

Grand Turk and Sultan Mountain

by Dave Cooper



Duane and Carl Nelson enjoying the views from the summit of Sultan Mountain.jpg

Most visitors to Molas Pass are drawn to the views of the impressive peaks of the Grenadier Range, Needle and West Needle Mountains to the south and east. This is not really surprising, since these views are stunning. Immediately to the north of the Pass, however, there is an area of lower peaks and sub-alpine meadows that provides one of the finest wilderness experiences that Colorado has to offer.

We recently had the opportunity to hike and climb in this area. Our objectives were a couple of peaks with the intriguing names of Grand Turk (13,148 feet) and Sultan Mountain (13,368 feet). No maintained trails lead to these summits, so some routefinding is required. The snow is melting fast in this part of San Juans, so we were able to leave the snowshoes at the car. Just an ice ax and good mountaineering boots were needed.

Relative to their famous neighbors across the Animas River, these peaks are climbed infrequently. We were surprised therefore to run into a couple of fellow climbers, Duane and Carl Nelson, who had the same objectives in mind. We shared the climb to the two summits with

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on Highway 550 to the intersection with the Little Molas Lake Road, 0.4 mile north of Molas Pass, 6 miles south of the town of Silverton. Assuming the gate is open, turn northwest and drive three quarters of a mile to the parking area by the lake. By the way, don't confuse Little Molas Lake with Molas Lake, a mile north on Highway 550.

Statistics and Difficulty: Assuming that you are able to drive to the Little Molas Lake Trailhead, the hike gains 3600 feet in 7.7 miles round trip. Walking from the highway (gate closure) to the Little Molas Lake Trailhead parking area adds 1.5 miles round trip and 200 feet of additional elevation gain to the day.

The hike is mainly off-trail but the difficulty during the summer months shouldn't exceed Class 2. In the early-season conditions we found, an ice ax was necessary for crossing several snow slopes. Good routefinding skills are necessary, so this climb is recommended only for experienced hikers with adequate map and compass skills. I found it helpful to pre-enter several waypoints from the route onto my GPS ahead of time.

USGS Quads: Snowdon Peak, CO; Silverton, CO.

Duane and Carl had the chance to swap tales as we hiked. Duane is closing in on his goal of climbing all thirteen thousand foot summits in Colorado, a total of 637 peaks. His sons accompany Duane on many of these climbs.

The road to Little Molas Lake was still closed on our visit, though the Forest Service reported that it opened the following day. Walking from the highway (gate closure) to the Little Molas Lake Trailhead parking area adds 1.5 miles round trip and 200 feet of additional elevation gain to the day.

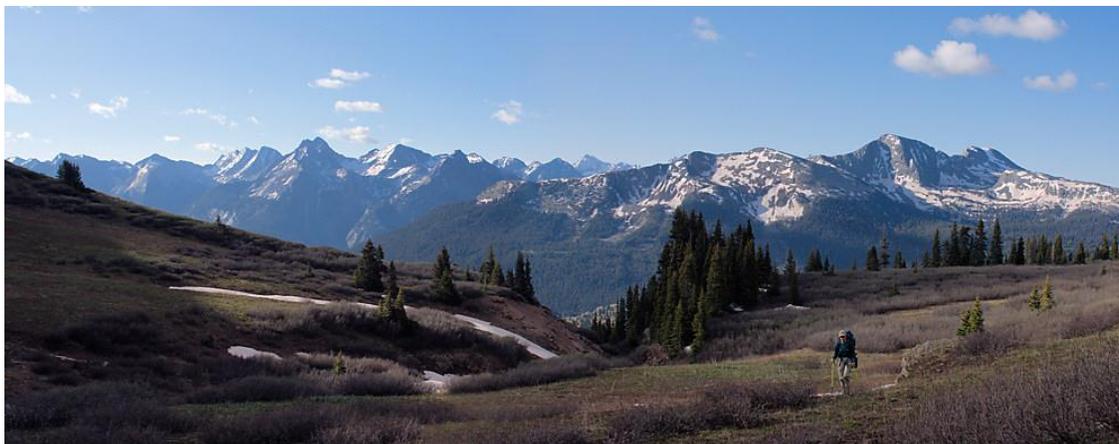
Hike Description



Early morning light on the peaks north of Molas Pass. The route climbs to the saddle between the two peaks.jpg

