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## THE HIGHEST STATE

The young college professor hoped to see the Colorado prairies and mountains from the top of Pikes Peak. For a young woman in 1893, that trip would have been quite an adventure. So Katharine Lee Bates and some friends hired a wagon and a driver and started up America's most famous mountain.

The trip thrilled Professor Bates. Atop Pikes Peak she wrote: "I was looking out over the sea-like expanse of fertile country" when the opening lines of a poem "floated into my mind":

O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!

These lines from her poem became the beginning of the song "America the Beautiful." Years later, Denver poet Thomas Hornsby Ferril wrote a poem about the community in which he lived for over ninety years. "Two Rivers" describes the South Platte River and Cherry Creek and the people who came to settle along their banks in Denver:

Two rivers that were here before there was  
A city here still come together: one  
Is a mountain river flowing into the prairie;

*Pikes Peak, America's most famous mountain, has become Colorado's best-known landmark. It inspired English teacher Katharine Lee Bates to write "America the Beautiful."*

1872 PAINTING BY GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM.



One is a prairie river flowing toward  
The mountains but feeling them and turning back  
The way some of the people who came here did.

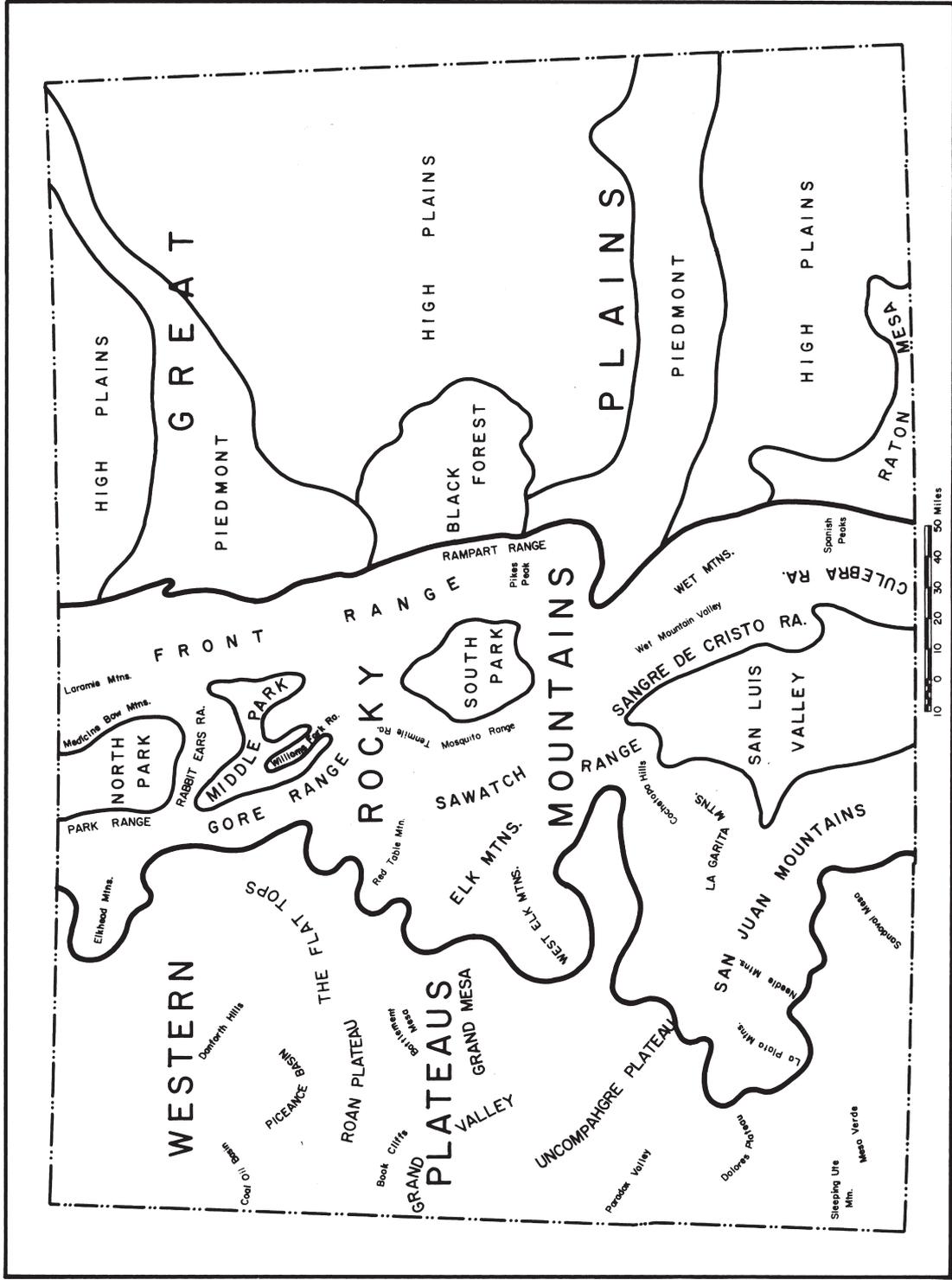
Ferril wrote about the mountains, prairies, water, and people—the major factors in Colorado’s history. He noted that Cherry Creek is one of the few creeks that flows toward the mountains instead of out of them.

