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Estes Park, Colo.: Fall color gold rush

'FAVORITE TIME OF YEAR' | Mother Nature spins her magic near Front Range of Colorado's mountains

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September 14, 2008

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

ESTES PARK, Colo. -- As the slanting rays of the sun signal Indian summer's last warm days, the promise of change -- another school year, a new television season, the presidential election -- is in the air.

But for Coloradoans living near the towering Front Range of the Rockies, autumn hasn't arrived until the bugling of the elk pierces the valleys and the aspen groves turn red and gold.

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(AP)

In our meadow, near Rocky Mountain National Park, the changing of the colors starts in late September or early October, after the first crisp cold nights dust the car windows with frost. The aspen leaves slowly fade, changing from pea-green to pale yellow, deep pumpkin and bright scarlet. The season is short, but here in Estes Park, gateway to the national park, it's welcome.

"This is my absolute favorite time of year," said my neighbor, Mary Emery Oldberg. "I love the colors. You can drive just about anywhere in this valley and see the aspen. I pass them while I'm running errands."

Though the prime viewing season spans four to five weeks, ranging anywhere from early September to late October, the aspen groves

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GETTING THERE: Rocky Mountain National Park and Estes Park, the gateway town, are northwest of Denver in the Front Range of the Rockies. Fly from Chicago to Denver International Airport and rent a car for the two-hour drive. From the airport, take I-25 north, and CO Highway 66 and U.S. 34 west to Estes Park.

WHERE TO STAY IN ESTES: The historic Stanley Hotel, a spacious grande dame built in 1909, overlooks the town. It's a brisk walk from the downtown center. Double rooms range from \$143 to \$600; 333 E. Wonderview Ave., (970) 577-4000, www.stanleyhotel.com. The YMCA of the Rockies, founded in 1910 on 850 acres adjoining Rocky Mountain National Park, has a restaurant, snack shop, library, recreation center, auditorium and daily activities. Rustic cabins sleeping four or more start at \$114; (970) 586-3341. The Wildwood Inn, a rustic property on the Fall River, has double rooms for two starting at \$156; 2801 Fall River Road, (866) 586-7025, www.esteswildwoodinn.com. The Comfort Inn motel on Highway 34 outside town has double rooms starting at \$71.99 midweek; 1450 Big Thompson Ave., (970) 586-2358.

FALL FOLIAGE WEB SITES:

www.parks.state.co.us/fall

www.colorado.com/article23

www.chiff.com/travel/colorado-foliage.htm

www.phototravel.com/sample/co_fall.htm

www.tripcart.com/usa-regions/Eastern-Colorado-Wyoming-Rockies-Fall-Foliage.aspx

blaze into color each on its own time, depending on the elevation, angle of the sun and the temperature. As with all things earthly, Mother Nature determines when and where the foliage reaches its Technicolor best, and how long it will last.

When friends from out of town ask me where to go, I recommend the Peak to Peak highway, a hometown favorite. The road, 55 miles long, starts west of Denver in Blackhawk and heads north until it reaches Estes Park. A Colorado State Scenic and Historic Byway, the road curves and twists as it winds from valley to crest to valley, skirting the foothills of the 13,000-foot Indian Peaks and the Continental Divide. Whole hillsides here, covered with fluttering aspen, glow red and gold, a natural wonder improved only by the periodic appearance of snow-clad peaks poking over lower foothills.

Allow two hours for the drive and a third for a bit of sightseeing along the way. Stop in funky Nederland, a historic mining hamlet, for a quick tour or a cup of coffee. Stop again after you pass Allenspark to snap photos of 14,256-foot Longs Peak, the best shots you'll ever get from a roadside. Looming up on the left, it looks close enough to touch.

Where can you expect to see aspen?

"Everywhere in the park, but especially in riparian areas, along streams and springs," said Rocky Mountain National Park spokesperson Kyle Patterson. "You should look for them in the Montane life-zone between 7,500 feet and about 9,500 feet. In some places in Colorado, large groves of aspen have experienced a sudden die-off, caused by a disease called SAD -- Sudden Aspen Decline. Fortunately we haven't seen it here in the national park."

If you plan to see your fall foliage on what Patterson calls "a windshield tour," stop at Rocky Mountain National Park headquarters and visitors center outside the Estes Park entrance and ask for directions to the Old Fall River Road, the first road to cross over the Continental Divide to Grand Lake. Now a one-way road, it switch-backs up a near-vertical slope to meet the newer Trail Ridge Road at the top.

Turning left on Trail Ridge Road will take you back to Estes Park, and it just might be the most scenic route you've ever driven. Savor it by taking the time to park in every vista point, including Many Parks Curve, for spectacular views of aspen groves in the meadows below.

To walk through the aspen, Patterson suggests three trails starting from Bear Lake at the foot of the Front Range peaks.

The easiest is a walk "most people never think of, but it's a beautiful forest and very mellow terrain," she said. This is the Bear Lake to Sprague Lake trail, a two-and-a-half-mile flat and downhill walk to a lower parking lot. The second walk, the loop trail from Bear Lake to Bierstadt Lake and back to the highway, is slightly harder, with a half-mile of uphill trail and three miles downhill. The longest hike is from Bierstadt to Hollowell Park, a walk of about six miles, much of it through aspen forest.

"Have you ever stood alone under the aspen and listened to the beautiful sound that millions of moving aspen leaves make?" Patterson asked. "It's a soft fluttering I can hardly describe and utterly peaceful."

An unexpected bonus for any visitor to Rocky Mountain is the opportunity for a self-guided American wildlife safari. Greater and lesser numbers of elk, moose, mule deer, bighorn sheep, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, beaver, marmots, ground squirrels, chipmunks and black bears reside in the park, along with a host of permanent and migratory birds.

Why come in autumn? This is when the larger animals gradually move from the cooler high country down to protected meadows, closer to main roads. But it hasn't always been this way.

Between the late 1860s, when hunters first discovered the Estes Valley, and 1915, when the national park was established, most of the valley's big game had been shot, trapped or forced out of the lower valleys.

"By 1915, the elk were gone. And the wolves and the grizzly bears," Patterson said. "There wouldn't be elk now, except that the Estes Valley Improvement Association brought some in from Yellowstone. By the 1940s, there were so many they had to cull them."

Other animals also disappeared or moved into more remote valleys. When I was growing up we never saw moose, rarely sighted bighorn sheep and only occasionally spotted beaver, usually at twilight in the ponds at Beaver Meadows. Later I was to learn that the importation of domestic sheep caused the bighorn to decline. Both species competed for the same food, and the bighorn had no resistance to the diseases carried by the domestic animals.

The same thing happens today, Patterson said, with the elk and the beaver. Unchecked elk herds are devouring the aspen and willow that the beaver also need to eat and to repair their dams. Without ponds, they can't survive.

Black bears -- creatures answerable only to man -- are the one animal that prospers handsomely in and out of the park.

Despite the formidable appearance of my rented metal garbage bin, a determined black bear turned it over twice this past summer, delicately picking out the edibles and scattering the containers. Not until we chained it shut did he finally abandon the effort.

Today it sits on the edge of the lane, under the aspen trees, whose leaves look just a bit paler than they did last week.

And the elk are bugling again, the young males testing their voices with tentative squeaks as they cross the lane and vanish among the aspen.

Autumn, sweet and poignant, is in the air.

Anne Z. Cooke is a free-lance writer who divides her time between Colorado and California.

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