

Handies Peak by Dave Cooper



A dusting of snow adds dramatic contrast to autumn on the high peaks-small.jpg

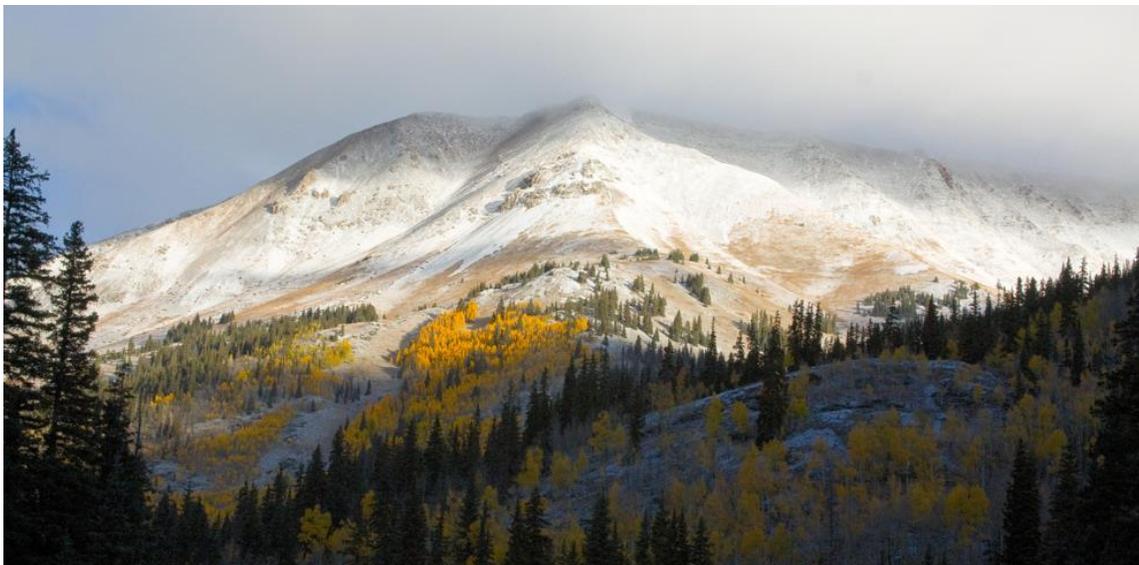
One of the most spectacular times of year in the high country is in late autumn, when a new coating of snow adds dramatic contrast to the fall colors.

On a recent trip to the San Juan Mountains of Southwestern Colorado I was chasing an early-season storm, hoping that it hadn't removed all of the aspen leaves. Spending the night near Lake City, I was at the Handies / Sunshine and Redcloud Trailhead in time to witness a splendid sunrise, the clouds lifting to expose the fresh snow on the surrounding peaks.

Getting to the Trailhead: From Lake City, drive south on Highway 149 for approximately 1.8 miles to the junction signed to Lake San Cristobal. Turn right at this junction onto County Road 3 (Alpine Loop Road) and drive past the lake, continuing for 12.4 miles (from Highway 149) to the ghost town of Sherman. Just before Sherman the road forks: take the right branch, signed to Cinnamon Pass, for 3.7 miles to the Handies / Sunshine and Redcloud Trailhead parking area. Note that later in the season the road is usually closed to vehicles near Sherman.

Statistics and Difficulty: The trail gains 3600 feet in 3.7 miles one way. While during the summer months this hike is nothing more than a pleasant high altitude walk on a mostly good trail, with snow expect to use an ice ax for the summit ridge and possibly snowshoes for the approach. Conditions on the summit ridge may at times dictate the use of crampons in addition to the ice ax. Remember that with snow the routefinding will be more complex. At this time of year the weather can be unpredictable, so be prepared.

USGS Quads: Redcloud Peak, CO; Handies Peak, CO.



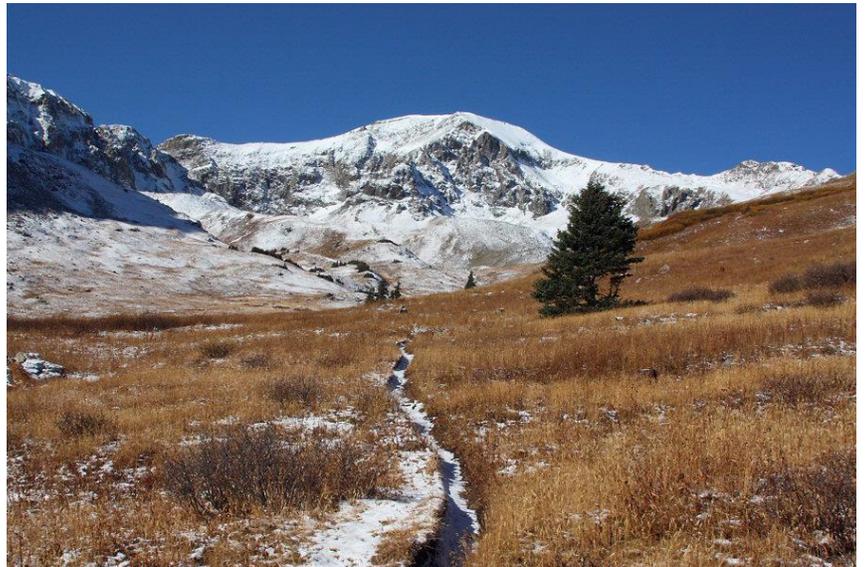
Sunrise at the Handies Trailhead-small.JPG

On the hike up Handies Peak (normally one of the easier Fourteeners to climb) the new snow certainly slowed me down a little, but the transformation of the landscape more than made up for that. I never saw the elusive cat (lynx or bobcat?) that had recently left an impression on the fresh snow, but the tracks alone were a treat to see.

