

“Atlantic” Peak (13,841 feet) – Winter Mountaineering

by Dave Cooper



The west ridge of “Atlantic” Peak, seen from Mayflower Gulch.

Winter mountaineering provides the opportunity to experience Colorado at its most spectacular. It also provides the aspiring mountaineer with additional challenges that can turn an easy “walk-up” route in the summer into an exciting and rewarding outing. The west ridge of “Atlantic” Peak is such a case. (Note: “Atlantic” Peak is not an officially named peak, hence the quotation marks). While in summer conditions the ridge is classified as “Class 2”, the knife edge formed by winter snow makes this route a fine introduction to more exposed snow climbing. An ice-axe (along with the skills to use it!) is a requirement for the route. With my friends, I have long used this outing for expedition training.

Snowshoes are best for this trip. I have tried it with skis in the past, and while they are great on the approach, the lower part of the ridge often has lots of exposed rocks that are challenging when skiing down. While we haven’t needed to use crampons on this ridge, on a recent visit the snow was hard enough that they would have been useful in a couple of spots.

Getting to the Trailhead: Take Exit 195 off I-70 and follow the signs for Highway 91 to Leadville. (This is also the exit for Copper Mountain).

Drive south on Highway 91 for 6.4 miles and park in a large plowed parking area on the east side of the highway. This is 5.3 miles north of Fremont Pass.

Hike Statistics:

Trailhead to the summit of Atlantic Peak: 2900 feet of total elevation gain in 2.8 miles (one way).

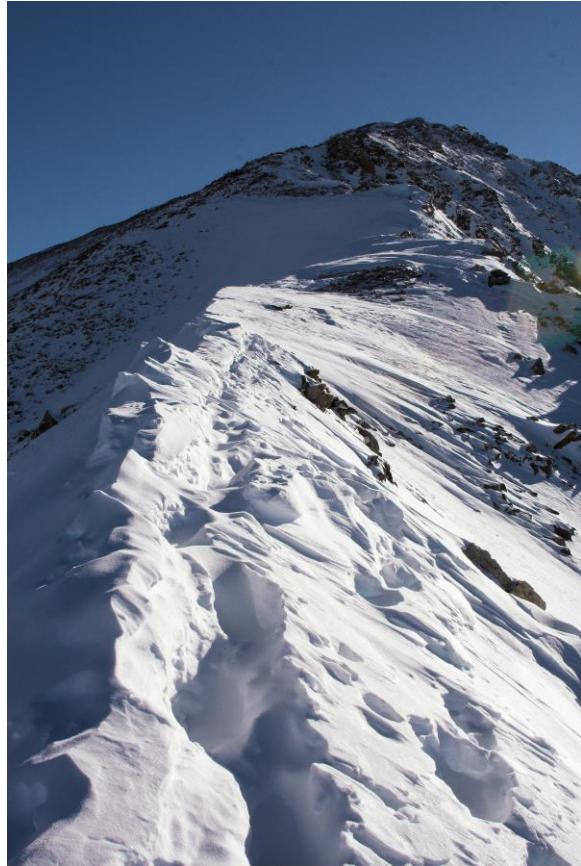
Difficulty: A strenuous winter mountaineering outing on an exposed ridge – snowshoes and ice axe required (crampons optional, depending on conditions).

USGS Quad: Copper Mountain, CO

In addition to the “Ten Essentials”, you may want to add a few more items to your pack for outings like this one:
Goggles
Facemask
Plastic double boots
Warm mittens
Extra windproof and warmth layers
Insulated water bottle carrier, plus wrap your second bottle in warm clothes in your pack



Looking back down the west ridge



Hike Description

From the parking area (Waypoint “PARKING”) snowshoe up the four wheel drive road for 1.1 miles to a point directly opposite Pacific Creek (Waypoint “LEAVE ROAD”). Cross Mayflower Gulch at this point and start to climb up through the trees, heading for the saddle between “Atlantic” and Mayflower Hill. As you reach treeline, carefully choose a route up the broad start to “Atlantic’s” west ridge. Usually this ridge is wind-scoured with lots of exposed rocks, but after a heavy snowfall it may have some avalanche potential, so take care and know the snow conditions.

After gaining four hundred feet the ridge flattens out for a while before narrowing and steepening again (Waypoint “RIDGE NARROWS”). Here is a good spot to take off the snowshoes and take out the ice axe. The approach is over!

Climb up mixed snow and talus from this point to the summit. The ridge seems to go on forever, especially when wind is combined with sub-zero temperatures as it was on a recent outing. The climbing is never difficult, but the mixture of rock and snow can make your footing less secure. While cornices rarely form on the ridge, it is quite common to find a moderate knife edge section of the ridge which can provide some excitement. Be careful to avoid unstable snow slopes – the ridge-top is usually the best place to be.

Looking up the ridge towards the summit



Looking towards Pacific Peak from the summit

From the summit the views are stunning in every direction.