Walk or drive along the Little Molas Lake Road to the trailhead, at the northwest end of the lake, following signs at any intersections. If parking at the trailhead parking area walk east for about 100 yards, reaching one of two trailheads. These two trails come together in 100 yards. We'll start measuring distance from the trailhead. Walk northwest on the trail for 0.2 mile until it crests a small ridge at an elevation of 11,129 feet. Leave the main trail here and follow a faint trail northeast along this ridge until reaching an open meadow, then travel cross-country due north towards the basin nestled between the steep cliffs of unnamed peaks

12,849 and
12,734.



Heading up to the basin between unnamed peaks 12849 and 12734-small.jpg

You may find indistinct trails leading into the basin, which become better defined as you approach the head of the basin, just to the right of a remaining snow patch.



Approaching the saddle between the unnamed peaks 12849 and 12734.jpg

Reach a saddle between the peaks (12,460 feet) at mile 2.5. Angle slightly left to gain the southwest ridge of unnamed peak 12,899 and follow the ridge to the top at mile 2.8. Continue east across a narrow ridge and climb another unnamed peak (Unnamed 13,087) at mile 3.2. Descend northeast to a low point on the ridge at 12,812 feet and continue up to Grand Turk's summit ridge. Turn east and hike to the high point (mile 3.8). The map shows the highest point as being at the eastern end of the ridge but we were all convinced that a point slightly west (I measured it to be 13,163 feet) was actually higher. Climb both to make sure!

Return to the west end of Grand Turk's summit ridge and descend northwest to the low point of the ridge at 12,776 feet and once again head up this last ridge to the summit of Sultan.



Ginni approaching the summit of Sultan Mountain.jpg

The views from the summit are truly amazing. It's easy to pick out many recognizable summits from here, plus you can look down directly on the town of Silverton, 4000 feet below.

To descend, it is possible to reverse your route, bypassing Grand Turk this time by traversing across its west flank. Since this is a fairly long ridge run, above treeline the whole time, it's good to have another option in case the weather turns ugly. The escape route I'll describe here is a mile longer than the ascent route, but allows you to lose elevation quickly and makes a nice loop.