Like millions of other people, Katharine Lee Bates and Thomas Hornsby Ferril marveled at the wonders of Colorado. The high mountains most impressed the poets, as well as many other visitors and Coloradans alike. “The Highest State” is what writers over 100 years ago called our state.

## **COLORADO ABOVE ALL**

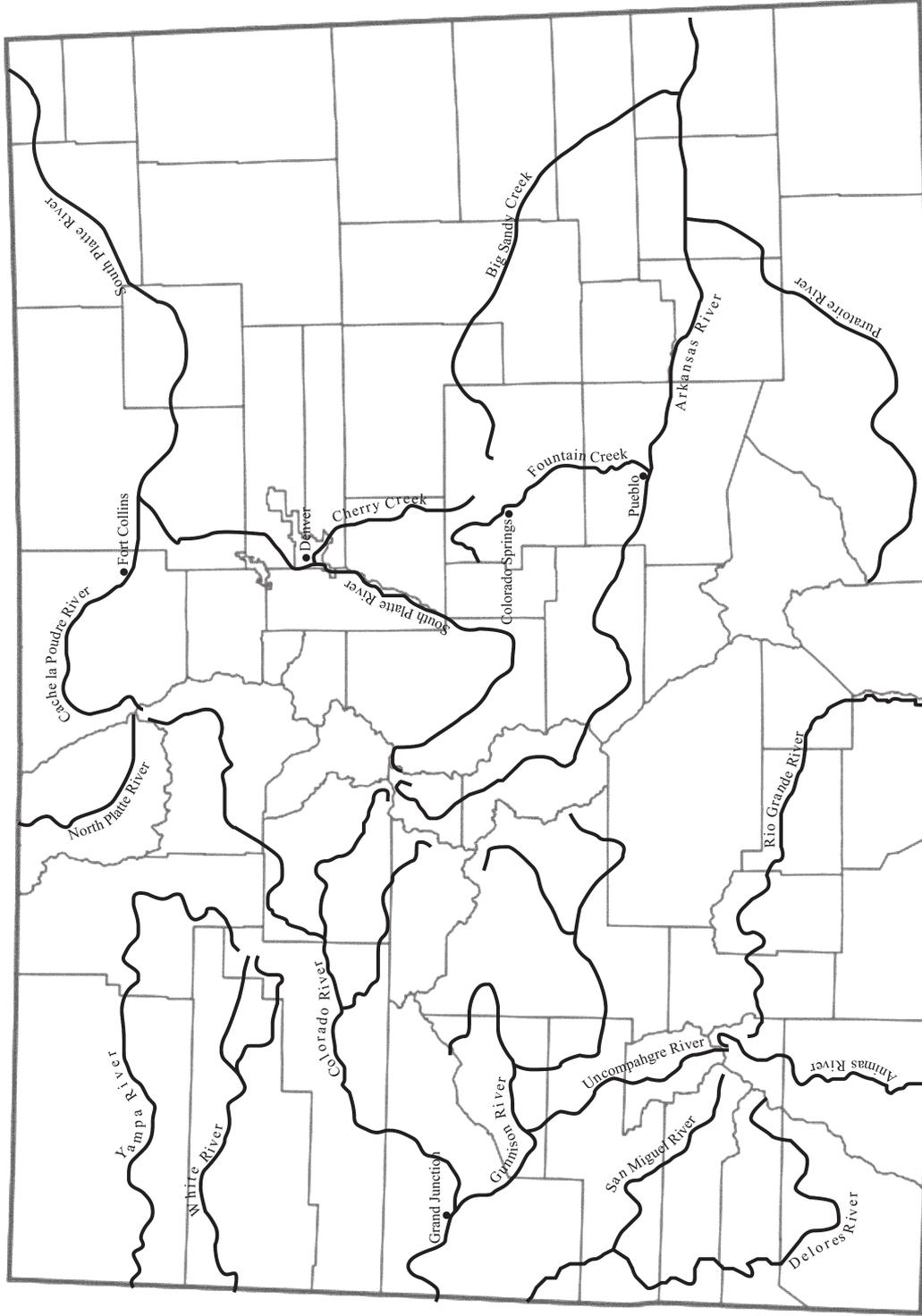
Colorado has the highest average elevation—6,800 feet above sea level—of the fifty states. If we leveled Colorado out to an average elevation of 1,000 feet, it would be the biggest state in the United States—larger than Texas or Alaska.

