

## Dragons Tail Couloir – Flattop Mountain

by Dave Cooper

As we move into spring a mountaineer's thoughts turn to snow couloirs. A fine example of a couloir which reliably comes into climbing shape relatively early in the season is the Dragons Tail Couloir on the south face of Flattop Mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park. The couloir offers several options depending on how late in the season you attempt a climb. The left branch is often favored early in the season since the right hand branch can be guarded by a significant cornice which can bar exit. As the season progresses into June the left branch will melt out completely and the right branch becomes a better option. Both can require climbing a short section of technical rock.

**Getting to the Trailhead:** From the major intersection of US Highways 34 and 36 in the town of Estes Park, head west through town on US 36. Turn south in 0.4 miles and continue on US36 as it turns west to Rocky Mountain National Park. Turn left (south) on Bear Lake Road after 4.4 miles and drive to its terminus at the large parking area after 14 miles..

Consider using the shuttle bus rather than driving to Bear Lake. For more information go to: <http://www.nps.gov/romo/visit/shuttle.html>.

**Statistics:** 2540 feet of total elevation gain in 5.8 miles round trip.

**Difficulty:** A short trail approach with a steep snow climb, requiring ice axe, crampons and helmet. In the left branch a short technical rock section will usually be encountered (M2-3) which may require mixed climbing techniques and possibly a rope. The right branch is often guarded by a cornice which, later in the season, may be bypassed. Descent is via the Flattop Mountain Trail.

**USGS Quad:** Mc Henrys Peak, CO.

*The Dragons Tail Couloir on May 31, 2006 compressed.jpg*

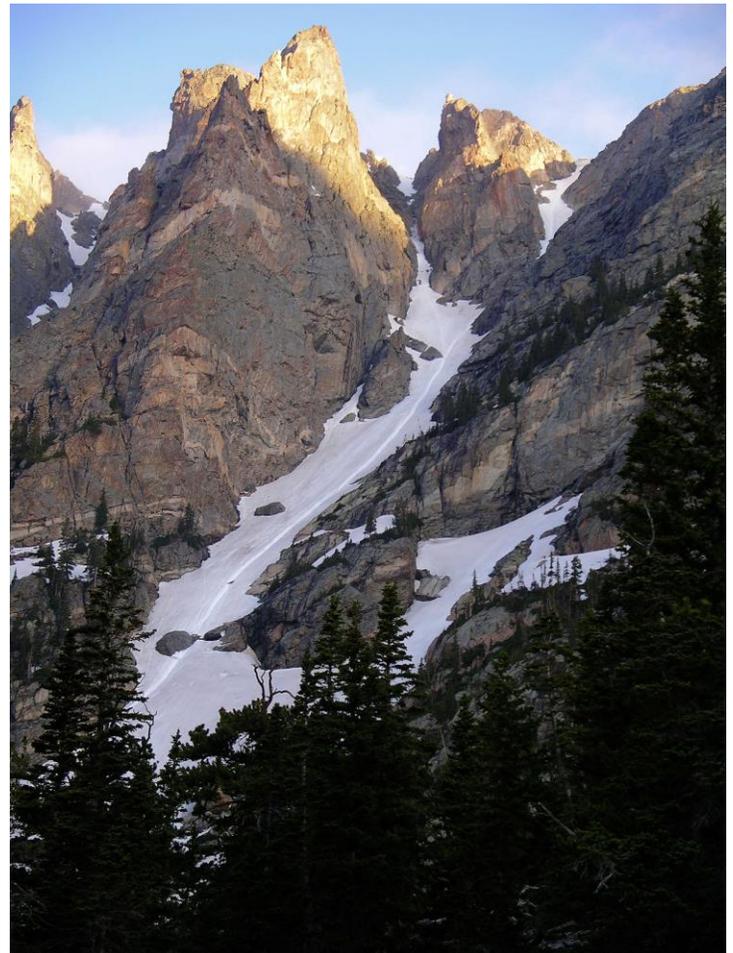
### Approach

From the Bear Lake Parking area follow the trail initially south, signed to Dream Lake and Emerald Lake. The trail is normally well tracked to Emerald Lake, 1.5 miles from the trailhead. Skirt around the left (south) side of Emerald Lake to its west end. You will now be directly below the couloir, rising to the northwest from the lake and immediately right of an impressive rock spire known as the Dragons Tail.

Study the couloir as you approach the lake. You should be able to see both of the upper branches of the couloir. If the left branch is in shape, all but a short, 15 foot section should be snow-covered. Also check the cornice at the top of the right branch. Based on conditions choose one of these options.

### The Climb

Find a good spot near the base of the climb to don crampons and helmet and head up talus and initially easy snow slopes which steepen to approximately 45 degrees as you reach the fork in the couloir. Based on the conditions you observed earlier, choose your route. When I climbed this route on May 31, 2006 the left branch had already melted out so I chose to head right. A twenty foot section of wet rock required a bit of easy



mixed climbing (M2) to gain the upper part of the gully. From here steep snow led to the cornice, which could be bypassed on either side. I chose a 60 degree snow slope (best climbed with two ice tools) on the left which gave access to the head of the left branch and an easy exit.

