's Rocky Mountain Front Range that is not inherently challenging, yet also beautiful. Factor in summer heat, and the density altitudes easily soar into levels no pilot can safely ignore. Thus, the often long runways encountered (by lowland standards) can quickly become barely or even less than adequate in the warmer months. King Airs are just the type of load-hauling aircraft that tourists and part-time residents seek when flying into mountain airports to begin their outdoor adventures. Knowing the capabilities of yourself and your aircraft before launching into or out of such areas cannot be overstated. The mountain regions of Colorado contain 13 NPS sites, including four national parks and several national monuments. All have public-use airports within reasonable driving distances that

offer facilities appropriate to King Air operations. None should be utilized without first becoming thoroughly familiar with the surrounding terrain, facility limitations and local operational requirements.

The sheer number and size of Colorado's public lands is daunting. Beyond the national parks and monuments are national recreation and wilderness areas and many historical and archaeological sites. Many state and county parks rival small national parks that exist in other states. Even some city parks offer terrain wholly unique within the Mountain West, such as The Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs. To detail them all would be far beyond the scope of this article series. Instead, we will focus on Colorado's four national parks and the aviation facilities that can best be utilized to partake of each (two here and two in the upcoming Part II). For our discussion, we'll assume a routing into Colorado from the east and a counter clockwise circuit. We'll use Rocky Mountain National Park, north and west of Denver, as the initial destination.

### **Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP)**

Considered Colorado's signature national park, RMNP is both vast and diverse, encompassing over 265,000 acres. It has five visitor centers and can be entered from the east, north or west. The most popular entrance is via the mountain hamlet of Estes Park, which feeds tourists nicely into three of the park's visitor centers. Home of the historic Stanley Hotel (inspiration for the hotel in Stephen King's, *The Shining*), Estes Park bustles with activity year around, yet it lacks an airport of its own. ➤



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The view from atop Deer Mountain (10,013 feet) looking southeast toward the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center and Entrance Station. While the 3.0-mile hike (one-way) to reach here requires a bit of rock scrambling, it is mostly easy-to-moderate for a relatively fit person and only climbs 1,100 feet from the trail head to the peak.

Thus, Northern Colorado Regional Airport (FNL), formerly known as Ft. Collins-Loveland Municipal Airport, is a popular point from which to begin adventures into RMNP's northern and eastern areas. FNL lies just above 5,000 feet and boasts an 8,500-foot main runway. Runway 33 is equipped with both ILS and GPS/LPV approaches and runway 15 has a single GPS/LNAV approach. Having a part-time control tower and full service FBO (Ft. Collins-Loveland Jet Center) makes it an easy choice. From there, it's about an hour's drive along Highway 34, curving and twisting alongside the Big Thompson River, into Estes Park.

Exiting Estes Parks to the south, Route 7 runs mostly outside the eastern boundary of the park. However, it also provides access to several popular trail heads which lead back into the park via hundreds of miles of hiking trails. Along this eastern route, progressing southbound, you'll have your choice of the Lily Mountain and Lily Lakes trail heads, followed by the popular Long's Peak and Wild Basin. But, if short walks and easy hikes are more your speed, enter RMNP via the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center and proceed southwest down the length of Bear Lake Road. Take the short side excursions to Moraine Park, Glacier Basin and Sprague Lake, as you progress toward the final destination of Bear Lake itself. Finally, if you're in the northeastern part of RMNP during the summer, a drive across the Trail Ridge Road is a must (at least as far west as the Alpine Visitor Center). This route is high elevation and peaks out at nearly 12,200 feet (where you are likely to encounter snow well into the summer months). The many vistas and wildlife viewing opportunities are not to be missed. Since the Continental Divide runs through RMNP, you have opportunities to cross it along this route (most such crossings are posted for photo ops). Past the 11,800 foot elevation Alpine Visitor Center, one could elect to continue driving to explore the western and southwestern areas of the park.

The other option for touring those areas would be to first fly to Granby into Grand Co. Airport (GNB), just



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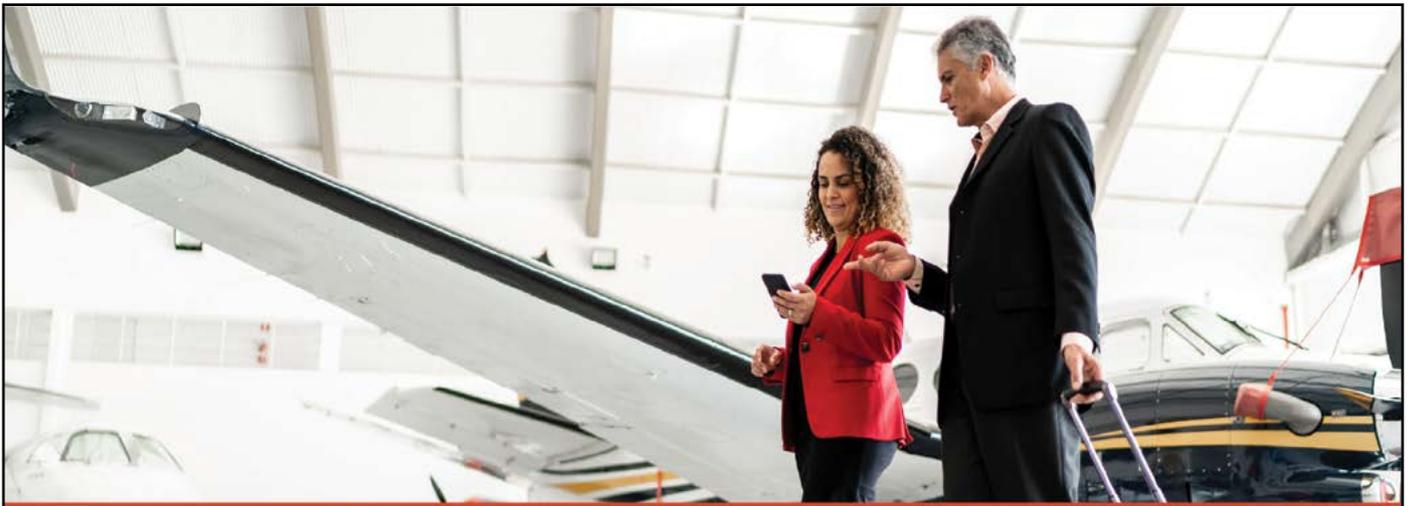
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The Painted Wall in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park is the highest cliff in Colorado, rising from riverbed to peak, over 2,300 feet (or about twice the height of the Empire State Building).

