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Permit, fee coming next year to hot spots in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness

Scott Condon, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

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The stunning beauty of Snowmass Lake has made it one of the most popular — and overwhelmed — spots in the N limit the number of backpackers on any given night.

Courtesy of U.S. Forest Service

Overnight visitors heading into certain high-use areas of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass

Wilderness will have to make a reservation and pay a \$10 fee per night starting in 2023, the White River National Forest announced Friday.

The permit system will apply to the popular Four Pass Loop backpacking route, which includes Snowmass Lake, as well as Geneva Lake and Capitol Lake. A reservation and permit system was implemented in 2018 for the area around Conundrum Hot Springs — now the \$10 per night fee will be attached to Conundrum.

The White River National Forest says permits and quotas are needed to deal with the growing numbers of visitors and the resulting impacts — unburied human waste, garbage, trampled vegetation and compacted soil.

“Recreation in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness has exploded over the past decade, with a quadrupling of overnight use since 2006,” the Forest Service said in a statement.

Katy Nelson, wilderness and trails program manager for the White River National Forest, said the restoration of Upper Conundrum Valley has been successful since the reservation system was put in place four years ago.

“I think we’ve turned a corner up there,” Nelson said. “People are having a better experience.”

She is optimistic that similar steps will benefit other hot spots in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness.

“I would say Snowmass Lake is the most impacted,” she said. “Snowmass [Lake] is pretty demoralizing for the wilderness rangers.”

The \$10 per-night fee will be required from May 1 through Oct. 31. A permit for overnight visits will be required but not a fee from Nov. 1 through April 30. Overnight permits will become available to reserve for the 2023 season on [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) in

February. The independent software operator will charge \$6 per transaction.

The Forest Service went through the National Environmental Policy Act process in 2017 to lay the groundwork for the reservation and permit system. Separate review was undertaken the last two years on the fee proposal. When the Forest Service collected public comment two years ago, about 1,635 people responded. The comments were analyzed by Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No Fee Coalition, who concluded that about 83% opposed the proposed fee while 14% supported it.

On Friday, Benzar said she wasn't surprised the fee was adopted despite the opposition.

"There was never any chance of turning it back from the get-go," she said. "They want credit for reducing it from \$12 to \$10. Big whoop."

Benzar said the comments showed overwhelming support for the Forest Service setting limits on the number of backpackers at one time and for designating where they can camp. But those goals could be achieved without charging a fee, she contended. The White River could still set quotas, require visitors to pack out their waste and enhance education efforts, she said. Instead, they defaulted to a fee, Benzar said.

Aspen-Snowmass District Ranger Kevin Warner said the efforts to restore resources and manage use can't be undertaken without new, dedicated funds. The Forest Service responded to concerns about the fee by reducing it and waiving it for youth 16 and under, he noted. In addition, school groups won't be charged the fee.

The amount of revenue from the fee will vary from year to year depending on how long the snowpack lingers and summer weather. However, the White River figures annual revenues will be in the \$400,000 range. Approximately 95% of those revenues will be dedicated to implementing the program, Warner said. The remaining 5% or so

will go to the regional Forest Service office.

Friday’s announcement included a list of Frequently Asked Questions that outlined how the funds from the fees will be spent. It included restoration and rehabilitation of heavily damaged natural areas and campsites, restoration of campfire scars, aeration of denuded, bare soils, increased wilderness ranger presence in the field and improved trail maintenance to permit areas.

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Maroon-Bells Snowmass Wilderness Overnight Fee Proposal

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the fee for an overnight permit and where will it be required?

A. Starting February 2023, the most visited areas of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness will require a permit for overnight visitors year-round. A \$10 per night, per person fee will be required for an overnight permit May 1 through October 31. No fee is required for children 16 years old and younger. Permits will be available on Recreation.gov, which charges a processing fee (currently \$6).

Overnight permits and the associated fee will be required at Conundrum Hot Springs, the “Four Pass Loop” (which includes Crater Lake and Snowmass Lake), Geneva Lake, and Capitol Lake. Additional areas in the Maroon-Bells Snowmass Wilderness could require overnight permits and fees in future years as use increases.

