

## James Peak (13,294 feet)

by Dave Cooper

As you drive west on I-70 out of Denver, the first view of the Front Range Mountains can take your breath away. Dominating this view is James Peak, a favorite of Front Range residents.

Although there are several ways to approach James Peak, for year-round access the St. Mary's Glacier Trail is my preferred starting point.

James Peak could be called "a peak for all seasons", since there are opportunities for every kind of activity in the area.

During the summer months the area around St. Mary's Glacier and Lake are popular spots for family outings, and many will walk up the glacier to get a view of the peak. The glacier is always a favorite spot for aspiring mountaineers to practice their snow skills, but remember that without proper equipment and instruction the glacier can be hazardous, and rescues are common when unprepared visitors wander onto the steeper parts of the glacier.

During the winter, spring and even summer months you are likely to encounter skiers and snowboarders yo-yoing the glacier, but many fewer venture across the flats above the glacier and onto the slopes of James Peak. Early May usually provides the most reliable skiing conditions on the peak, and some years we have been able to enjoy an uninterrupted ski down from the peak to St. Mary's Lake, almost 3000 feet of vertical!

In the summer and autumn the standard route becomes a straightforward trail hike.

We enjoyed a fine snowshoe outing on this peak recently, described here.

**Getting to the Trailhead:** Take the Fall River Road Exit (Exit 238) from I-70, approximately 1.2 miles west of Idaho Springs. Drive generally northwest on Fall River Road for 9.1 miles to a small parking area on your left, just past the signed start to the Saint Mary's Glacier Trail (Waypoint "PARKING"). The large parking area immediately before the trailhead is no longer available for public parking. Also, if you park along the road you are likely to be ticketed

**Hike Statistics:** From the parking area to the summit of James Peak (13,294 feet): 2900 feet of total elevation gain in 3.6 miles one way.

**Difficulty:** Snowshoes or skis and climbing skins required until the snow recedes far enough to allow you to bypass it, usually sometime in late June. On this route avalanche slopes can generally be avoided. Remember that thunderstorm season is now here - you're above treeline for a long time on this hike.

While the normal route up James Peak stays on moderate slopes, the east face of the peak offers some of the finest steep snow climbs in Colorado. These couloirs (such as "Shooting Star" and "Superstar") are serious undertakings and require expert knowledge in order to evaluate the objective hazards of avalanche potential and rockfall. In most years the preferred months for climbing these routes are June or July. For more information on James Peak's technical routes and more, see "Colorado's Indian Peaks Wilderness Area: Classic Hikes & Climbs" by Gerry Roach (Fulcrum Publishing).



*James Peak with approaching storm*

## **Hike Description**

From the parking area (Waypoint "PARKING AREA"), walk back 200 yards down the road to the start of the old jeep road signed to Saint Mary's Glacier. The trail heads up the road taking the left fork (uphill) after 200 yards, and again taking the left fork in a further 150 yards. Continue on the trail to Saint Mary's Lake, a total of 0.6 miles from the car.



*Saint Mary's Lake*

The glacier starts at the far end of the lake. Head for the righthand margin of the glacier where the slopes are gentlest and walk northwest up the glacier, usually on firm snow at this time of the year.

*Heading up the gentle right edge of Saint Mary's Glacier*

From the upper reaches of the glacier you will have your first view of James Peak. Depending on the snow cover, you may find a trail, periodically marked by giant cairns, leading across the flats towards James Peak.



*James Peak, seen from high on Saint Mary's Glacier. "Superstar" is the snow couloir to the right of the summit.*



If you look closely at the rugged face on the peak's right side, you can see the top of "Superstar", guarded at the very top by an impressive cornice that usually stays for a long time.



Cross the flats, aiming for the broad snow slope to the left of the prominent ridge, and climb this broad slope as it gradually curves around to the north before depositing you on the southeast ridge, shortly before the summit.

See if you can identify some of the distant peaks as you enjoy lunch on the summit.

To descend, reverse your route, being careful to aim for the correct valley at the head of Saint Mary's Glacier. More than one group, especially in poor visibility, has ended up in the wrong drainage on the way down! A good landmark to aim for is a large rock outcrop just above the glacier.

