

BOULDER COUNTY ENVIRONMENT

Geography:

Boulder County is divided by the foothills of the Rocky Mountains that run on a north-south line directly through the middle of the county. The east half of the county is the western edge of the Great Plains. The terrain rolls gently, interrupted by small ridges and Davidson Mesa, running northeast from south of Boulder to Louisville. The western half contains the foothills and mountains that rise continuously to the Continental Divide, forming the county's western boundary.

The highest point in Boulder County is 14,255 foot Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, in the extreme northwestern portion of the county. The lowest point is on the county's eastern edge, where the elevation sinks to 4,890 feet at the point where the St. Vrain Creek flows out of the county. Boulder is 5,430 feet above sea level, Louisville is 5,350 feet, Lafayette is 5,237 feet and Longmont is 4,979 feet. The highest town is Ward, at 9,253 feet.

Climate:

Boulder County's climate is a series of extremes. In winter, temperatures can plunge to minus 30 and hover below zero for days on end. In summer, temperatures can be blistering with highs in the upper 90's day after day.

Some of the most powerful winds recorded in the continental United States have roared through Boulder County in December and January, with gusts of more than 120 mph not uncommon.

Snowstorms regularly dump a foot or more of snow. More snow fell in Boulder in 1987 than in any other year in the city's history - 125.4 inches eclipsing the 123.8 inches that fell in 1959.

Yet, despite these extremes, the climate is one of the biggest drawing cards to Boulder County. In winter, the terrible cold spells are often followed by periods of unseasonably warm weather. Temperatures often climb into the 60's in January and February.

In the summer the hot temperatures are moderated by low humidity that can drop into the single digits at times. And the semi-arid climate that produces an average of 18.17 inches of moisture annually means that most days have at least some sunshine. Boulder's climate is characterized by two "rivers," one of water and one of air. The river of water is the runoff from the mountain snowpack. In some years this runoff can be disastrously heavy, as it was in 1894 during Boulder's flood of record (the notorious 100 year flood) and in 1959 following a winter of record snowfall.

The river of air is equally important. Boulder's strong winds can be a blessing. If from the west, they can clear our air pollution. If from the east, they can bring needed upslope moisture.

(Source: Boulder Daily Camera, maps of Colorado and Boulder County, and William Callahan, Boulder Weather Log.)