Mount Elbert (14,431 feet) is the highest point in Colorado and the fourteenth-tallest mountain in the nation. Alaska has twelve taller mountains and California has one. Colorado, however, has fifty-four peaks that are 14,000 feet or higher. These are often known as Colorado’s “fourteeners.” The low-



Landforms map. From the Historical Atlas of Colorado.

COURTESY, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS.



Rivers of Colorado.

MAP BY NICHOLAS WHARTON.

est point in the state is in the Republican River Valley near Wray, where the tiny town of Laird is 3,402 feet above sea level.

Colorado is the only state that is an almost perfect rectangle. At its widest, Colorado stretches 387 miles from the Kansas border to Utah. It is 276 miles from the Wyoming border on the north to the New Mexico border on the south. It is the eighth-largest state, with a total area of 104,247 square miles.

Colorado became a state in 1876, the same year the United States celebrated its centennial, or 100th birthday. That is how Colorado got one of its nicknames, “the Centennial State.” The state is divided into sixty-four counties, with Las Animas and Moffat the largest in area and Gilpin the smallest. Broomfield, the newest county, was carved out of Boulder, Jefferson, Adams, and Weld Counties in 2001. In each county one town is designated the county seat. Denver is the state capital and Colorado’s largest city.

## RIVERS

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Colorado holds the US record for the deepest single snowfall—95 inches. This 32-hour continuous snowstorm fell at Silver Lake near Silverton on April 14–15, 1921.

Heavy snowmelt in spring and summer feeds Colorado’s rivers. Our state is called the “mother of rivers” because so many waterways start in our mountains.



*You can explore Colorado’s rivers on tubes, rafts, canoes, or kayaks. These river rats are riding the Arkansas River.*

COURTESY, SANBORN  
SOUVENIR COMPANY.

Rivers radiate out of the state like the spokes of a wheel. The mighty Colorado River begins in Rocky Mountain National Park and flows 1,450 miles to reach the Gulf of California and the Pacific Ocean. The Rio Grande, which means “Grand River” in Spanish, is even longer—1,885 miles—and flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The Arkansas flows from Fremont Pass near Leadville through southeastern Colorado. After a journey of 1,450 miles, it joins the Mississippi River in the state named Arkansas.

In the central Colorado mountains, something very unusual occurs. From starting points within a few miles of each other, water rolls in four different directions toward the sea. Part of it flows west into the Colorado River, some flows south into the Rio Grande, some southeast into the Arkansas River, and some northeast into the South Platte River. After starting out close together, these rivers will be separated by thousands of miles when they finally reach the sea. Rivers, as we shall see, have played a very important role in Colorado’s history. Settlers, animals, plants, and industry all need water.

## CLIMATE

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Because Colorado has such a variety of climates and elevations, it has recorded some extreme temperatures. The coldest temperature recorded was 61 degrees below zero at Maybell, Moffat County, on February 1, 1985. The hottest was 118 degrees at Bennett in Adams County on July 11, 1888. In addition, the weather on the Eastern Slope of Colorado is often completely different from the weather on the Western Slope. Rapidly changing climate conditions can raise or lower the temperature as much as 50 degrees in one day. Snow falls somewhere in Colorado during every month of the year. Leadville has had several snowfalls on July 4.

Colorado’s climate has shaped the history and development of the state. Farming, mining, ranching, tourism, town building, industry, and transportation have all been changed by climate and geography. Few other states offer such breathtaking scenery, varied animal and plant life, and variety of climates.

### Eastern Plains

Look at Colorado’s geographic regions on the landforms map. The state is naturally divided into three parts. The first region visitors from the eastern states saw was the eastern plains. This is part of the region called the Great



Plains, which stretches eastward from the Rocky Mountain states through North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

The plains slope down from foothills of the Front Range, or the Eastern Slope of the Rocky Mountains. The Front Range stretches south from Fort Collins to Boulder, Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, and Trinidad. Rainfall is scant in this region. These eastern plains are windy in the spring and well-known for their dust storms, heat, hail, and summer droughts, or dry spells. Because of these conditions and the sparse summer vegetation, early visitors called the plains “the Great American Desert.” The region is not a desert at all, but it seemed that way to people who were used to the lush green forests of the eastern United States.

