

Hike of the Week - Crater Lake

by Dave Cooper

Crater Lake and North Twilight Peak offer an accessible Weminuche Wilderness experience

We usually associate the Weminuche Wilderness of the San Juan mountains with long backpacks or a train ride to gain access to some of the most spectacular scenery in our State. Here we explore a small section of the Wilderness area close to the Million Dollar Highway.

Getting to the Trailhead: From Silverton, take US550 south for 6.4 miles to the summit of Molas Pass. Continue south for a further 0.9 miles to the Andrews Lake road. Turn left and follow the paved road for 0.7 miles to a parking area at Andrews Lake.

Hike Statistics:

Trailhead to Crater Lake: 1650 feet total elevation in 10.2 miles round trip
Trailhead to N. Twilight Peak: 3400 feet total elevation gain in 12.8 miles round trip.

USGS Quad: Snowdon Peak, CO

The group of peaks known as the West Needles Mountains, added to the Weminuche Wilderness by Congress in 1993, are separated from their better-known neighbors by the chasm of the Animas River Valley. The views of the Grenadier and Needles ranges seen from North Twilight Peak are unsurpassed.



Spectacular views of the Needle Mountains

Hike Description

From the trailhead by Andrews Lake, follow the excellent trail for 5.1 miles as it winds its way to Crater Lake, with a few ups and downs along the way. Look for excellent views of Engineer Mountain as you begin the hike. As the trail nears Crater Lake it will take you through heavily forested areas before the vistas open up again.

The area by Crater Lake, nestled under the mass of North Twilight Peak (13,075 feet), makes a fine lunch spot and is the turnaround point for most hikers. However, a strenuous scramble up the north-east shoulder and east ridge of North Twilight Peak provides unique views of the San Juans.

Crater Lake, with north Twilight Peak beyond. The route gains the east ridge via the shoulder on the left side of photo



To gain the north-east shoulder of the peak, it's best to head around the left side of the lake, initially following a faint trail. Once on the broad shoulder, leave the trail and head south-west. As the shoulder narrows, a climbers trail becomes quite distinct. Follow this trail as it climbs just left of the ridge line. A grassy gully, at waypoint "START OF GRASSY GULLY" intersects the east ridge, which may appear a little intimidating at first, but which really isn't too difficult, the scrambling never exceeding class 3.



Figure 1 IMGP3598_1-the east ridge of N. Twilight Pk.-compressed

This long ridge takes some time to negotiate, so make sure the clouds aren't

building. The rule of thumb is to be off the peaks and ridges by noon.

A climbers trail will usually provide the easiest path along the ridge. Follow the ridge until reaching waypoint “CROSS GULLY”. Follow the trail as it descends for 20 feet on the ridge’s right side and crosses a loose gully. At waypoint “LEDGE”, a narrow ledge on the right side of the ridge bypasses a tricky class 4 downclimb. The ledge does have some exposure. From here the summit is a walk. Enjoy the views!

Descend by reversing the route, being careful to choose the correct grassy gully to leave the east ridge. A trail indicates that several hikers have dropped too far down the ridge before leaving it. This would put you into a loose bowling alley and is best avoided.



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)

TH: 37,43,40 N / 107,42,40 W, 10747 feet
START OF GRASSY GULLY: 37,40,6N / 107,43,8W, 12559 feet
CROSS GULLY: 37,40,4N / 107,43,23W, 12836 feet
LEDGE, 37,40,5, -107,43,29W, 13015 feet

