

“Ptarmigan Peak” and Carbonate Mountain (12,308 feet)

by Dave Cooper

On a recent visit to The Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, I decided to explore some of the peaks overlooking the sand dunes, in the hope of finding an optimum viewpoint for photographing the Dunes with the Crestone Range as a backdrop. Looking at a map and checking the guidebook it appeared that Carbonate Mountain or one of its subpeaks (“Ptarmigan Peak”) might be a candidate. It turned out that the hike was a delightful, if strenuous outing and I was rewarded with excellent views of the area.

Getting to the Trailhead: Take US285 south over Poncha Pass into the San Luis Valley. 4.7 miles south of Villa Grove, turn left onto SH 17 and follow this road south for 36.6 miles to Sixmile Lane (Ln 6 N). Take Sixmile Lane (following signs to the Great Sand Dunes National Park) east for 16.1 miles to the intersection of SH 150. Turn north and drive 6.3 miles to the parking area for the Mosca Pass Trail, a quarter of a mile past the Visitors Center for the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. This is a US Fee Area.



Rime-covered trees frame the sand dunes and Crestones

Hike Description

From the trailhead, hike east along the excellent Mosca Pass trail. The trail starts out in a pleasant, steep-sided canyon bottom, alongside Mosca Creek. Eventually the canyon broadens out before reaching the Park Boundary (just before Mosca Pass) after 3.2 miles. An information board contains interesting facts concerning the history of the Pass,

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to the summit of Carbonate Mountain (12,308 feet): 5000 feet of total elevation gain in 14 miles round trip (500 feet of which is on the descent).

Difficulty: A moderate on-trail hike to Mosca Pass, followed by a long, strenuous ridge hike (on and off trail) to Carbonate Mountain. In early spring you may encounter significant snow at the higher elevations.

Guidebook: “The Essential Guide to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve”, by Charlie and Diane Winger

USGS Quad: Mosca Pass, CO

including the fact that in 1890 the toll for a horse and rider was \$1 – quite a bit in those days. To climb the long ridge to Carbonate Mountain, backtrack to the trail junction 0.2 miles west of the park boundary (Waypoint “TRAIL JUNCTION”). The junction is not signed, so pay attention! The trail drops slightly as it heads south into a meadow with an old cabin.

Cabin near start of Carbonate Mountain Trail

Follow the trail as it angles left (southwest) to gain the main ridgeline, then wanders up the ridge, finally leaving treeline near a minor ridge point labeled “11268” on the map. Look for the impressive peaks of the Sierra Blanca Massif due south, slightly to the left as you climb the ridge. On the left end of the Massif are the peaks of the Mount Lindsey group, while the sharply pointed peak just in view to the right of Lindsey is the mighty Blanca Peak.



The Sierra Blanca, seen from the northeast ridge of Carbonate Mountain

Now you also start to see nice views of the Sand Dunes and Crestone group, to the north. When I was there in early April, a storm had just moved out, leaving the trees coated in a thick layer of rime frost, creating a spectacular foreground. The ephemeral nature of this brilliant display was revealed when the sun hit the trees, causing the frost to drop to the ground within minutes.

The rime on the dead tree stands out starkly against the building clouds



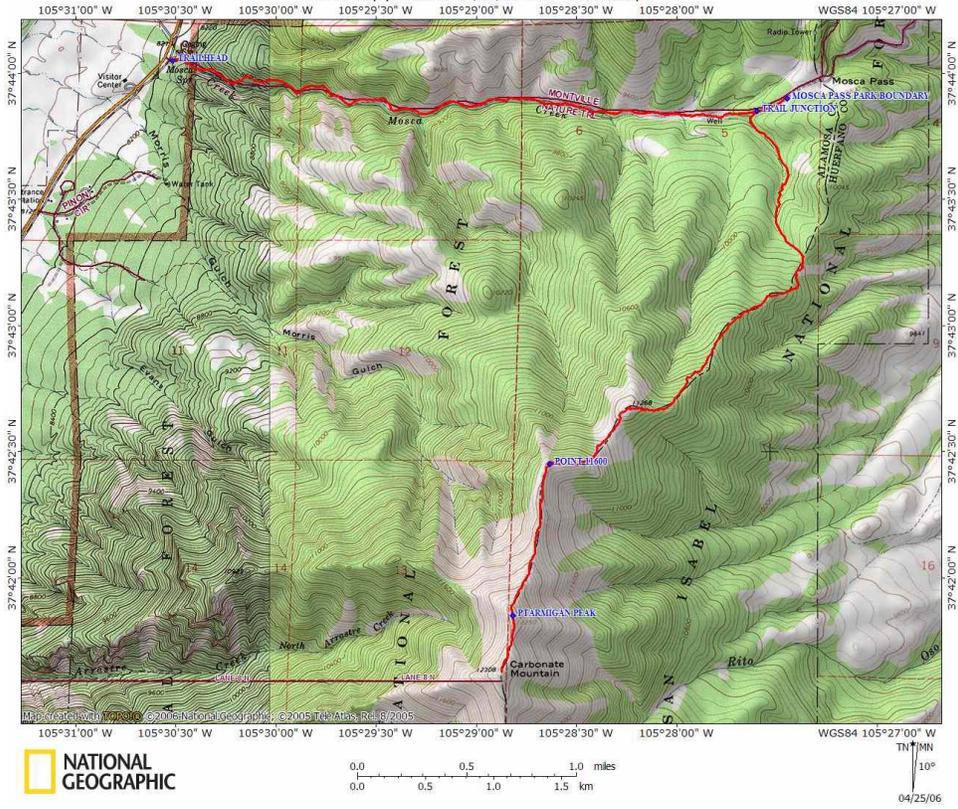


The ridge point in the foreground is Point 11,600, with Ptarmigan Peak behind. The summit of Carbonate Mountain is still out of sight

After crossing a seemingly endless series of ridge points you will reach Point 11,600. From here “Ptarmigan Peak”(12,250 feet) is a short distance away across a narrow peninsula. To reach the summit of Carbonate Mountain continue up and over “Ptarmigan Peak”.

The ridge over to Ptarmigan Peak





GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)

TRAILHEAD: 37,44,31N / 105,30,31W, 8278 feet

TRAIL JUNCTION: 37,43,51N / 105,27,36W, 9613 feet

MOSCA PASS PARK BOUNDARY: 37,43,54N / 105,27,27W, 9721 feet

POINT 11600: 37,42,27N / 105,28,38W, 11557 feet

PTARMIGAN PEAK: 37,41,53N / 105,28,50W, 12176 feet

