



THE BOONDOCKING BIBLE

The Complete Guide to
Free & Low-Cost Camping
in America

2026



BROUGHT TO YOU BY:
5STAR CAMP



THE BOONDOCKING BIBLE

The Complete Guide to Free & Low-Cost Camping in America

BLM Land • National Forest • Harvest Hosts • Walmart • Casinos
Power Management • Water Conservation • Safety • Apps & Resources

Free your adventure. Find your next spot at 5star.camp

What Is Boondocking?

Boondocking — also called dispersed camping, dry camping, or free camping — is the practice of camping without hookups, away from developed campgrounds, often on public land at no cost. It is one of the most rewarding and most misunderstood forms of RV and tent travel.

Done well, boondocking gives you access to some of the most spectacular landscapes in America, extraordinary quiet, complete freedom over your schedule, and the deeply satisfying feeling of genuine self-sufficiency. Done poorly, it leaves you stuck in the dark with dead batteries and an empty water tank 40 miles from anywhere.

This guide gives you everything you need to do it well.

245 million

Acres of BLM (Bureau of Land Management) public land in the U.S. — the largest inventory of free camping terrain in the world, and most campers barely know it exists

Option	What It Is & Key Rules
BLM Land	Bureau of Land Management — federal public land, primarily in the West. Free dispersed camping typically allowed with a 14-day stay limit.
National Forest	U.S. Forest Service land. Free dispersed camping allowed in most forests unless specifically prohibited. 14-day limit standard.
National Grasslands	Similar to National Forest rules. Less known, often spectacular, almost always empty.
Army Corps of Engineers	Manages land around major lakes and waterways. Some free camping available, more paid sites.
State Trust Land	State-administered public land. Rules vary dramatically by state — research before visiting.
Harvest Hosts	Private network: farms, wineries, breweries, attractions. Annual membership (~\$99). Free overnight stays for self-contained RVs.
Walmart / Casinos	Many allow free overnight RV parking. Always call ahead. Follow courtesy rules: no slide-outs, leave early, make a purchase.
City / County Camping	Some municipalities allow overnight parking in specific areas. Highly variable — always verify locally.

Finding the Perfect Spot

The single most common mistake new boondockers make is choosing a spot based on a map pin alone. Great boondocking requires a bit more research — but the payoff is a site you'll never forget.

The Essential Apps and Websites

App / Website	Best Use
Campendium (campendium.com)	The most comprehensive free and paid campsite database with real user reviews, cell signal ratings, and RV-specific filters. Start here .
FreeCampsites.net	Crowd-sourced free camping locations with road condition reports and user updates. Excellent for finding hidden gems.
iOverlander	Global platform for wild camping. Excellent for remote locations and overlanding routes.
The Dyrt PRO	Premium camping app with offline maps and free site discovery. Worth the subscription for serious boondockers.
onX Offroad / Gaia GPS	Shows public vs. private land boundaries in real time. Essential for knowing if you're actually on legal public land.
Recreation.gov	Official federal reservation system. Some free federal sites bookable here .
BLM.gov Interactive Map	Official BLM land boundaries by state and field office. Use to verify land ownership before committing to a site.
Google Earth	Satellite and street view for pre-scouting sites before you drive in. Look for access roads, shade trees, and level ground.

Scouting a Site — What to Look For

- Access road condition: Will your rig make it in AND out? Scout on Google Earth first, then drive the access road in your tow vehicle before committing the RV.
- Level ground: A slope you can barely notice on foot becomes significant when you're trying to sleep. Bring a good level.
- Sun exposure: Morning sun is valuable for solar charging. Afternoon shade is valuable in summer heat. Know your priorities.
- Cell signal: Check Campendium reviews for signal strength. Download offline maps before leaving service.

- Water source proximity: If you need to refill water, know where the nearest potable source is before you arrive.
- Wind exposure: Exposed ridges are beautiful and often very windy. Trees provide windbreak but can drop branches.
- Escape routes: Always know a second way out. Getting your rig stuck on a single-access road is a bad day.



