Fall color photography recommendations in Colorado

The fall color season in Colorado lasts from late September to late October with individual locations’ peak dates depending strongly on their altitude, latitude and other local environmental factors such as aridity, wind exposure and others. Peak times also vary widely between years so it makes sense to check reports from others or from ranger stations or forest service information centers before heading to your location of choice.

Tips for photographing fall color

Colored leaves have the intriguing property that you can make good photographs of them almost any time of day. One factor is the generally lower angle of the sun in autumn. Another is the strong complementary color couple between yellow or orange and the blue of a midday sky that is often very effective. Some tips that can help are:

1. Try to photograph leaves that are backlit by the sun. This gives very radiant colors. Combine this with tip 2 for even stronger effect or create a sunstar in your frame by placing the sun just at the edge of a branch and using a very high f-stop (small aperture) of f/16 or higher.
2. Use a polarizer when photographing leaves away from the sun - this darkens the sky and tends to increase the saturation of the color in the leaves.
3. Seek out situations where you can place one kind of tree against a sea of others. A good example of this is a lone red tree in a sea of yellow.
4. Try both wide field (the sea of color under snow capped peaks) as well as small intimate landscapes.
5. Look up. A very effective image is tree trunks leading the eye to a cornucopia of color swimming in a blue sky.
6. Look down. Fallen leaves can create very interesting patterns on forest floors, near waterfalls or on other trees where they don’t belong. Think aspen leaves forming christmas ornaments on a young evergreen.

Last but not least - stop and experience the moment. See the color, hear the wind in the leaves, smell the musty smells of fall and feel the warmth that is contrasted by bitter cold and try to capture these feelings in your photographs.

Locations

Very easily accessible:
1. Dallas Divide. This is the classic location for a wide sweeping view of snowcapped mountains underscored by fields of color. You have likely seen some pictures of this and the most...
effective views are usually panoramic ones. There are several locations for this, many along the dirt roads going into the San Juans from Ridgeway and highway 62. Nearby the Dallas divide are two more classic locations which are Lizard Head Pass south of Telluride on highway 145 and Kebler Pass which is on road 12 from Crested Butte. Dense groves of Aspen everywhere and is fun combined with McClure Pass which is on road 133 to Carbondale.

2. Maroon Bells. Another classic. Just before Aspen turn onto road 13 and at the end of the road walk a few yards to line up with the ca. 100 photographers who will be lined up at the lake to capture the reflection of sunrise in Maroon Lake lined by gorgeous colored trees. It is tough to do something original with this view as it has already been printed on millions of postcards. A good combination is to photograph the sunrise at Maroon Lake and then hike the short distance to Crater Lake. You’ll see lots of fall color close by and end up with a more intimate view of Maroon peak.

3. Kenosha Pass. This is another classic that can also be made into a nice fall color hike. Go west or east from the pass on the Colorado trail and you’ll find some nice groves of aspen.

4. Eldorado Canyon. South Boulder creek forms many rapids in this park that can be combined with some gorgeous fall color. Unfortunately this year the park will probably be closed for most of the fall color season but normally you can hike along the creek and catch some nice views. A classic shot is just below the bridge over the creek.

5. Clear Creek trail in Golden. You can start this from the CMC building. Just follow the trail next to the creek that goes west. The creek is lined with many trees that turn golden late in the color season. You’ll likely see many photographers photographing family or engagement portraits on the rocks that line the creeks with some nice fall color in the background. After you pass under highway 6, you’ll see none of those anymore but you’ll be in a little grove of impressive cottonwoods with gorgeous color. You can also catch some falls in the creek that are lined by trees.

Slightly more effort required:
There are thousands of good hikes for fall photography in Colorado. Here are just a few.

1. Hike to Electric Pass (or to Cathedral Lake) from Ashcroft, a ghosttown south of Aspen. On the way you pass through dense groves of aspen and above treeline you are rewarded to a view of some of the most rugged peaks in Colorado.

2. Cub Lake or Bierstadt Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park. Both hikes are lined with aspen trees. While climbing the moraine to Bierstadt Lake you will get some superb views of the glaciated valley that RMNP is famous for lined with groves of aspen. On the hike to Cub Lake you are likely to see elk

Aspen leaves line Boulder Brook in Rocky Mountain National Park.
Photo: Jao van de Lagemaat
enjoying the lower parts of the bark on the aspen trees.

3. Spring Creek Trail. This trail leaves from Steamboat Springs and after a while becomes a singletrack trail that slings through dense aspen forest. It tops out at Colorado 38 with a sweeping view of seas of aspen.

4. Jud Wiebe trail. This trail starts and ends in the town of Telluride. It climbs a steep hill where you can find an extensive view of the town as well as the bridal veil falls power station. There will be large meadows lined with aspen as well as a dense grove of the largest aspen trees you can find anywhere.

5. Boulder Brook trail. This quite unknown photographic gem in RMNP is right next to a creek that in fall gets sprinkled with aspen leaves looking like little gold coins. The best location is found right where Boulder Brook trail splits of from Storm Pass trail (when coming from Storm Pass trailhead). Walk a hundred yards south on the trail and then leave the trail going east towards where you can hear (but not see) the brook. There is one area there where the trail goes through aspen trees that sprinkle their gold on the bright green forest floor next to the creek. The mossy growth has deep red roots that hang in the water forming a nice contrast with the green and yellow.