

Best Practices

- Respect private and public property as well as claims.
- Leave all collecting areas free of litter, regardless of how you found them.
- Know the laws, rules, and regulations governing collecting on public land.
- Leave all gates as you found them.
- Leave little to no evidence of your collection efforts.
- Know boundary lines of property and claims where you plan to collect.

The best way to collect rock or fossil samples is with a camera. Leaving rocks and fossils in place both preserves and ensures the future enjoyment of our public lands' geologic treasures for others.

Contact Us

Rio Grande National Forest
Divide District Office
13308 W. Hwy 160
Del Norte, CO 81132
719-657-3321
www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande

Saguache District Conejos Peak District
46525 State Hwy 114 15571 County Rd T5
Saguache, CO 81149 La Jara, CO 81140

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
719-852-7074

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Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



Rockhounding and Fossil Collecting

Rio Grande National Forest

A Quick Look

You may be able to collect rocks, minerals, petrified wood, invertebrate fossils and plant fossils from National Forest System Lands with a Free Use Permit if all of the following criteria is met:

- Collected for personal use and not resale
- Gathered by hand or with nonpowered hand tools
- Quantity is limited to 250 lbs per person per year.

Collecting vertebrate fossils is not allowed.

Collection of meteorites and/or artifacts is not allowed.

Metal detecting is allowed but collecting what is found may or may not be allowed.



Panning does not require a permit, removing material found does require a permit.

No collecting in Wilderness areas, research natural areas, admin sites, developed recreation areas, and other locations listed on the Free Use Permit.

Ground disturbance, including digging, is not allowed.

More detailed information about collecting is found on the inside of this brochure.



Alanna Herrera

Locating Existing Claims: Existing mining claims may show up on some maps but not all. Check the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Mineral & Land Records System (MLRS).

Staking a Claim: The BLM oversees the process of staking claims. It is best to contact the BLM for detailed information on the process. The basics of the process include:

- Ensure the claim is not located on private, restricted, or already claimed land
- Mark the claim physically
- Get a certificate of the location
- File with the BLM and county and pay the appropriate fees

Notice of Intent: A notice of intent informs the Forest of plans for rock and/or mineral extraction. The notice includes the basics of who, what, when, and where. Operations may not begin until the notice of intent is received and approved by the District Ranger.

Plan of Operations: A plan of operations is a detailed summary of rock and/or mineral extraction on the forest. It includes measures for environmental protection and remediation when operations cease.



Silver crystals from the Bulldog Mountain Mine, Creede, Colorado. Photo from: Colorado School of Mines, Geology Museum.

Rockhounding

Rocks and Agates - Rock hounding (surface collecting of rocks and agates, excluding meteorites and fossils), is allowed with a Free Use Permit (36 CFR 228 (a, c)).

Meteorites - Meteorites found on National Forest System Lands are primarily considered objects of scientific interest. They are not available for casual collecting, and are subject to the provisions of the Antiquities Act.

Metal Detecting - Using hand held metal detector devices in the search of native metals does not require a permit (36 CFR 228 (a)). If searching for coins, historic items, treasure, etc. follow the regulations for archeological resources.

Panning - Use of hand held non-motorized implements for the separation of minerals (ie. gold, garnet etc.) from native materials does not require a permit. Removing any minerals found requires a Free Use Permit.



Tony Oliver

Motorized placer and sluicing operations require a notice of intent to be submitted to a Forest Service District Office at least 15 days in advance of operations.

Motorized Placer Operations - Operations which involve motorized equipment like dredging, high banking, and trammel.

Sluicing Operations - The use of a sluice or riffle device of any size.



James St. John

Photo: The famous 114 pound boulder from Little Annie Mine in Summitville has an estimated 316 troy ounces of native gold. It is located in the Denver Museum of Natural History.

Artifacts

Archeological Resource - This is any material remains of prehistoric or historic human life or activities, which are at least 50 years old, and includes the physical site, location, or context in which they are found (36 CFR 261.2). The collection of projectile points, pottery, or any other archeological resource or artifact is not allowed (36 CFR 261.9 (h)) without a permit. Projectile points include arrowheads and any prehistoric human-modified stone.

History

The Rio Grande National Forest and surrounding area is not a fossil 'hotbed' like some other places in Colorado. The surrounding mountains are primarily made up of igneous rock both extrusive (volcanic) and intrusive, whereas the valley floor primarily made up of gravels, eroded from the mountains.

The igneous rocks were rich with solutions of metals that brought thousands of people to the area. In 1890, silver was discovered in the Upper Rio Grande. The rush brought thousands of people to the area trying to strike it rich, working in the mines, or supplying the mining boom. Many mining claims still exist on the Forest.



Creede Historical Society

Fossils

A fossil (paleontological) resource means any evidence of fossilized remains of multicellular invertebrate and vertebrate animals, and multicellular plants, including imprints thereof (26 CFR 261.2). There are four major types of fossils.

Ichnofossil - An imprint or trace fossil. These are typically a fossilized track, trail, burrow, or tube resulting from the life activities and behavior of an animal, including coprolites (fossil dung).



Plant Fossils - The fossilized remains of all parts of a plant. Petrified wood is wood fossilized by silica where the woody structure is visible.

Invertebrate Fossils - The fossilized remains of animals lacking a backbone such as ammonites, insects, and clams.



Vertebrate Fossils - The fossilized remains of any animal having a bony skeleton or backbone such as fish, amphibians, and birds.

Plant and invertebrate fossils, including plant and invertebrate trace fossils and petrified wood, may be collected with a Free Use Permit (36 CFR 228.62 (e), 36 CFR 291).

A permit is required for collecting for research or scientific purposes.

The collection or duplication of vertebrate fossils, and vertebrate trace fossils from National Forest System Lands requires a permit (36 CFR 269.1 (i)). Permits are only issued to qualified paleontologists.

Treasure Trove: Searching for a treasure trove requires a special use permit. This includes non-mineral related activities such as the search for and recovery of money, gems, coins, gold, of unknown ownership and purposely hidden.

Further Information

Prior to collecting, operators should research the presence of mining claims in the area or contact the BLM.

Collecting is not permitted in Wilderness areas, Research Natural Areas, Wilderness Study Areas, developed recreation sites, Wild and Scenic Rivers, campgrounds, picnic areas, resorts, recreation management areas, Administrative sites, or existing mining claims.

All collections must be done from the surface, without digging. If digging or disturbance will occur, a notice of intent must be filed.



James St. John

Permits are not issued for fossil collection for commercial purposes. Trading, bartering or selling any fossil material, rocks, or minerals obtained with a free use permit from National Forest System Lands is prohibited. Free use permits issued are for personal, hobby, educational, and noncommercial use only.

Free Use Permits

A Free Use Permit is required to collect rocks, minerals, invertebrate fossils, plant fossils, invertebrate trace fossils, and petrified wood.

Up to 250 pounds per person per year of resource may be collected. 250 lbs is approximately equivalent to five 5-gallon buckets. An individual may collect any combination of rocks, minerals, fossils (as listed above), and petrified wood up to a total of 250 lbs. For an example, a person could collect 200 pounds of rocks, 20 pounds of plant fossils, 10 pounds of petrified wood, and 20 pounds of minerals during one calendar year.

Permits are issued at
Rio Grande National Forest Offices.