

Ute Trail in Rocky Mountain National Park



tacular alpine views—a setting that’s earned Estes comparisons to Chamonix, France, the de facto trail-running capital of the world. Like Estes Park, Chamonix’s more than 300 miles of trails skirt and traverse a spectacular, daunting mountain range: the Alps, which include 15,781-foot Mont Blanc. And like Chamonix, Estes Park now attracts premier trail runners—such as 2013 USA Half Marathon Trail national champion and Boulder native Melody Fairchild—who seek high-alpine training ground. “If you run the Lumpy Ridge Loop enough times, you will definitely see ultramarathon superstar Scott Jurek,” Chiplin says.

Or maybe two-time Leadville Trail 100 winner Anton Krupicka, or Fort Collins sensation Nick Clark. Nancy Hobbs, the founder and executive director of the American Trail Running Association, frequents the trails in Estes Park, as does legend Buzz Burrell, the one-time speed record holder for the Colorado

and John Muir trails (486 and 211 miles, respectively).

No one gives Estes Park trails more love than the locals, though, who’ve been quietly pushing their town toward trail-running glory for years. The town’s Asylum Group running club has been pounding these paths once a week for more than a decade, and Chiplin regularly hosts running vacations through his company, Active at Altitude. In 2009, the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District began collecting a property tax specifically for building and maintaining trails, and this year, residents voted for a one percent increase in sales tax to further support the rec district, a portion of which will go to trails.

“I’ve lived in Estes since 1979 and have been running all this time,” says Amy Plummer, founder of the Asylum Group and a member of the Trails Committee for the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District. “It just keeps getting better.” Up next: a possible trail that links town trails to those in Rocky Mountain National Park, so runners can go from town to treeline without ever stepping on a road. —JAYME MOYE

The High Road

Estes Park makes a bid to become Colorado’s trail-running mecca.

ALREADY ON THE MAP as the base camp for Rocky Mountain National Park, Estes Park is working on a new moniker: America’s Trail Running Destination. This month, the small town will host North America’s only trail-running conference, the Estes Trail Ascent (October 9 to 11). Now in its second year, the event brings together industry leaders, retailers, and runners. “And by design, it also shines a light on the amazing trail-running culture we have here in Estes Park,” says event director and local Terry Chiplin.

The Estes Valley and Rocky Mountain National Park host more than 130 individual paths that climb from 7,522 feet to 14,255 feet and total 355 miles. Along the way, runners take in wildflower meadows, sapphire blue lakes, aspen and pine forests, and spec-

A RUNNING START

CUB LAKE LOOP



HIGH POINT: 8,620 feet
LOW POINT: 8,000 feet
ELEVATION GAIN: ~650 feet
BEST FOR: Beginning to intermediate trail runners fond of killer views and varied terrain ranging from short, technical climbs to smooth descents.
TIP: Locals like to run this loop clockwise; it’s faster because the climbs in this direction are more gradual.

LUMPY RIDGE LOOP



HIGH POINT: 9,140 feet
LOW POINT: 7,776 feet
ELEVATION GAIN: ~2,620 feet
BEST FOR: Intermediate trail runners looking to test their mettle on a couple of burly climbs. Fortunately, sweeping descents and flat single-track offer relief from two lung-searing ascents.
TIP: Much of this trail sits inside Rocky Mountain National Park, but the trailhead at Devil’s Gulch is outside the park boundary, which means runners pay no entrance fees.

LONGS PEAK KEYHOLE ROUTE



HIGH POINT: 14,259 feet
LOW POINT: 9,400 feet
ELEVATION GAIN: ~5,100 feet
BEST FOR: Advanced trail runners with a bucket-list goal of conquering Longs Peak. High-elevation experience required.
TIP: As with any fourteen-er, you’ll want to be off the summit by noon to avoid potential afternoon lightning storms.