

Highland Mary Lakes, Verde Lakes and Whitehead Mountain by Dave Cooper



At one of the upper Highland Mary Lakes.JPG

One of the joys of exploring new areas in our mountains is when we happen across an unexpected view of familiar peaks. This occurred recently on this week's hike, and the peaks were some of my favorites - the Grenadier Range of the San Juans.

Normally approached via a long backpack either from the Silverton-Durango train or from Molas Pass, the Grenadiers, notably the Three Trinities, Arrow and Vestal Peaks as well as a host of other equally rugged mountains, are among the most impressive summits in the state. Rearing skywards with smooth, curving lines, the east faces of these peaks form a stunning line as you approach from Elk Creek or view from Molas Pass. What I had failed to realize, however, was that there is an even better view of these peaks available from the area around Highland Mary Lakes and Whitehead Mountain: and it's totally unexpected. One moment you're walking along on rolling tundra enjoying the gentle terrain surrounding the host of scenic lakes, then in an instant your breath is taken away as the line of quartzite peaks appear above the horizon. Even though you're separated from the peaks by two drainages, they appear close enough to touch. And all within a relatively short day hike.

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on Highway 550 to the town of Silverton. Turn onto Silverton's main street (County Road 2) and drive northeast through the town for 0.9 miles to a junction. Stay right on County Road 2 and reach the ghost town of Howardsville 5.1 miles from US550.

In Howardsville, turn right on County Road 4 and drive 4.2 miles to the trailhead, passing turnoffs to Stony Pass and other spur roads.

Measuring from the intersection of CR2 and CR4, the Stony Pass turnoff is at mile 1.8. Stay right here, even though the sign says dead end. At mile 3.6, stay right as the road drops down to the valley floor, then continues left. At mile 4.6 there is another junction, with a parking area where passenger cars may want to stop. The left fork drops down a small hill before crossing a stream, which can be a challenge in high water. Shortly beyond the stream crossing is the trailhead parking area.

GPS coordinates for the trailhead (NAD83): 37°46'51"N, 107°34'48"W, 10,827 feet

Statistics: The complete hike described has an elevation gain of 2,570 feet in a round trip distance of 9 miles. The hike to the Highland Mary Lakes gains 1360 feet in 1.8 miles one way. The trail from Highland Mary Lakes directly to the Verde Lakes gains about 600 feet and loses 200 feet in 1 mile one way.

Difficulty: Moderate on-trail hiking to the lakes. Moderate hiking, mainly off-trail, to Whitehead Peak.

USGS Quad: Howardsville, CO; and optionally, Storm King Peak, CO.

So close you could touch them - Arrow and Vestal Peaks-small.jpg



The possibilities for hikes in this area are boundless. Hike the trail to the Highland Mary Lakes; continue on to the even more scenic Verde Lakes; or as we did, combine both of these with an easy peak - Whitehead Peak (13,259 feet).

Hike Description

I'll describe the loop that we took. If you're uncomfortable following the faint and sometimes non-existent trails cross-country to Whitehead Mountain, consider skipping that and just visiting the lakes.

From the trailhead, hike south as the trail climbs along the east bank of the stream. At mile 0.3 a trail takes off to the left, but we stay straight. Pass the Weminuche Wilderness Boundary at mile 0.5 and continue to climb steadily. Shortly after trending to the west then back to the south, the trail crosses a boulder-strewn section. At least two cairned trails guide you through this section, before re-combining on the east side of the stream. You're almost at the first of the Highland Mary Lakes (mile 1.7), a small lake with an island.



The first of the of the Highland Mary Lakes

Continue a short distance on to the next, larger lake, and follow the trail as it skirts the east side of the lake. A third, and even larger lake, lies a short distance to the east, and is worth a short detour to explore.

If climbing Whitehead Peak, head west from the south end of the second lake. We were hoping to find a trail shown on the map, but this trail is obviously little used and quite faint, so much of the time we were using map and compass to navigate. The trail, such as it is, climbs up a series of steps on the tundra, passing several small lakes before flattening out at around 12,700 feet (mile 3.4). Look to your left in this section for your first view of the Grenadiers. Continue west, aiming for a minor ridge descending to the east from the southern end of the major ridge ahead. Look for a climbers trail ascending this ridge, and climb steeply to a point just north of the summit, then cut back to your left (south) to reach the high point, Whitehead Peak (13,259).



Whitehead Mountain panorama. Whitehead is the point at the far left of the ridge.jpg

Great views of the Grenadier and Needles Ranges on the slopes of Whitehead Mountain-small.jpg

The views from the summit are spectacular, so this makes a fine lunch spot if the weather cooperates.

Descend from Whitehead the same way you climbed it, until you reach the base of the minor ridge. At around 12,800 feet, the trail forks. Follow the right hand trail as best you can, over flat tundra due east. The trail avoids a cliffy area as it descends towards the Verde Lakes. Sometimes you aren't sure if you're on a man-made trail or just following game trails, so keep map and compass (and perhaps your GPS), handy. A short distance before reaching the Verde Lakes a series of wooden posts appear, paralleling the trail. Reach the Verde Lakes at mile 5.8.



