



Zapata Falls

Special Recreation Management Area



Map & Guide

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Rich in historical and geological significance, the Zapata Falls Special Recreation Management Area is a unique opportunity to experience spectacular scenery while hiking or camping. Designated as a “Colorado Natural Area,” the falls and the 628 surrounding acres are owned by the Colorado State Land Board and cooperatively managed with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

A photograph of hikers at Zapata Falls. In the foreground, a hiker with a red cap and a large backpack stands on a rock, looking towards a waterfall. Another hiker in a pink shirt is partially visible behind them. The waterfall flows over several large, dark rocks. The background is a massive, layered rock wall. The scene is outdoors and appears to be a natural area.

For more information:
www.blm.gov/visit/zapata-falls-srma

History

In 1864, at the western base of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, families from Mexico established the town of Zapata. This community raised sheep and other livestock until the 1870s, when several landholdings were consolidated into one of the San Luis Valley's first – and largest – cattle ranches, which is still active today.

Geology

The San Luis Valley was formed along with the Sangre de Cristo mountains as the result of a rift – a place where tectonic plates move apart from one another. The mountains shot up and the valley sank down to a flattened plain.

Then, about 2 million years ago, water from melting glaciers and snowfields reached a weak spot at the end of a large deposit of rocks. What began as a trickle would eventually become a torrent carving its path through the rock, eventually forming a waterfall. Zapata Falls is perched on the Rio Grande Rift – the rift that created the valley and that remains active to this day.



Frozen Zapata Falls
BLM Photo by Erin Edgell

Directions

From U.S. Highway 160, about five miles west of Blanca, turn north on Highway 150. After about 10.5 miles, turn on to Zapata Falls Road #5415. Look for the “Zapata Falls Recreation Area” road sign and turn east. You will reach the campground entrance after approximately 3.5 miles.

Zapata Falls Trail

Reaching Zapata Falls requires a short—but difficult—hike to Zapata Creek. Where the trail meets the creek, enter the creek and wade upstream to the base of the falls.

Length: 1/2 mile each way

Elevation: 9,000 to 9,400 feet

Connections: South Zapata Lake Trail
(U.S. Forest Service Trail #852)

Do Not Climb the Falls

The falls are home to the Black Swift, a rare species of bird that makes its nest on vertical cliffs and behind waterfalls. It is also a species in rapid decline. Staying on-trail will not only help prevent disturbances of nesting birds, it may also save your life.

In summer the water is high, fast, cold, and plummets more than 25 feet through a narrow, slippery, rocky canyon. In the winter, the creek freezes—but, the ice may not be thick enough to carry your weight. In any season, climbing the falls is a danger to you, the people below you, and the ecosystem—all while offering no view of the falls from the top.

Know Before You Go

- The 3.5-mile road to the Zapata Falls Campground & Day-use Area is steep and rough. Four-wheel drive is recommended. All recreation is at your own risk.
- Pack it in, pack it out. Carry out your garbage and dispose of it properly.
- There is no drinking water in the campground or day-use area. Bring plenty of water and do not drink from streams or lakes. A water system is scheduled to be installed in summer of 2024.
- The waterfall and the area around it are on Colorado State Land Board property and subject to their regulations and restrictions.
- The half-mile trail to the falls is rocky and steep. Wear appropriate shoes to hike the trail and wade in the cold waters of the creek, which is the only way to reach the falls.
- Motorized vehicles and bicycles are prohibited on the Zapata Falls and South Zapata Lake trails and in the U.S. Forest Service's Sangre de Cristo Wilderness. Motorized travel and bicycles are allowed only on designated roads and trails.
- Be considerate of others and share the trail.
- Always keep pets on-leash and under control.



