

Hesperus Mountain

by Dave Cooper



Morning sun on Hesperus. The trail ascends the right hand ridge-small.jpg

The La Plata Range, a compact mountain range located northwest of Durango, is one of my favorites. The range offers challenging scrambling routes as well as moderate “walk-ups”. This week we explore probably the most popular peak in the area; Hesperus Mountain. At 13,232ft. Hesperus is the highest peak in the La Plata range. As you approach the mountain from the west, the mass of Hesperus dominates the view. The mountain is well protected by rough ridges on all but its west side. This west ridge provides a moderate way to climb the peak using un-maintained climber’s trails.

Getting to the Trailhead:

From the town of Mancos on U.S. 160 (approximately 20 miles west of Durango), turn north on Colorado 184. After 0.3 mile, turn right on Forest Service Road 561 (aka County Road 42) at the sign for Transfer Campground and the Sharkstooth Trailhead. Reach Transfer Campground at the 10-mile point. Stay on Forest Service Road 561 for 2 more miles, following the signs, until half a mile past the Aspen Ranger Station. Take a right turn onto Forest Service Road 350 (again, well signed). After 4 miles, the road forks again, the left fork being Forest Service Road 351 and the right fork Forest Service Road 350. Stay right; 2.5 miles further the road forks again. Take the right fork, signed to the Sharkstooth Trailhead, which you will reach in 1.5 miles. This last mile and a half may be a little rough for some passenger cars.

Hike Statistics: From the parking area to the summit of Hesperus Mountain you’ll gain 2450 feet in 2.4 miles.

Difficulty: Mostly off-trail hiking (sometimes following climbers’ trails) on talus and scree, with possibly a couple of short, steeper sections.

USGS Quad: La Plata, CO.

Hesperus and neighboring Centennial Peak are easily recognizable by their striking banded appearance while the peak between, named for Dwight Lavender (one of Colorado's early mountaineers), consists of needle-like rock spires. You may want to bag Centennial Peak while you're in the area, a relatively easy ascent from Sharkstooth Pass via its north ridge. Lavender Peak is significantly harder to climb and should only be attempted by experienced scramblers.

Hike Description

There are two ways to access the west ridge of Hesperus Mountain; both start at the Sharkstooth Trailhead and follow a trail southeast then west along the North Fork of the West Mancos River. The first option leaves the trail and heads directly up a shallow scree gully to reach the west ridge. The longer but less-steep route crosses a large rock glacier north of the west ridge and intersects the ridge further west at an elevation of 11,150 feet. Either of these routes works, though my preference is to use the first option, which I'll describe here. The map shows both options.

Two trails start at the trailhead parking area. Don't take the Sharkstooth Pass Trail that heads east, but instead take the trail heading initially southeast down towards the creek. Cross the North Fork of the West Mancos River at mile 0.7, where the trail cuts back to the west. Continue on the trail for two tenths of a mile further to a point where a small drainage crosses the trail at mile 0.9. Leave the trail here and head south, following a faint climber's trail marked with occasional cairns.



A view of the shallow gully leading to the west ridge-small.jpg

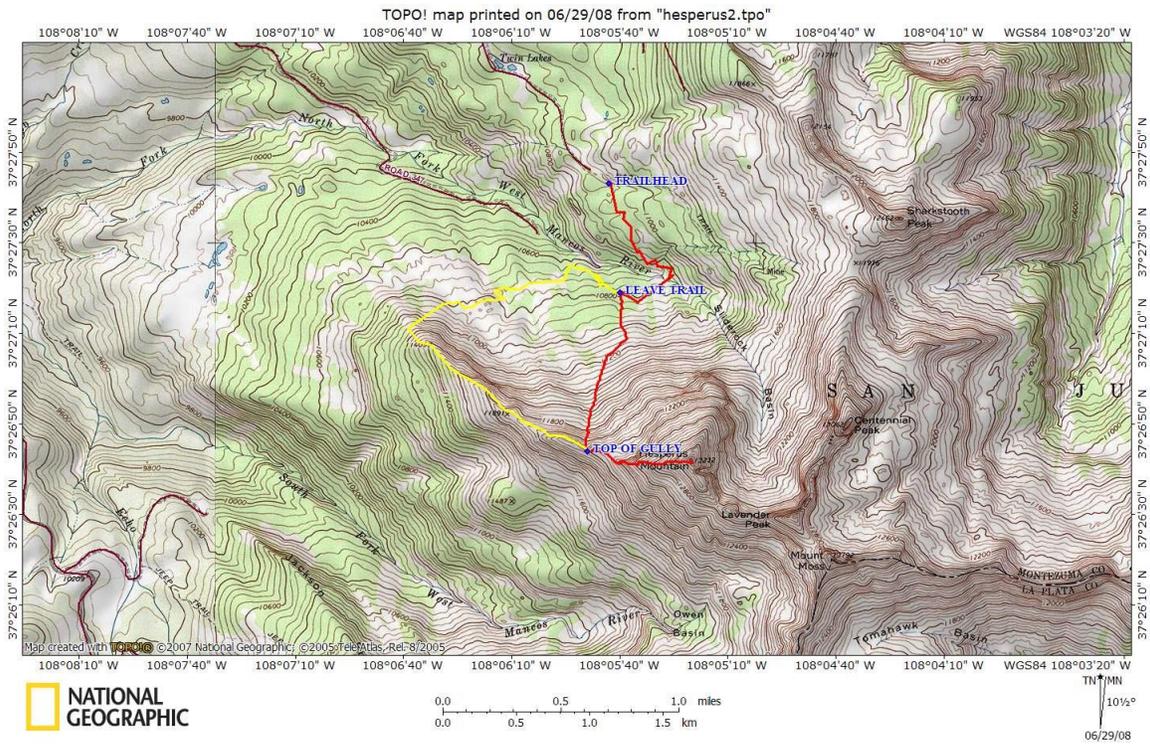
At treeline you'll have a good view of your objective, a shallow scree gully aimed straight up to the west

ridge. Rock hop to the start of the gully and follow it south as it climbs up to reach the west ridge of Hesperus at 12,170 feet at mile 1.8.



Heading up the west ridge of Hesperus-small.jpg

Turn east and follow the trail as it heads up. At 12,400 feet a steeper section can be climbed either on loose, gravelly trails just right of the ridge crest, or by staying more directly on the ridge and climbing some easy, Class 3 rock steps. Continue to the summit and enjoy the views.



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 TRAILHEAD: 37,27,43N / 108,5,43W, 10997 feet
 LEAVE TRAIL: 37,27,19N / 108,5,40W, 10807 feet
 TOP OF GULLY: 37,26,44N / 108,5,49W, 12165 feet