The 14-Day Rule: Most federal public land allows camping for up to 14 consecutive days in one spot. After 14 days you must move at least 25 miles before returning. Some areas have shorter limits — always check the specific field office rules for where you're camping.

Power Management — Living Off-Grid

Power is the most common challenge new boondockers face. Understanding your electrical system, knowing your consumption, and managing your batteries intelligently is what separates comfortable extended boondocking from a frustrating experience.

Your Power Sources

Source	What You Need to Know
Solar Panels	The backbone of boondocking power. Converts sunlight to electricity stored in your batteries. Sized in watts — 200W is entry level, 400W+ for comfortable extended stays.
Battery Bank	Stores the electricity generated by solar or the generator. Lead-acid, AGM, or lithium (LiFePO4). Lithium is more expensive but superior in almost every way for boondocking.
Generator	On-demand power when solar isn't enough (cloudy days, high-demand appliances). Propane or gasoline. Observe quiet hours — never run a generator overnight in most areas.
Shore Power (not available boondocking)	Listed here as a reminder: you won't have it. Plan your power needs around solar and generator only.
Alternator Charging	Your tow vehicle or motorhome charges your batteries while driving. Every driving day adds charge. Factor this into multi-day trip planning.

High-Drain Appliances — Know Before You Camp

Appliance	Power Impact
Air conditioner	The #1 power draw. 1,500W+. Cannot run on solar alone without a very large system. Generator required or avoid AC entirely.
Electric water heater	1,200–1,500W. Switch to propane water heating when boondocking to eliminate this load.
Microwave	1,000–1,500W for short bursts. Use propane stove instead when power-conscious.
Residential refrigerator	400–600W/day. 12V compressor fridges are dramatically more efficient for boondocking.

Lights (LED)	10–20W total. Essentially negligible. Always convert to LED if you haven't.
Fans	30–50W. Efficient. Run them all you want.
Phone/laptop charging	20–60W. Negligible. Don't worry about these.

The Daily Power Budget

Before your first boondocking trip, calculate your daily power consumption in amp-hours (Ah). Multiply watts by hours of use, then divide by 12 (your battery voltage) to get amp-hours. Your battery bank should store 2–3 days of consumption at minimum — don't drain below 50% on lead-acid batteries (20% on lithium).



The Lithium Upgrade: LiFePO₄ (lithium iron phosphate) batteries are the single most impactful upgrade for serious boondockers. They charge faster, discharge more deeply (80–90% usable vs. 50% for lead-acid), last 3,000–5,000 cycles, and weigh less. The upfront cost is higher but the cost per cycle is dramatically lower.

Water Management

Water is typically more limiting than power for boondockers. The average full-time boondocker uses 5–10 gallons per day for two people. Your fresh water tank and gray water capacity define how long you can stay without resupply.

Conservation Habits That Make a Real Difference

- Navy showers: wet, turn off, soap up, rinse. 2 gallons vs. 20 gallons for a traditional shower.
- Wash dishes in a basin, not under running water. Use a spray bottle for rinsing.
- Drink bottled water or filter tap water rather than running the faucet.
- Use paper plates for some meals to reduce dishwashing water use.
- Monitor your tank levels daily. Don't wait until you're at 10% to start conserving.

Finding Water Resupply

Source	Notes
Campendium / FreeCampsites	Search filters for 'water available' near your area. User notes often include water source details.
Flying J / Loves / Pilot	Truck stops often have RV water fill stations. Some free, some small fee.
City / County Rest Areas	Many have potable water available. Check state highway department websites.
National Forest Service Offices	May have potable water. Call the field office before relying on this.
Walmart / Home Depot	Some locations allow water fill from outdoor hose bibs — ask first.
iOverlander App	Community-sourced water locations worldwide including remote areas.

Gray Water Management

Gray water (sink and shower drain) must be contained and properly disposed. Never dump gray water on the ground — it's illegal on most public land and leaves a mess for other campers. Carry a collapsible gray water tank if your rig doesn't have a gray tank, or use minimal water to slow gray tank fill.