Zapata Falls Campground
BLM Photo

Rules and Regulations for Zapata Falls Campground and Day-Use Area

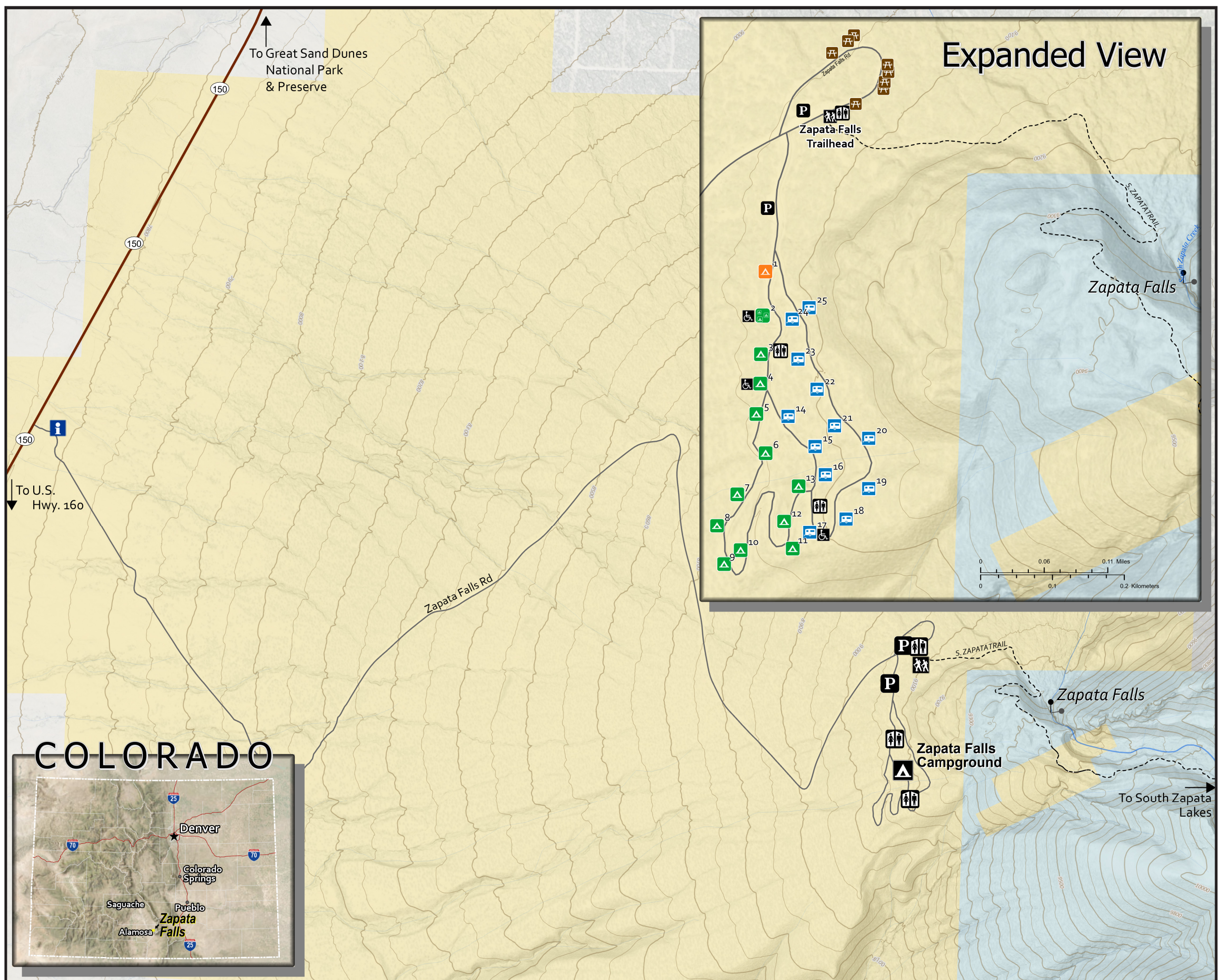
- Camping in designated sites is by reservation only. Camping is prohibited in the day-use area, picnic sites, parking lots, or anywhere else in the Zapata Falls Recreation Area.
- Camping is limited to 14 days in any 30-day period.
- Maximum occupancy for individual sites is two vehicles (plus one trailer), six people, two tents. Maximum occupancy for group site is four vehicles (plus one trailer), fifteen people, five tents.
- Quiet time is 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. Please respect others by turning off your generator during these hours.
- Gathering of down and dead wood for campfires is allowed. Do not cut firewood and haul away.
- Use designated metal campfire rings or use a camp stove.
- Fireworks are not allowed anywhere on BLM-managed land.
- Dogs must be leashed and under owner's control.
- Motorized vehicles are permitted only on designated routes.
- No shooting firearms in or within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of the campground, day-use area, parking lots, and other developed recreation areas.

Camping at Zapata Falls

The Zapata Falls Campground was built with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds and offers sweeping views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Great Sand Dunes National Park, the San Luis Valley, and the San Juan Mountains to the west. The campground has 23 single campsites, one group site, and one camp host site. Sites must be reserved through www.recreation.gov. If the campground is full, dispersed camping is allowed on BLM lands along the Blanca Peak Road (#5410) located 6 miles south of the Zapata Falls entrance on state highway 150.

For camping reservations visit:
www.recreation.gov





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|-------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Campground | Campsite - Non Reservable - Fee | Zapata Falls Waterfall | Road for Licensed Street-Legal Vehicle |
| Parking Area | RV Campsite - Non Reservable - Fee | Trailhead | Trail for Equestrian and Hiking Only |
| Toilet | Group Campsite - Non Reservable - Fee | Picnic Site | Bureau of Land Management |
| Information Kiosk | Camp Host Site | | State Land |