Looking down on the Verde Lakes-small.jpg

These lakes are even more scenic than the Highland Mary Lakes, and are a must-see even if you decide to skip Whitehead Peak.

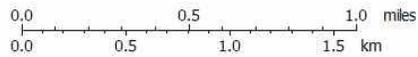
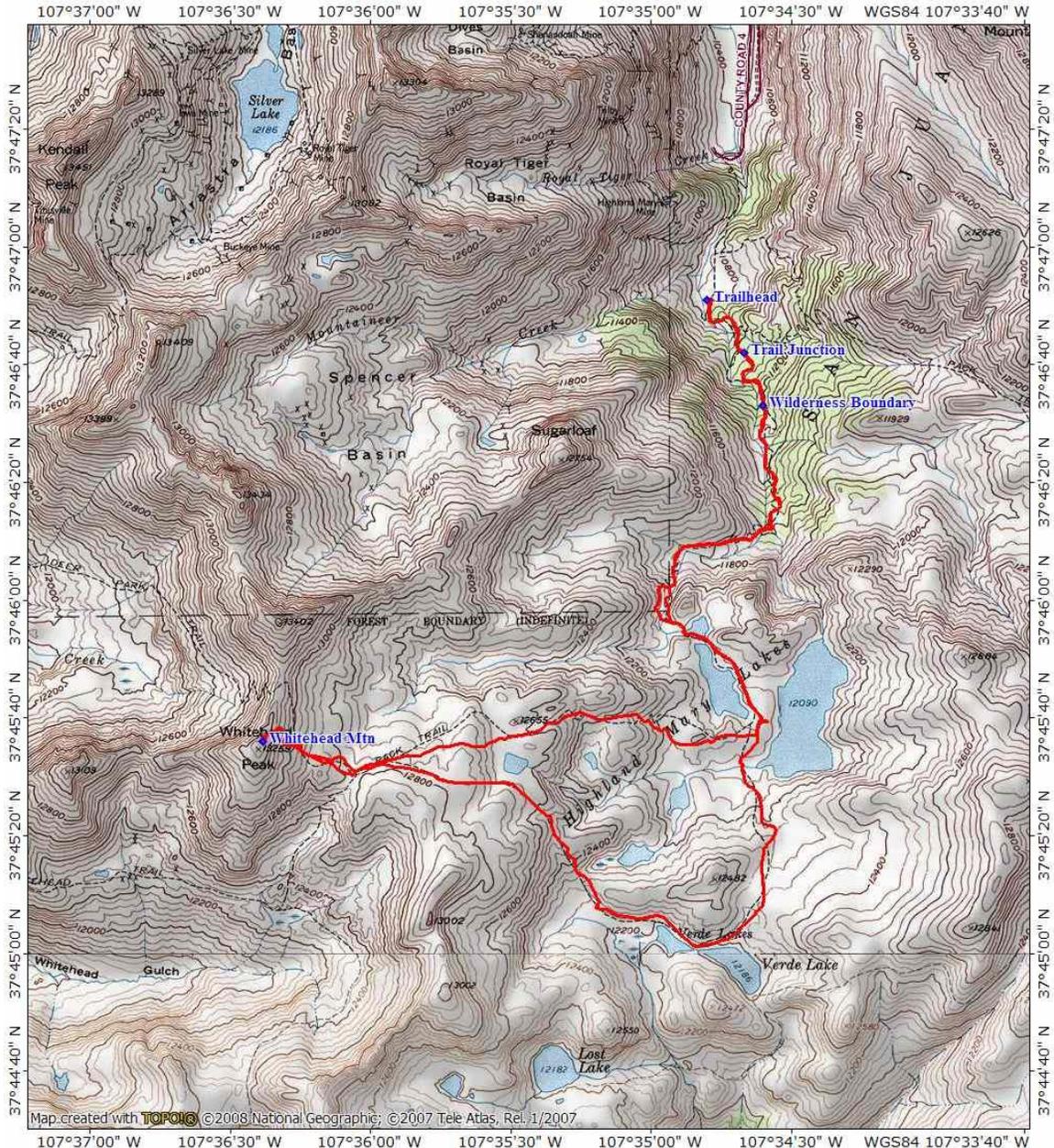


The summits of the Grenadiers loom over the waters of the Verde Lakes-small.jpg

To complete the loop back to Highland Mary Lakes, continue on the trail as it follows the northern margin of the Verde Lakes, then climbs north away from the lake. The trail soon fades into the tundra, but the wooden posts continue. When the wooden posts turn right (east) along a small ridge, continue north, picking up more trail markers. At this point you can see your objective, the Highland Mary Lakes, reached at mile 6.8. Once at the lakes, regain your ascent trail and continue back to the trailhead, reached at mile 9.0.



TOPO! map printed on 07/19/10 from "whitehead2.tpo"



07/19/10

GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 Trailhead, 37,46,51, -107,34,48, 10827 feet
 Trail Junction, 37,46,42, -107,34,40, 11089 feet
 Wilderness Boundary, 37,46,33, -107,34,36, 11253 feet
 Whitehead Mtn, 37,45,36, -107,36,23, 13246 feet