Native grasses grow well on this prairie land. Buffalo, antelope, and other animals have thrived on these grasses, and numerous Native American peoples settled on the plains to hunt the animals. Because of the rich grasslands, Colorado’s eastern plains became an important cattle-ranching region. When Europeans began to arrive, they first settled along the rivers and then moved onto the drier land. The eastern plains, which are at a lower elevation

*Colorado’s high plains were mapped as “the Great American Desert” by explorer Stephen Long. He found that yucca was one of the few plants that thrived on the flat, dry landscape.*

COURTESY, OVERLAND TRAIL MUSEUM, STERLING, CO.



*Pioneers found that Colorado was a dry state, averaging only 16.6 inches of precipitation a year. Drought and wind created dust storms that wiped out farms, such as this one in Baca County.*

COURTESY, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, DC.

than the rest of Colorado, have a longer growing season (the number of days between the last frost of spring and the first frost of fall). The region is also well-known for its sunshine and its special beauty.

## Mountains

Colorado has always been famous for its mountains, especially Pikes Peak, the state's first mountain to be named on maps. Tourists have been climbing or riding to the top of the 14,110-foot-high Pikes Peak for many years. You can hike, drive, or take a cog railroad to the top.

Mountains stretch from the rolling foothills along the Front Range to the high Continental Divide and then westward. The Continental Divide is a ridge of mountains that separates the water flow between east and west. On the Eastern Slope, water runs east to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Water running off the Western Slope eventually reaches the Pacific Ocean via the Colorado River.

The mountains of Colorado are part of a larger chain called the Rocky Mountains, which run from Canada into Mexico. The Rocky Mountains reach their highest elevation and greatest width in Colorado. Within the Rockies are other, smaller ranges. The Spanish, the first Europeans to explore much of Colorado, named many of these ranges. After seeing the red sunset on its snowcapped peaks, they christened the Sangre de Cristo Range for the blood



*South Park, in the heart of Colorado, is a flat, mountain-rimmed valley.*

PHOTO BY THOMAS J. NOEL.

of Christ. They named the La Platas after the silver they found there and the San Juans for Saint John.

In the Rocky Mountains of Colorado are four great “parks,” or large mountain valleys: North Park, Middle Park, South Park, and the San Luis Valley (originally San Luis Park). The San Luis Valley and South Park are the largest of these parks.

These parks, once filled with buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope, were the hunting grounds for Native Americans and fur trappers. Settlement, especially ranching, came to the parks when European and American settlers arrived. In the mountains around these valleys, discoveries of gold, silver, and other valuable minerals later triggered mining rushes.

Rivers have cut impressive canyons as they break out of the vast mountains. The Royal Gorge of the Arkansas River and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River are the most famous canyons in Colorado. Royal Gorge narrows to 30 feet wide, with cliffs rising 1,100 feet above the river.

Beavers first brought French trappers and other Europeans into the mountains. Fur trappers worked throughout this region in search of the furry rodent whose hide was prized for hats. Grizzly bears, black and brown bears, deer, mountain sheep, mountain lions, and buffalo thrived as well. Beaver, buffalo, deer, and elk skins were sold to make hats, blankets, and clothes. Buffalo, deer, and elk were also sources of meat. Many of them were

*The Arkansas River carved the 1,000-foot-deep Royal Gorge. The nearby town of Cañon City built this suspension bridge to give visitors an eagle's-eye view of the river below.*

COURTESY, THOMAS J.  
NOEL COLLECTION.



hunted until they were nearly extinct before people stepped in to conserve these creatures.

### Western Slope

The part of Colorado that lies west of the Continental Divide is known as the Western Slope. It also has mountains, such as the very rugged San Juan Mountains surrounding Ouray, Silverton, and Telluride and the Elk

Mountains near Crested Butte and Aspen. Western Colorado has some large river valleys as well. Because they were protected from the worst winter storms and cold, these valleys attracted farmers and ranchers. The Gunnison Valley and the Grand Valley near Grand Junction are two of the best-known agricultural areas. The Western Slope was the last of the three Colorado regions to be settled.

The climate, rainfall, and growing seasons of the Western Slope vary greatly. The far western and northwestern parts are semiarid, or almost a desert. This is a hard land for both animals and people because rainfall is very light. It is much wetter in the mountains, however. Some mountains receive up to 300 inches of snowfall each winter.

The Western Slope is a scenic land. It has high mountains and deserts, wide river valleys, and huge mesas (“tables” in Spanish). Early Spanish explorers gave that name to these landforms. The largest is Grand Mesa, which rises to 10,000 feet and towers over Grand Junction. Mesa Verde (“green tableland”) in southwestern Colorado is the site of the famous cliff dwellings and thousand-year-old Ancestral Puebloan villages.