outside the southwestern reaches of the park. GNB is a sleepy airport and its 5,000-foot, east-west runway is minimal considering the airport's whopping 8,207-foot elevation. Yet, geographically speaking, it is well situated for exploring the "back side" of RMNP. While Granby has self-serve fuel (100LL and Jet A) and parking available, arranging ground transportation there would require special effort. Traffic into RMNP tends to be lighter from this direction and the long back-track via the Trail Ridge Road becomes unnecessary. Along the route from GNB, the Shadow Mountain Lake and Grand Lake areas are technically just outside the park but offer many great opportunities for water-based activities at the park's southwestern edges. Re-enter the park near the Kawuneeche Visitor Center and there are many trail heads and historic sites to choose from as you progress north.

## **Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (BCGNP)**

If you're looking for something dramatic, look no further than Colorado's Black Canyon. Few canyons on earth can compete with its combination of steep and soaring canyon walls, narrow cross-section and spectacular overlooks. While BCGNP is relatively new as a national park (established in 1999), it has been part of the NPS for decades. It was designated a national monument in 1933 (and some current aeronautical charts still erroneously label it as such). Because it is a relatively small park (by western standards) it is perfect for short layovers, as it is near two popular and well developed western Colorado airports; Gunnison-Crested Butte Regional (GUC) and Montrose Regional (MTJ).

Given the name, one would think that Gunnison Regional would be the preferred airport for visiting BCGNP. That is not necessarily the case though. GUC's wide and long runway (9,400 x 150-feet) helps to compensate for its nearly 7,700 foot elevation. While it is equipped with ILS and RNP approaches, surrounding high terrain makes those approaches less than optimal. For the ILS, minimums are essentially VFR due to the airport's position, relatively deep in the Gunnison Valley, surrounded by terrain exceeding 13,000 feet. The RNP approaches offer true IFR weather capabilities, but few King Airs or King Air operators will be equipped and authorized to fly them. Nonetheless, the FBO (AvFlight Gunnison) offers all the necessary services, including rental cars. From GUC, you are close to the Curecanti National Recreation Area, which eventually does connect with BCGNP. To be certain, this route is stunningly beautiful to drive, but it is long (plan a minimum of 2.5 to three hours to reach BCGNP's South Rim Visitor Center and two hours to the North Rim Ranger Station).

On the other hand, Montrose offers several advantages. MTJ is positioned in a broader and lower valley than GUC. It's lower elevation (5,759 feet), two long runways (10,000 and 7,500 feet), and multiple approaches (ILS & GPS/LPV) offer more operational options, especially when IFR conditions exist and low approach minimums are required. Atlantic Aviation offers robust FBO services and geographically MTJ is much closer to the heart of BCGNP. The most popular area for touring the park is along the south rim of the canyon, which is only 30 minutes driving from MTJ. Even the more remote north rim can be reached within 1.5 hours.

Once at the visitor center, I recommend walking the Oak Flat Trail. It is easy hiking and offers a great introduction to the canyon views. Along South Rim Road, a series of many roadside parking areas allow taking brief hikes out to the canyon's rim for some truly breathtaking views. A word of caution though: Those viewpoints are often right at the edge of the canyon's near-vertical walls, with minimum railing. If acrophobia (fear of heights) is a problem for you, these views will make you sweat! The average height of Black Canyon's walls in this area is 2,000 feet and their sheer vertical nature, combined with the canyon's narrow width make for vertigo-inducing visuals. Also on the south rim, East Portal Road provides access to the canyon's bottom, along the Gunnison River which carved it. The drive is steep and curvy, but once at river level the park's name becomes more meaningful. For, it is only down there that one can appreciate the narrow verticality of the gorge and the blackened appearance of the canyon walls and floor. In some areas, Black Canyon is so narrow and so deep that sunlight only reaches the bottom of the gorge for 35-40 minutes per day, when the sun is directly overhead. The rest of the daylight hours, one side of the canyon glows in the sun's rays, while the other side appears almost inky black, deprived of light by its own shadow.

In the next issue, we'll cover Colorado's other two national parks and the airports that serve them. Mesa Verde National Park (MVNP) in the Four Corners area and Great Sand Dunes National Park (GSDNP) in south central Colorado are vastly different from one another. We'll explore their differences and what each has to offer the pilot who's touring with family or making the most of layover time. Whatever your agenda or reason for visiting, Colorado and its public airports and protected lands will likely have you wishing to return as you take in the views during your departure. **KA**

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Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 19,500 hours total, over 5,600 hours of instruction-given, and over 2,500 hours in various King Airs and the BE-1900D. As owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC ([www.progaviation.com](http://www.progaviation.com)), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is also an Airbus A-320-Series captain for an international airline, holds 8 turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 95 aircraft types. Matt is one of less than 15 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for 9 consecutive two-year terms. He can be reached at: [matt@progaviation.com](mailto:matt@progaviation.com) or (414) 339-4990.

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