*Snowshoeing up the final slopes to James summit*

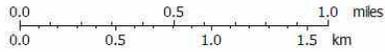
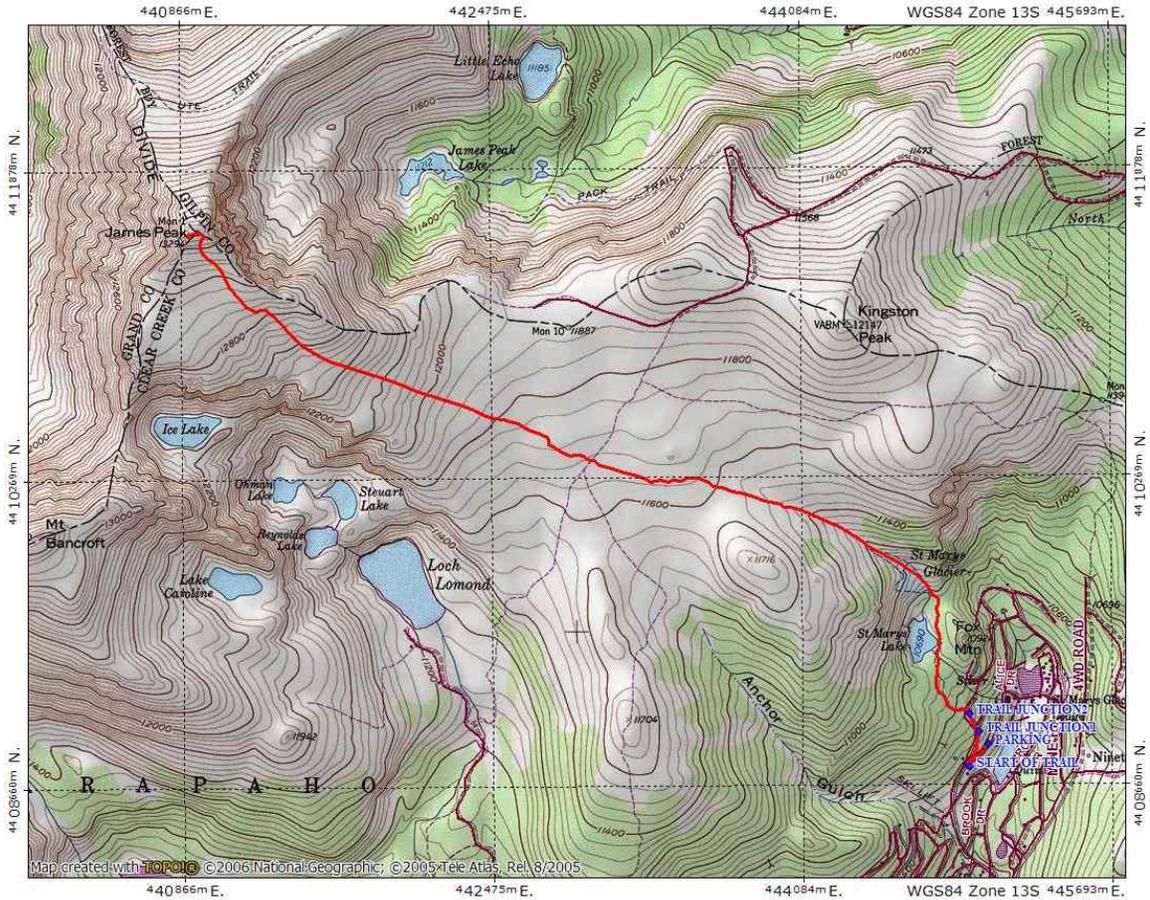


*The top of the "Shooting Star" couloir, which exits almost at the summit of James Peak*

*Skier on Saint Mary's Glacier*



TOPO! map printed on 05/25/06 from "Untitled3.tpo"



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)  
 PARKING: 39,49,41N / 105,38,32W, 10417 feet  
 START OF TRAIL: 39,49,37N / 105,38,36W, 10423 feet  
 TRAIL JUNCTION1: 39,49,43N / 105,38,34W, 10472 feet  
 TRAIL JUNCTION2: 39,49,46N / 105,38,36,10495 feet