Rivers carved awesome canyons into western Colorado. The Black Canyon of the Gunnison, not far from Montrose, is a national park. At its deepest point, the canyon walls are 2,425 feet high. Just west of Grand Junction, the Colorado River has carved out fantastic red sandstone formations in what is now the Colorado National Monument.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND SETTLEMENT**

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Two geographic features dominate the history of Colorado: the Rocky Mountains and the rivers. In the mountains, the abundant beaver pelts and veins of gold and silver attracted newcomers to the future state of Colorado. People believed they could become fabulously rich in a few short years by trapping beavers or mining gold or silver.

Mining was the most important industry in Colorado for forty years following the 1859 Pikes Peak Gold Rush. Mining brought permanent settlement: first camps and then towns. To reach the mining settlements, people built wagon roads and railroads. Farmers and ranchers from the plains moved to the mountains to furnish food to the miners.

The rivers were equally important. Without water, people could not stay. This is true of all three regions of Colorado. The ranchers and farmers settled in the river valleys of the mountains and plains. It is no accident that Colorado’s largest cities are located along the eastern foothills, where the



*As this 1900 view of Silverton shows, mountains have always shaped Colorado's settlement and history.*

COURTESY, SAN JUAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, SILVERTON, CO; DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY F-11904.

rivers break out of the mountains. Colorado's commerce and industry are concentrated here as well. These well-watered river valleys were the most popular places in which to settle.

Settlement, then, followed several basic patterns:

1. Towns and cities on waterways leading into the mountains (for example, Denver, on the banks of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River)
2. Settlements along the rivers that cross the eastern plains (for example, Greeley, on the South Platte)
3. Camps and towns near mineral outcroppings of gold, silver, and coal (for example, the gold-strike town of Central City and the coal-mining town of Erie)
4. Towns on agricultural sites and transportation routes (for example, Sterling, on the Union Pacific Railroad route and the South Platte River)
5. Health or tourist resorts near scenic or unique geographic features (for example, Glenwood Springs, at the site of mineral hot springs, and Estes Park, the eastern gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park)

## Water

Colorado averages 16.6 inches of precipitation yearly. Precipitation is any form of water that falls to the earth's surface. This can include snow, rain, sleet, and hail. However, this amount can change greatly from year to year. Fortunately, the mountain snowpack and runoff can be used to water farms and ranches during the spring and summer. This is known as irrigation. All the water in the state comes from precipitation and underground sources. It then flows into the five major rivers whose headwaters are in Colorado. Neighboring states can get their water from rivers that flow into them; Colorado cannot. Hardly any water enters Colorado from other states. In this respect, the Highest State is unique.

Water is Colorado's most valuable natural resource. Although many great rivers begin in the state's mountains, Colorado does not have the right to use all that water. It must share its water with neighboring states.

## Seasons

People like to live in Colorado, as its population growth over the years shows. Colorado's temperatures are usually mild—it is rarely very hot or very cold for long periods of time. The air is very dry most of the time; the humidity, or moisture in the air, is rarely high enough to make you feel uncomfortable. Colorado is famous for its dry, cool, sunny weather. The lack of humidity is also a reason the state is so pleasant. Humidity makes cold air seem colder and hot air seem hotter.

Colorado's changing seasons give its climate some variety. There are really only three seasons—fall, winter, and summer. James Grafton Rogers, in his book *My Rocky Mountain Valley*, explains: "The four seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter, are terms that belong to the language of Europe and of Eastern North America . . . There is, in the Rocky Mountains, no gentle spring, no gradual awakening of life, no slow emergence of vegetation. Summer comes suddenly, some day in early June, on the heels of winter."

Summer is the season in which plants flourish and animals are most active. They have to gather much of their food for the rest of the year. Fall turns the aspen yellow and brings the first snows.

Winter snows bury spring. As Rogers wrote, "Our winter is not gloomy or snowbound. It takes turns with sunshine and snow storms." Then summer arrives, and the cycle begins again.

These seasons are important to Colorado. In “spring” and summer the crops must be planted and nurtured. The growing season—the number of days when the weather is warm enough to grow vegetables and fruits—ranges from 76 days in the mountains to nearly 200 days on the eastern plains. Farmers must be careful so that what they plant has time to grow to maturity. Crops such as wheat, corn, potatoes, and onions grow well in Colorado’s varied growing seasons.

Fall is a good season to tour Colorado because there are fewer tourists and the weather is usually dry. Fall is the time when the crops are harvested (and winter wheat is planted) and the wild animals are preparing for the oncoming winter.

During Colorado’s winters, rural communities were often isolated by severe storms and heavy snows. Winter still can shut Colorado down. In 1982 a Christmas Eve blizzard paralyzed Denver when 2 feet of snow fell. Yet this was not the biggest Denver blizzard. That one came in December 1913, when the city received 47.7 inches of snow, with drifts up to 20 feet high. Digging out was tough. Schools and businesses closed. Hundreds of men were paid \$2.50 per day to shovel snow and load it into horse-drawn wagons. Some of the snow piles did not melt until summer.