The Handies Trail-small.JPG

Hike Description

The Grizzly Gulch Trail starts by the outhouses on the west side of the road. Follow the trail as it climbs southwest at a moderate grade through stands of conifer and aspen. After 1.6 miles the trail emerges into open meadows with the dramatic form of Handies directly ahead. Continue southwest as the trail crosses below Whitecross Mountain, aiming slightly right of Handies summit until reaching a trail sign at mile 2.4.



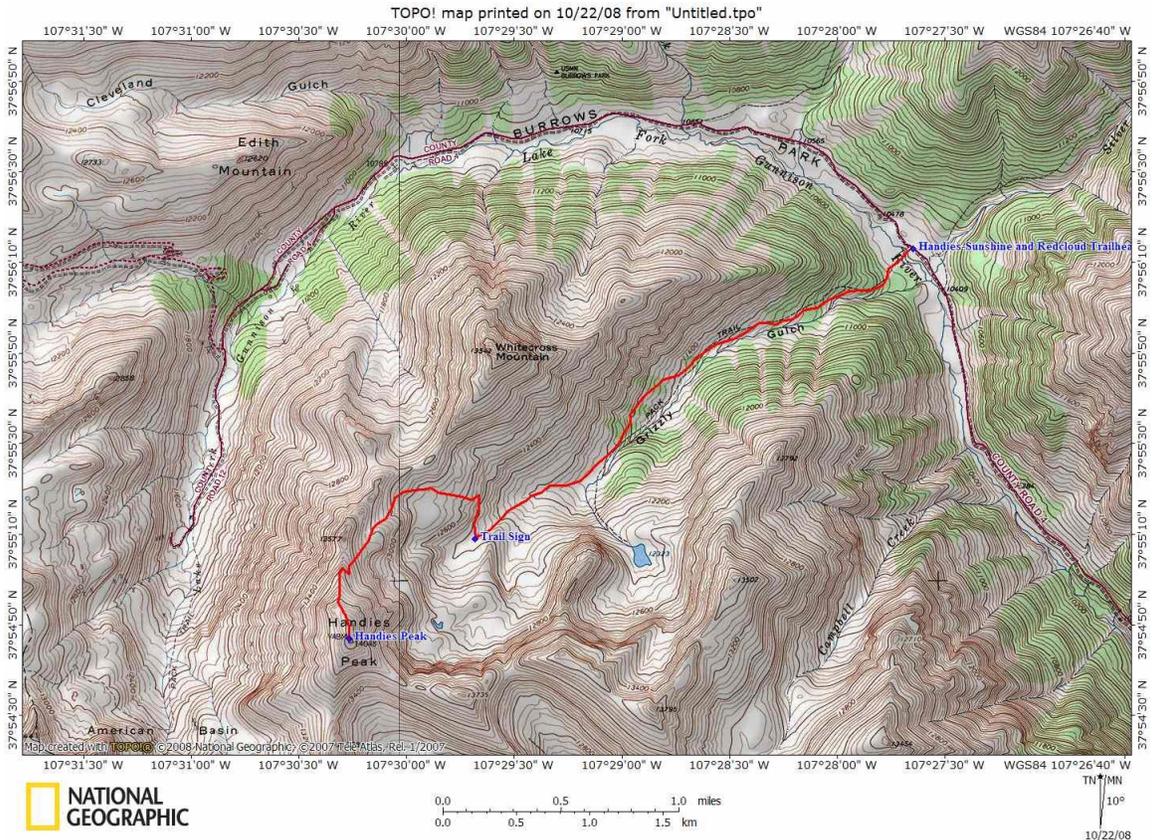
The sign, in a high shallow basin at 12,400 feet, indicates a hard right turn to the north. Follow the trail (if visible) north for a little over one tenth of a mile before turning west to reach an obvious high bench. The trail crosses the bench to reach a broad ramp that parallels Handies north ridge where it curves around to connect with the ridge coming off Whitecross Mountain. This ramp heads southwest as it climbs gently upward to join the north ridge 0.1 mile south of the point shown on the topographic map as Point 13577. Depending on the snow conditions it may be necessary to deviate from the trail to reach the ridge at a slightly different point.



Good views of the San Juan Mountains from high on Handies summit ridge small.jpg

Once on the windswept north ridge, choose a path up the ridge on steeper snow and frozen scree (and possibly some ice) to a false summit. From here it's a short walk to the top, possibly having to scramble up and over a small cornice that guards the very summit. If the weather is good spend a few minutes attempting to identify as many of the surrounding peaks as you can.

Carefully retrace your steps to descend.



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 Handies-Sunshine and Redcloud Trailhead: 37,56,13N / 107,27,39W, 10423 feet
 Trail Sign: ,37,55,9N / 107,29,41W, 12398 feet
 Handies Peak: 37,54,47N / 107,30,16W, 14015 feet