- Dump at RV dump stations (Sanidumps.com maps them nationwide)
- Some campgrounds charge \$5–\$15 for dump station use even for non-overnight guests
- Plan your route to pass a dump station before your gray tank is full

Safety and Leave No Trace

Personal Safety

- Always tell someone your planned location and expected return date before going remote
- Download offline maps before leaving cell service — Google Maps requires data
- Carry a satellite communicator (Garmin inReach, SPOT) for emergencies in no-cell areas
- Know the nearest hospital and emergency services for your general area
- Keep a basic first aid kit and know how to use it
- Trust your gut on questionable access roads — the site isn't worth a stuck rig

Fire Safety

- Check current fire restrictions before building any fire — conditions change daily in fire-prone areas
- Visit inciweb.nwcg.gov for current fire information and restrictions by state
- Never leave a campfire unattended — ever
- Drown campfires thoroughly: stir, drown again, check for heat with your hand
- In high fire risk conditions, use a propane fire pit instead of wood

Leave No Trace Principles

1. Plan ahead and prepare — know the rules for where you're going before you go
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces — stay on existing tracks and clearings
3. Dispose of waste properly — pack out everything, bury human waste 200 feet from water
4. Leave what you find — don't take rocks, plants, artifacts, or disturb the land
5. Minimize campfire impact — use existing fire rings, keep fires small
6. Respect wildlife — don't feed animals, store food properly, give wildlife space
7. Be considerate of other visitors — noise, sight lines, and resource use



The Boondocking Courtesy Code: Leave every site better than you found it. Pick up litter even if it isn't yours. Spread out — don't camp on top of other boondockers. Keep generators to daytime hours. If you find a great spot, don't share the exact coordinates publicly — share the general area and let others discover it for themselves.

The Beginner's First Season Plan

Don't start with a week-long remote wilderness adventure. Build your skills and confidence in stages. Every experienced boondocker started exactly where you are.

Stage	What to Learn
Night 1: Your driveway	Dry camp in your own driveway or a friend's property. Learn your systems. Run the battery down and see what trips it. Fill and drain your water tank. No pressure, fix anything before you go remote.
Nights 2–3: Walmart or casino	Practice self-sufficiency with infrastructure nearby. Understand your gray water capacity. Get comfortable with arrival and departure routine.
Nights 4–7: Developed BLM area	A spot with other campers nearby. Pit toilets often available. Cell signal usually accessible. Learn your power consumption over multiple days.
Week 2+: True dispersed camping	Now you understand your rig and your habits. You're ready for the real thing.

Essential Gear for Serious Boondocking

Gear	Why You Need It
Solar setup (400W+)	Your power independence foundation. More panels = more flexibility.
Lithium battery bank (200Ah+)	The storage that makes extended stays possible.
Satellite communicator	Safety net for no-cell emergencies. Non-negotiable in remote areas.
Portable water filter	Katadyn or Sawyer for emergency water treatment from natural sources.
MaxxAir or Fan-Tastic vent fan	Ventilation and cooling without running AC. Life-changing in summer.
Level kit + blocks	Essential for finding level ground. Cheap and critical.
Tow straps + MaxTrax	Self-recovery for soft ground situations. Know how to use them.
Tire pressure monitor	Know your tire pressure without leaving your seat. Blowouts cause most RV accidents.

**The best boondocking site you'll ever find
is the one you discovered yourself.**

Find 5star.camp network parks between your adventures at 5star.camp

**Where the paved roads end and the red dirt starts,
We chase the horizon with wandering hearts.
No concrete pads, no park-regulated lines,
Just a roof made of stars and a whisper of pines.**

**Out on the ridges or a high mountain crest,
We kill the ignition and let the rig rest.
The batteries charge from the glow of the sun,
And water is gold till the dry days are done.**

**With the tanks reading full and the world left behind,
It's a different kind of freedom we out here find.
No hookups, no crowds, no city-side noise—
Just the soul of America, stripped to its joys.**