Today, people feel less lonely than they did in those earlier blizzards. Computers, cell phones, radios, and television keep them in touch with one another. In fact, winter has actually helped the state. It has become one of the biggest tourist seasons, now that Colorado skiing is world-famous.

### State Emblems

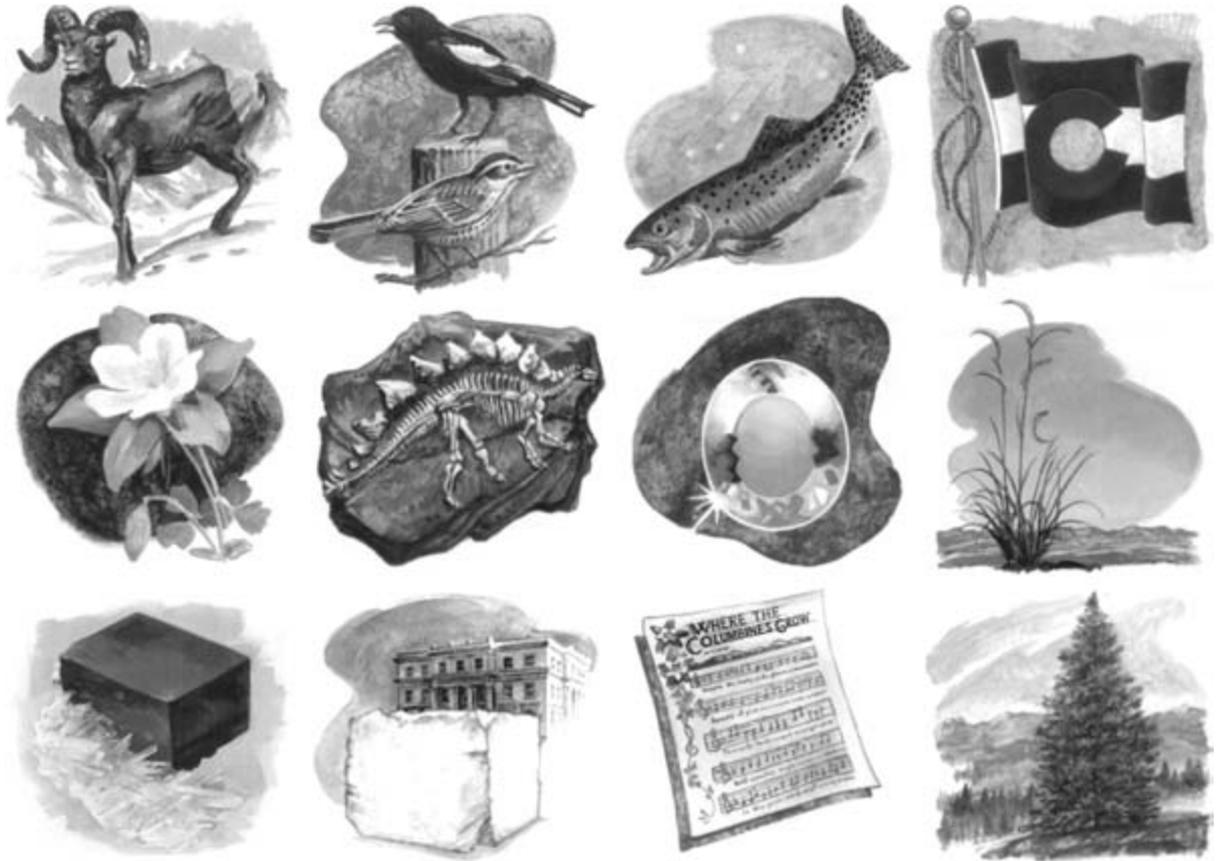
Like other states, Colorado has an official flower, tree, bird, rock, and nickname. It even has a state dinosaur.

In a state as large and varied as this one, selecting these emblems was difficult. James Grafton Rogers tells why: “The Blue columbine is called the Colorado State flower but a single symbol is hard to find for a region so varied as ours, so full of wet and dry, high and low, hot and cold extremes. The columbine grows only in the mountains, less than half the state.” In 1891, Colorado schoolchildren chose the columbine as the state flower.

