

Cottonwood Peak (13,588 feet) by Dave Cooper



Cottonwood Peak - small-2.jpg

Springtime can produce interesting hiking conditions in Colorado's mountains. Sandwiched between the winter months, when the days are short and snow deep, and summer hiking, often on trails where the main concerns are to avoid the thunderstorms that usually form like clockwork each afternoon, spring weather and conditions tend to be unpredictable.

Choosing a route can be problematic, and sometimes requires flexibility. An example is when climbing Cottonwood Peak. In winter, which is when I've climbed this peak previously, the route is usually quite obvious: from the San Luis Valley, aim to gain the west ridge as early as possible and follow it all the way to the summit. In the summer, the trail up Hot Springs Canyon can be followed to treeline, then a short hike

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on Highway 285 to the San Luis Valley and continue to the junction of Highway 285 and Highway 17, 4.2 miles south of Villa Grove. County Road GG also originates at this junction. Take CR GG east for 6.8 miles to an intersection with County Road 65. Turn southeast onto CR 65 and drive 0.6 miles to a well-signed trailhead parking area for the Hot Springs Canyon Trail. The trailhead kiosk is located on the east side of the parking area. Passenger cars should have no difficulty reaching the trailhead on the well-graded roads.

Statistics: The route gains 5400 feet in 10.7 miles round trip.

Difficulty: Trail and easy off-trail hiking to a moderate, snowy ridge.

Special Gear: Ice ax, possibly snowshoes and crampons.

USGS Quad: Valley View Hot Springs, CO

GPS coordinates for trailhead (NAD83): 38°10'48"N, 105° 48'46"W, 8,576 feet.

on grassy slopes brings you to a saddle on the west ridge. Using trails where possible reduces environmental impacts.

In April, the choices are less obvious. Do you follow the trail, knowing that those shady spots are going to retain snow, making progress slower and making the trail difficult to follow, or do you stick to the winter route. On April 25th, I decided to give the trail a try, fairly confident that when I lost the trail I'd be able to find a reasonable ridge to gain access to the west ridge proper. That's what happened on this hike - a minor ridge at mile 2.4 provided easy access, mainly on faint game trails, to the west ridge, and from there it was just a long ridge walk on snow, talus and grass. Now this may not be the best route year-round, but on this day it was a very reasonable way to go. In a couple of weeks it may well be that you can stay on the trail 'til it peters out at treeline.

Hike Description

From the trailhead, after signing in, take the Hot Springs Canyon Trail to the left. The trail wanders north through an open area before turning into the mouth of the canyon. Stay on the main trail (right) at mile 0.4 where a faint trail takes off to the left. Head into the canyon on the trail, generally staying close to, and sometimes in, the streambed. At mile 1.8 the trail turns north, entering an open area just before the wilderness boundary at mile 2.3.

Shortly after entering the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, at mile 2.4, I found deep snow covering the trail, so at this point I headed north up open slopes, generally following game trails to reach the crest of a minor ridge, trending northeast. This ridge climbed gradually through trees to 11,800 feet, where I had my first views of the peak. A short hike north and I reached a ridge point on the west ridge at 12,118 feet. From here it was just a long, steady climb east on the moderate ridge, over a couple of intermediate points, to the summit. It was interesting to note how the snow cornices changed as I climbed higher, alternating between left-facing, a symmetric knife edge, and right facing cornices. Always be careful to avoid getting too close to the edge of these cornices.

Solitary footprints along Cottonwood Peak's west ridge - small.jpg

A bench immediately south of the summit provides a slightly easier alternate path, and for my descent I took this to avoid some tedious postholing above 13,000 feet on the ridge, evidence of the recent snowstorm that left up to thirty inches of snow in the Front Range.



View from the summit - looking back down the west ridge-small.jpg



As I descended, dark clouds were forming and the wind grew stronger, urging me to keep moving downward. At this time of year you never know what to expect.



Time to go-small.jpg