Q. How do I get a permit?

A. Permits will be available starting in February 2023 on recreation.gov. We are currently developing the reservation website and will share more as February approaches. Permits will be released in blocks on the recreation.gov reservation website under this schedule:

- February 15: Overnight permits for April 1-July 31 are available for advanced reservation at 8am Mountain Time
- June 15: Overnight permits for August 1-November 30 are available for advanced reservation at 8am Mountain Time
- October 15: Overnight permits for December 1-March 31 are available for advanced reservation at 8am Mountain Time

Q. Why is the fee being charged?

A. The fee program will provide the Forest Service with the ability to address the significant impacts caused by high recreational use in the most-visited areas of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. This will help ensure it remains a premiere backcountry destination.

Overnight use in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness has quadrupled since 2006, leading to large-scale environmental damage, including unburied human waste, large amounts of trash, dangerous

human and wildlife interactions, visitor conflict and crowding, and significant loss of vegetation and soil around heavily used campsites and areas.

Q. What additional services will be provided with the new fee?

A. Permit fees would fund specialized services such as:

- Restoration and rehabilitation of heavily damaged natural areas and campsites. Restoration of campfire scars, aeration of denuded bare soil and revegetation of sites with damaged vegetation.

There are two wilderness rangers employed by the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District and three through the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps this season, along with a trail crew of five members. The wilderness rangers have to cover a total of 350,000 acres in the district, not just Maroon Bells-Snowmass. The trail crew covers the entire district, wilderness and non-wilderness.

“The big thing this fee does is allow us to have more ranger presence,” Warner said.

The enhanced management was applauded by Wilderness Workshop, the Roaring Fork Valley’s oldest homegrown conservation group.

“We support the White River National Forest’s thoughtful plans for protecting this iconic place while ensuring people continue to have quality wilderness experiences,” Wilderness Workshop Executive Director Will Roush said in a statement to the Aspen Daily News. “Managing the impacts of increasing recreation on our public lands presents many challenges; we’re glad to see the Forest Service working to minimize recreation impacts to ecosystems within the Maroon Bell-Snowmass Wilderness.”

While the start of the fee program suggests the rangers and trails crew will receive reinforcements in coming years in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, Benzar said don’t count on it. When Forest Service administrators at the regional office in Lakewood, Colorado see the revenues coming in through the fee program, they will siphon off regular funding for the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District for use elsewhere, she

predicted. “It happens every time,” Benzar said.

While the fee remains controversial, there appears to be near-universal agreement that more management was necessary to protect a landscape that matches National Parks for stunning beauty. Nelson said the overnight visitor fee in Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness isn’t groundbreaking for the Forest Service. A fee is charged in numerous areas, including the Indian Peaks Wilderness in Colorado.

The system was tailored to specific needs in the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District. In some places, overnight visitors will have to use designated campsites but in other zones, they will get to choose their campsite.

There are currently 20 designated campsites in Conundrum Valley and that number won’t change. There will be 11 designated campsites at Crater Lake, the gateway to the wilderness area, and nine campsites at and near Capitol Lake.

The other wilderness areas where the fee will be applied will be set up in zones, such as the Snowmass Lake zone. Designated campsites won’t be assigned when a backpacker or equestrian gets a permit for an overnight visit to that zone, but there are rules on where camping is and isn’t allowed. The Forest Service will regulate the number of visitors through the number of permits it issues.

“We will issue 15 nightly permits for the Snowmass Lake zone,” Nelson said.

That would result in a maximum number of 66 campers. Currently on busy summer weekends there are 150 to 200 nightly campers, according to Nelson.

The Forest Service expects the reservation system will flatten the peaks and fill in the valleys. There will be fewer people camping on weekend nights but more people on weekday nights, Nelson said.

The Forest Service is also prepared to react in case the reservation system pushes

backcountry visitors into areas that aren't currently overwhelmed. The permit and fee system could be expanded as needed.

This new round of permits and fees doesn't apply to the Maroon Bells Scenic Area, the area around Maroon Lake that is accessed by the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority buses, bicycles and some private vehicles. Different fees apply there.

The White River FAQ also notes that no fees apply to 72% of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, or about 153,000 acres.

More information will be released on specific aspects of the reservation system prior to February.

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