**Colorado:** state named for the Colorado River; Colorado is Spanish for “red” or “ruddy”

**Nicknames:** the Highest State; the Centennial State

**Motto:** Nil Sine Numine: Nothing without Providence (God)



**Animal:** bighorn sheep

**Bird:** lark bunting

**Fish:** cutthroat trout, greenback trout

**Flag:** three equal horizontal stripes, two blue and one white; a red letter  
“c” encircling a golden disk is at the left

**Flower:** blue/lavender columbine

**Fossil:** stegosaurus

**Gemstone:** aquamarine

**Grass:** blue grama

**Mineral:** rhodochrosite

**Rock:** Yule Marble

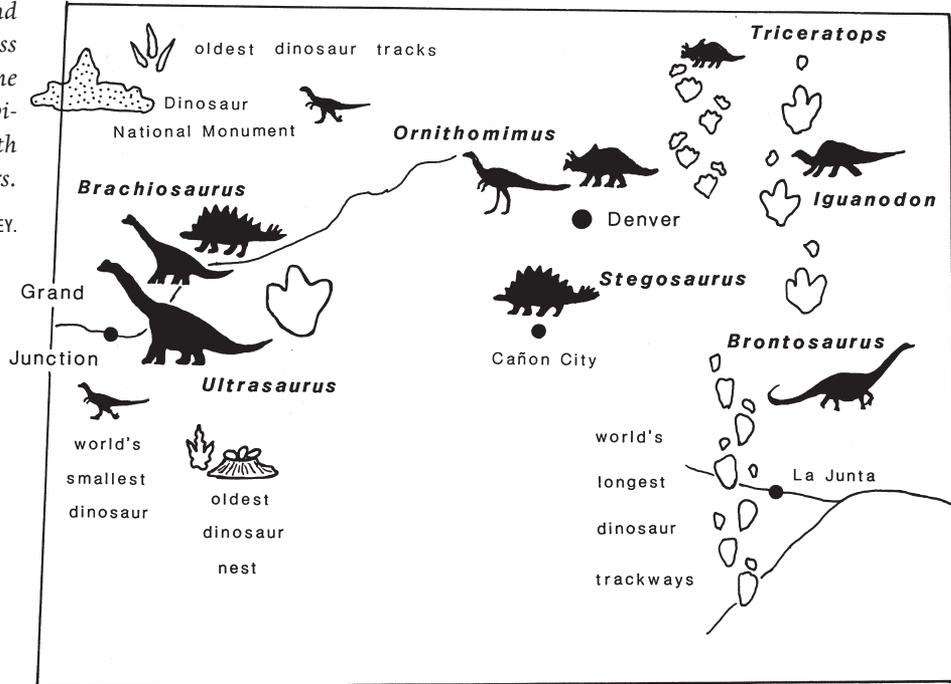
**Song:** “Where the Columbines Grow”

**Tree:** Colorado blue spruce

*State emblems.*

Dinosaur bones and tracks found across Colorado point to a time when our state had tropical jungles crawling with prehistoric monsters.

DRAWING BY MARTIN LOCKLEY.

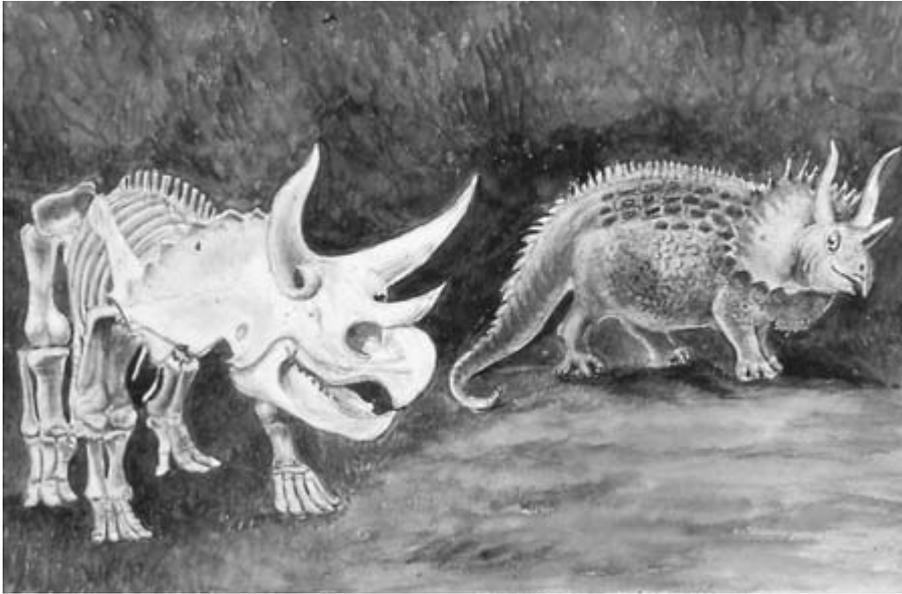


The state flower and the state tree are mountain dwellers, but the state bird lives on the plains and is scarcely known to mountain people. It is the lark bunting, a little black-and-white bird with a brilliant song. Students also chose the lark bunting as the state bird.