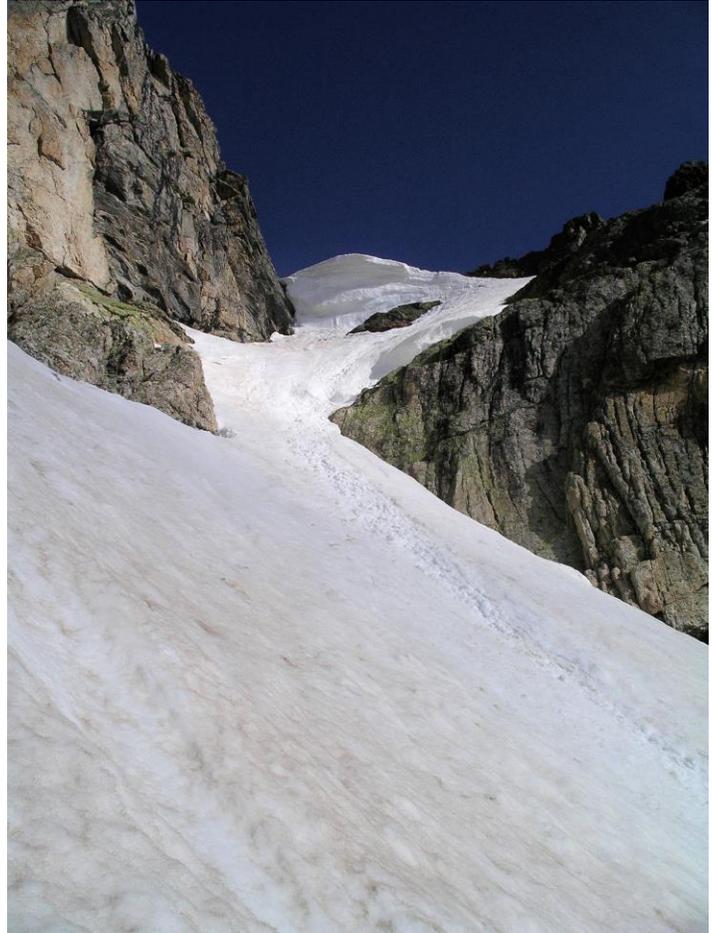
*Approaching the cornice - compressed.jpg*

The climb tops out on the broad east ridge of Flattop Mountain. To descend, head northwest to intersect the Flattop Mountain Trail. Follow the trail back down to the Bear Lake Parking area. Note that the trail can be difficult to follow as it reaches treeline, so pay careful attention.

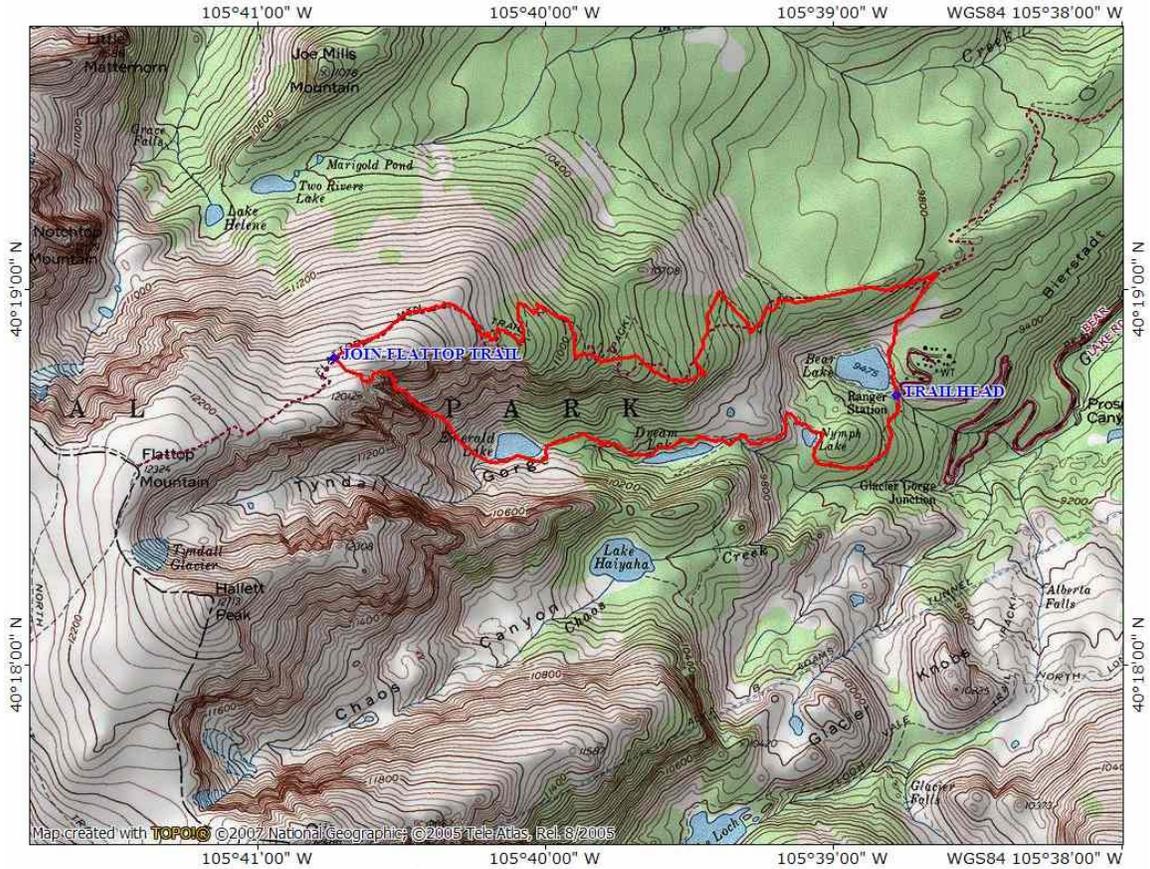
**Caution:** A hard freeze is required at night to stabilize the snowpack. Make sure you have the skills to assess snow stability and the climbing ability and conditioning to complete the climb in a timely manner. Get an early start and plan to be off the climb before the snow softens. Cornice collapse and avalanches are some of the potential hazards on this climb.

Be aware of the potential for rockfall and always wear your helmet.

Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route. We write about it, you take all the risks.



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