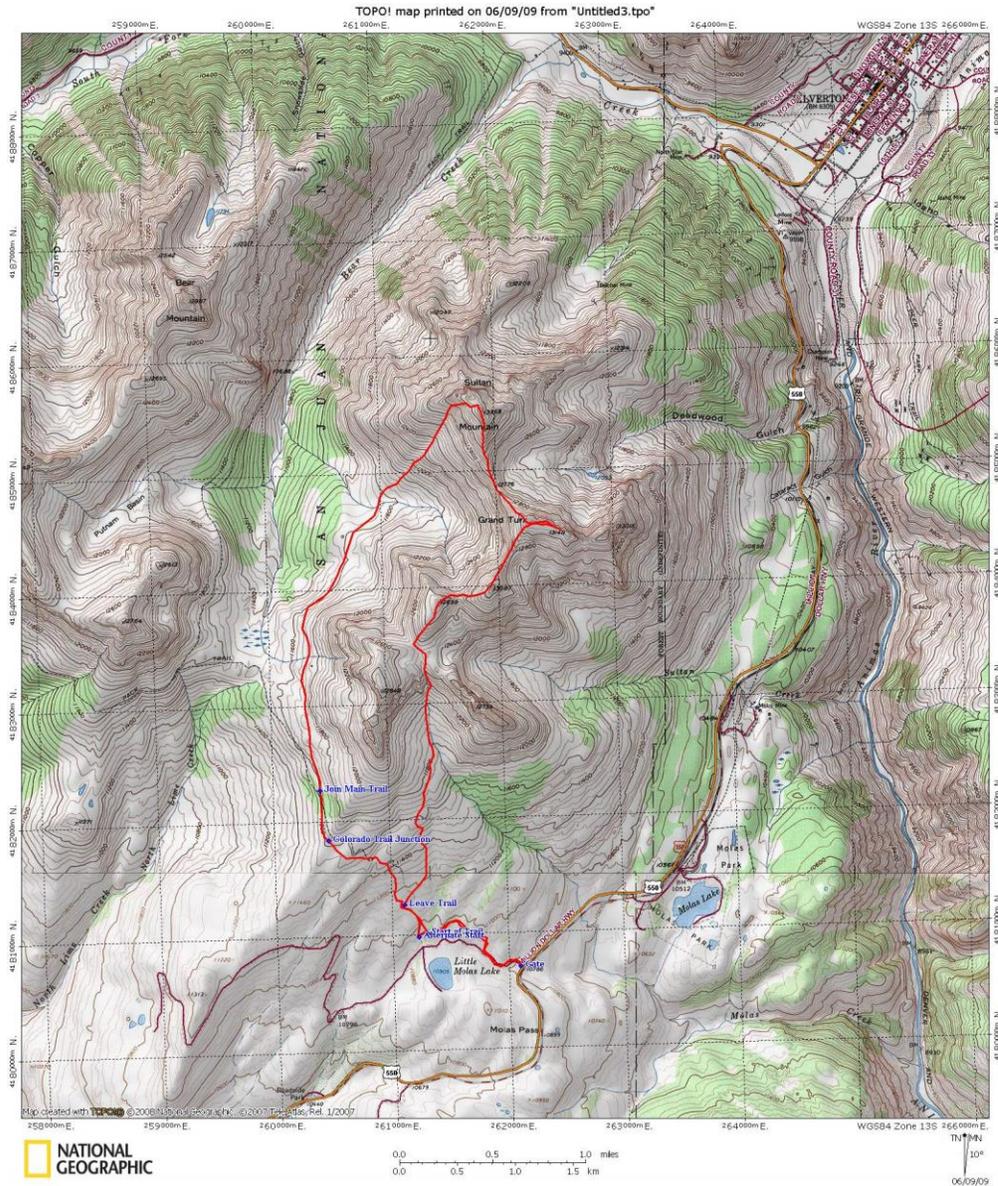
*Sultan's southwest face.
The descent route
generally follows the
snow-filled gully.jpg*



For this alternate descent, continue northwest from Sultan's summit for 50 yards and reach the head of a shallow gully on Sultan's southwest face. Either descend the gully or grassy slopes alongside the gully. With the right snow conditions the gully could offer a nice

glissade (assuming you have an ice ax and the skills to use it). We found the snow to be too firm to safely do this, so we elected to descend on the grassy slopes immediately southeast of the snow, then crossed back and forth across the gully a couple of times to find moderate terrain. If you try to descend further to the south you'll probably find steeper terrain and some cliff bands, so pay attention.

Continue descending southwest until reaching the 11,600 foot level, then start contouring at this elevation, curving towards the south. We found moderate snowfields and occasionally sections of a faint trail and were able to make rapid progress to the southern end of the massif. The goal is to intersect a major trail at the 11,600 foot level, which you should do at mile 7.3. This major trail continues south and then turns east around the southern end of the massif, meeting a signed junction with the Colorado Trail at mile 7.6. Stay straight here (the Colorado Trail heads right). As you continue around you'll see first Engineer Mountain, then North Twilight Peak, Snowdon Peak., and finally Little Molas Lake. Continue down the trail to the lake and back to your vehicle.



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 Gate, 37,44,34,-107,42,0,10784 feet
 Start of Trail, 37,44,43,-107,42,33,10922 feet
 Alternate Start, 37,44,42,-107,42,36,10948 feet
 Leave Trail, 37,44,51,-107,42,41,11129 feet
 Grand Turk, 37,46,39,-107,41,51,13111 feet
 Sultan Mtn, 37,47,9,-107,42,14,13317 feet
 Join Main Trail, 37,45,23,-107,43,11,11614 feet
 Colorado Trail Junction, 37,45,9,-107,43,8,11614 feet