In 1981 and 1982 two groups of fourth graders from McElwain Elementary School in Thornton worked hard to have a state fossil named. In 1982 they persuaded Governor Richard Lamm to choose the stegosaurus ("Steggy"). "Steggy" is the heavyweight of the state emblems.

Millions of years ago, the stegosaurus and other dinosaurs roamed over the land that would become Colorado. The climate, landforms, vegetation, and rivers were different back then. Colorado had many volcanoes, inland seas, and lush jungles where dinosaurs roamed. The first complete stegosaurus skeleton was discovered in Colorado. That find is a major reason the stegosaurus was selected to be the state fossil. Many other Colorado dinosaur skeletons are located in museums all over the world.

Colorado is a wondrous, fascinating land, a land to be explored. Its geography has played a major role in its history, from the days of the Mesa Verde Indians until today. In the words of our state song, "Where the Columbines Grow":



*Arthur Lakes, a professor at the Colorado School of Mines, first discovered dinosaur tracks near Morrison. After studying the bones, he drew these sketches of what he thought triceratops might look like.*

COURTESY, ARTHUR LAKES  
LIBRARY, COLORADO SCHOOL  
OF MINES, GOLDEN.

*You can clearly see these dinosaur tracks along West Alameda Avenue at Dinosaur Ridge near Morrison.*

PHOTO BY THOMAS J. NOEL.



Colorado, a Land to Behold  
'Tis the land where the columbines grow,  
Overlooking the plains far below,  
While the cool summer breeze in the evergreen trees  
Softly sings where the columbines grow.

Colorado has to be seen, felt, studied, and explored to be understood. The following chapters will give you a start.

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### Questions

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1. Why is “mother of rivers” a good nickname for Colorado?
2. How have the mountains influenced the course of Colorado history?
3. If you traveled across Colorado from east to west, what differences would you see among the eastern plains, central mountains, western canyons?
4. Why is water Colorado’s most important natural resource?
5. Do you think Colorado should have other state symbols, or emblems? What would they be? Why? Choose something you think should be a state emblem. Draw a picture of it, and explain why it should be an emblem.

### Activities

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1. Draw a map of Colorado. Use this chapter to help you label the following:
  - ◆ Eastern Slope
  - ◆ Western Slope
  - ◆ Front Range
  - ◆ Sangre de Cristo Range
  - ◆ La Platas
  - ◆ Rocky Mountains
2. Imagine you are a farmer moving west to Colorado. What part of the state would you settle in, and what crops would you grow? Use the maps and chapter information to explain your choices.
3. Find out how many of the state emblems can be found in your county or region. Make a drawing or take a photo of them.

## Vocabulary

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- ◆ climate
- ◆ Continental Divide
- ◆ precipitation
- ◆ irrigation

## Books You and Your Teacher Might Enjoy

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- Benson, Maxine. *1001 Colorado Place Names*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. Find out how your town or county was named.
- Jenkins, John T., Jr., and Jannice L. Jenkins. *Colorado's Dinosaurs*. Denver: Colorado Geological Survey, Department of Natural Resources, 1993. This book will introduce you to the prehistoric giants that once lived in Colorado.
- Michener, James A. *Centennial*. New York: Random House, 1974. A fictionalized history of the South Platte Valley of northeastern Colorado. Michener has chapters on the prehistoric period, Indians, trappers, miners, cowboys, hunters, sheep ranchers, sugar beets, and Hispanics.
- Noel, Thomas J., Paul F. Mahoney, and Richard E. Stevens. *Historical Atlas of Colorado*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. This book of maps shows how geography has affected Colorado's history.
- Wommack, Linda. *Colorado History for Kids*. Van Nuys, CA: Valley Press, 1992. Here is an easy-to-read look at Colorado.
- Young, Mary Taylor. *On the Trail of Colorado Critters*. Denver: Denver Museum of Nature and Science and Westcliffe Publishers, 2000. Beautiful color photos make this a terrific introduction to Colorado wildlife and where you can see it.

## Did You Know

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- ◆ Colorado was once covered by seas.
- ◆ Colorado was the home of many dinosaurs.
- ◆ Colorado is the starting point of five major rivers: Arkansas, Colorado, North Platte, South Platte, and Rio Grande.
- ◆ Colorado is the home of four of the earth's major vegetation types: grasslands, desert shrub and brush lands, evergreen forest, and alpine tundra.
- ◆ Colorado has more than forty named hot springs.

**Websites**

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[coloradowest.auraria.edu](http://coloradowest.auraria.edu) for a list of new books, videos, and resource guides on Colorado

[Colorado.com](http://Colorado.com) for information on touring our state and its historical wonders

[denverlibrary.org](http://denverlibrary.org) for photos of Colorado people, places, and things

[historycolorado.org](http://historycolorado.org) for information on all aspects of Colorado