

# First-of-its-kind hiking permit may be required in Colorado's gorgeous Blue Lakes

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The Blue Lakes, located in the San Juan Mountains between Telluride and Ouray, have become an international destination for hikers and mountaineers seeking to enjoy the Instagram-worthy alpine lakes and scale Mount Sneffels' 14,150-foot summit.

In fact, they've become so popular over the last decade that the United States Forest Service is proposing a plan to limit the number of visitors who can go to the lakes each summer, in hopes of reducing the environmental impact of recreation.

The plan, unveiled Tuesday, would require not only that overnight campers secure permits May through September, but daytime hikers as well. The day-use permit would be the first of its kind instituted in a [national forest](#) in Colorado, said Dana Gardunio of the federal agency's Ouray Ranger District.

Other strategies to curtail damage to the plants and [wildlife habitat](#) caused by visitation include banning camping above treeline, eliminating dispersed camping near the Blue Lakes trailhead, and reducing the number of campsites at Lower Blue Lake.

The plan outlines additional efforts the Forest Service will take to address increased visitation and stewardship of 16,200 acres near the Mount Sneffels Wilderness that's been divided into five different zones: the Lower East Dallas Zone, the Blaine Basin Zone, Yankee Boy Basin Zone, Mount Sneffels Zone (including the summit) and the Wilderness Zone, which encompasses the Blue Lakes.

Gardunio said the number of people hiking to the Blue Lakes and Mount Sneffels has gradually increased over the last decades with significant spikes in visitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Forest Service estimates about 35,000 recreate in the Mount Sneffels Wilderness annually, the vast majority of which come from June to October.

In 2021, the Blue Lakes Trail saw its highest number of visitors on Sept. 5 when 509 people hiked there, according to a visitor use study released last year. Gardunio believes a permit system would slash the number of visitors to about 8,000 people per summer.

Upticks in recreation have caused significant damage to the natural environment. According to an environmental impact report, the most common issues are improper disposal of human and animal waste, overrun vegetation and threatened wildlife habitats due to the

proliferation of dispersed campsites and user-created trails, campers building fires illegally, and frustration among visitors caused by crowding at the trailhead.

"We've already started to feel some of these places we love are getting loved to death," Gardunio said. "So we're going to try and make sure to keep that experience high quality for people who are visiting and also help care for the landscape itself and wildlife and the other resources that live out there."

The Forest Service released its first draft of this plan in spring 2022 to solicit feedback from the public. Local communities were overall supportive of the need to better manage tourism to the Mount Sneffels Wilderness, Gardunio said. The agency is now opening the plan up for another comment period, which will last 45 days. It expects to make a final decision on its strategies by early 2024.

Here are the highlights of the Visitor Use Management Plan:

## **Permits required to visit the Blue Lakes**

The Forest Service's plan calls for implementing a permit system for hiking and camping at the Blue Lakes from May 1 to September 30.

Similar to how recreators need a permit to stay overnight in the White River National Forest near Maroon Bells, hikers would need to reserve a day-use permit or an overnight camping permit to access the Blue Lakes Trail.

The Forest Service is proposing to issue up to 40 day-use permits per day, which hikers would reserve at [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov). Every individual would need their own permit.

The agency is also proposing to issue up to 24 overnight permits per night, but only for four designated campsites. That means each campsite could have up to six people.

Hikers would need either a day-use permit or an overnight permit—not both. That means up to 64 people per day would use the [trail](#).

The Forest Service landed on those numbers using an internal standard that evaluates the number of other people a hiker should expect to see in a primitive wilderness area like the Uncompahgre National Forest. The agency may opt to increase or decrease the number of permits after monitoring the trail's capacity and visitor impact.

The permit system will not be in place for summer 2024, Gardunio said. The earliest that permits would be required is May 1, 2025. Permits will not carry a fee at first, Gardunio said, but she expects eventually it will cost money to reserve one.

Details, such as when date-specific permits will become available for purchase, will be decided at a later date, she added. Anyone hiking to the Blue Lakes without a permit would be subject to a ticket and fine.

Mountaineers would not require a permit to climb Mount Sneffels if they approach from the Yankee Boy Basin trailhead, Gardunio said.

## **Changes to camping rules**

The Forest Service proposes banning dispersed camping in four out of the five zones noted in its plan. Instead, camping would be permitted only in designated sites that the agency plans to build out with fire rings, signage and other infrastructure.

Camping would be permitted only at designated sites along the Blue

Lakes trail, including at the trailhead and at Lower Blue Lake.

The agency plans to reduce the number of camping spots at Lower Blue Lake to four and remediate the rest of the 144 sites that currently exist there. Access to those would be available exclusively to permit holders. Campsites at the trailhead would be available on a first-come-first-serve basis.

The only zone in which dispersed camping would be permitted is the Blaine Basin Zone.

Additionally, the plan prohibits all camping above treeline and/or in alpine tundra. Anyone who camps in the backcountry would also be required to bring bear-proof food storage under the plan.

Current regulations prohibit open fires in the Wilderness Zone, where the Blue Lakes are, and that restriction will remain in place.

## **Pack it out**

While recreators are currently allowed to bury their poop, the new plan prohibits that in most of the national forest and instead requires trail users to pack it out using "wag bags" or some other container.

The only zone where burying waste would be permitted is in the Blaine Basin Zone.

The Forest Service has received a grant to build a second toilet at the Blue Lakes Trailhead, but it does not plan to build others in the Wilderness Zone.

## **New parking lots at two trailheads**

Under the plan, the Forest Service would better delineate parking spots at both the Blue Lakes trailhead and the Yankee Boy Basin trailhead.

Parking would not be permitted along roads or elsewhere that's not an official parking spot. This seeks to limit capacities at trailheads, reduce vegetation damage and deter trespassing on private lands that border the recreation areas.

## **Closing 'social' driving and hiking trails**

Yankee Boy Basin is one access point to reach the Mount Sneffels summit. It's also a popular area for off-road driving. However, several trails were made by drivers and do not follow the state-approved Motor Vehicle Use Maps.

The Forest Service plans to close those so-called "social trails" with signage and remediate them. The same is true of the social trails at Lower Blue Lake and other areas within the [forest](#).

The Forest Service wouldn't close any existing, designated trails—just the ones that are not official thoroughfares for hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking and off-road driving.

Drivers who navigate off designated trails are and would still be subject to fines.

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