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Sangre de Cristo Wilderness

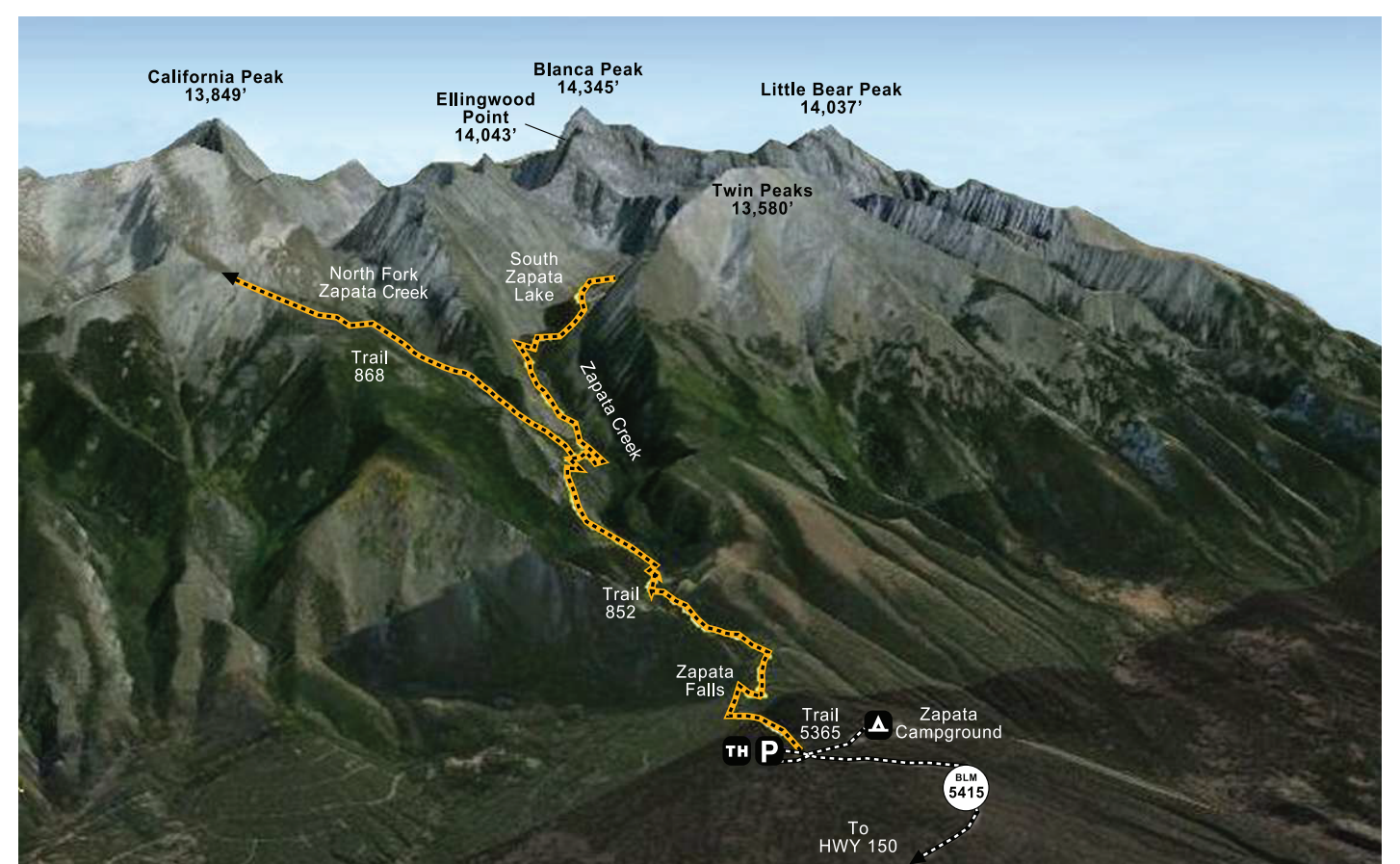
BLM Trail 5365, USFS Trail 852, and USFS 868 are all accessible from the parking lot trailhead, which serve not only Zapata Falls, but South Zapata Lake and the north fork of Zapata Creek.

Zapata Falls is approximately a half mile from the trailhead. The trail to South Zapata Lake begins just below the falls, taking visitors across open slopes, ridges, forests and meadow, with scenic views of Ellington Point. Branching from this trail are lesser-used paths that will bring visitors in sight of other fantastic scenery in the area.

As this trail system is managed by both the BLM and the USFS, be sure to check with both agencies for current trail conditions, weather alerts, and other information for this area. For your safety and to better manage the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, we ask that you register your party at the South Zapata Lake trailhead.

For more information regarding the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness visit:

Conejos Peak Ranger District of the Rio Grande National Forest
 15571 County Road T5
 La Jara, CO 81140
 719-480-9892



Contact Us

Bureau of Land Management

San Luis Valley Field Office
1313 Highway 160 E.
Monte Vista, CO 81144

719-852-7074

BLM_CO_SLVPLC_Mail@blm.gov

Camping Reservations:

www.recreation.gov

877-444-6777

www.blm.gov/colorado

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BLM Colorado values diversity and is committed to creating a strong workforce that reflects the face of our Nation. Public lands are inclusive for all people and groups. Come out and share your public lands with neighbors and friends today!

Accessibility

The BLM is dedicated to ensuring that everyone has an equitable opportunity to access their public lands by providing access to facilities, programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. To learn more visit www.blm.gov/accessible-recreation.