

Loch Vale - Rocky Mountain National Park – Easy Snowshoe / Hike

by Dave Cooper

Rocky Mountain National Park is a wild place in the winter. The Jet Stream seems to be permanently “parked” over this area, so expect high winds and seriously cold weather. I’ve been blown off more peaks and ice-climbs here during the winter months than anywhere else in Colorado!

That having been said, this location and season have provided some of my most memorable outdoor experiences. The impressive scenery of the park takes on an austere beauty when the peaks assume a mantle of snow and ice and the lakes become frozen over. Wintering herds of elk congregate in the meadows, searching for food under the snow drifts.

The excellent trail systems allow year-round access into the heart of this amazing place - a few miles in and you’re in another world .

You may wonder why I described this outing as a snowshoe / hike, and not as a cross country ski trip. Certainly, many people ski these trails – but conditions are rarely very good on this side of the Park. Often the trail is so well packed that your snowshoes will stay on your back. There are better places to ski. Having said that, there have been occasions when we have left our snowshoes at the trailhead and later regretted the decision as we wallow in waist-deep snow!

Getting to the Trailhead:

From Estes Park, take US HWY 36 and follow signs to Rocky Mountain National Park. Shortly after passing the Entrance Station turn left onto the road signed to Bear Lake and drive 8.3 miles on the sometimes icy Bear Lake Road to the Glacier Gorge Parking area and Trailhead.

Hike Statistics:

Trailhead to The Loch: Total elevation gain of 1200 feet in 5.4 miles round trip.

Difficulty: Easy snowshoe / hike.

USGS Quad: McHenrys Peak, CO



Winter coats the high peaks of the Park with a mantle of snow and ice

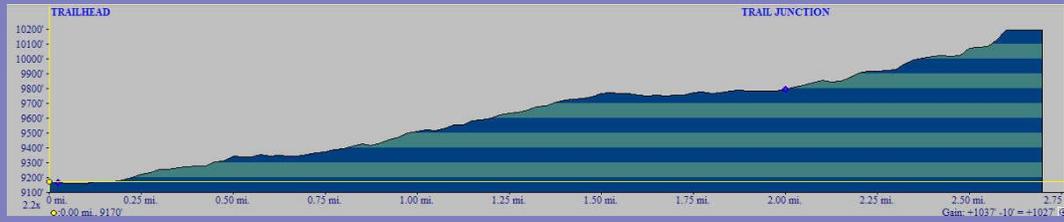
Hike Description

From the parking area follow the signs to Loch Vale. Pass two trail junctions in the first half mile, cross a series of footbridges and continue on to Alberta Falls. Don't get too close to the edge as you view the icy cascade! Continue on past the North Longs Peak trail junction and after two miles reach the trail junction for Glacier Gorge. Continue to follow the signs to Loch Vale, shortly passing another trail junction for Lake Haiyaha. From here the trail climbs above the drainage on its right side, reaching a series of switchbacks to avoid a cliffband. As you head up the switchbacks, look over to the opposite side of the drainage to several curtains of ice that form reliably every year. On winter weekends there are likely to be ice-climbers on these vertical walls. Continue up to The Loch, where on a clear day there are spectacular views of the surrounding peaks, though this week the high winds in the area created limited visibility. Be careful about stepping onto the frozen surface of the lake.

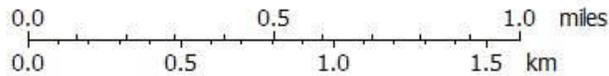
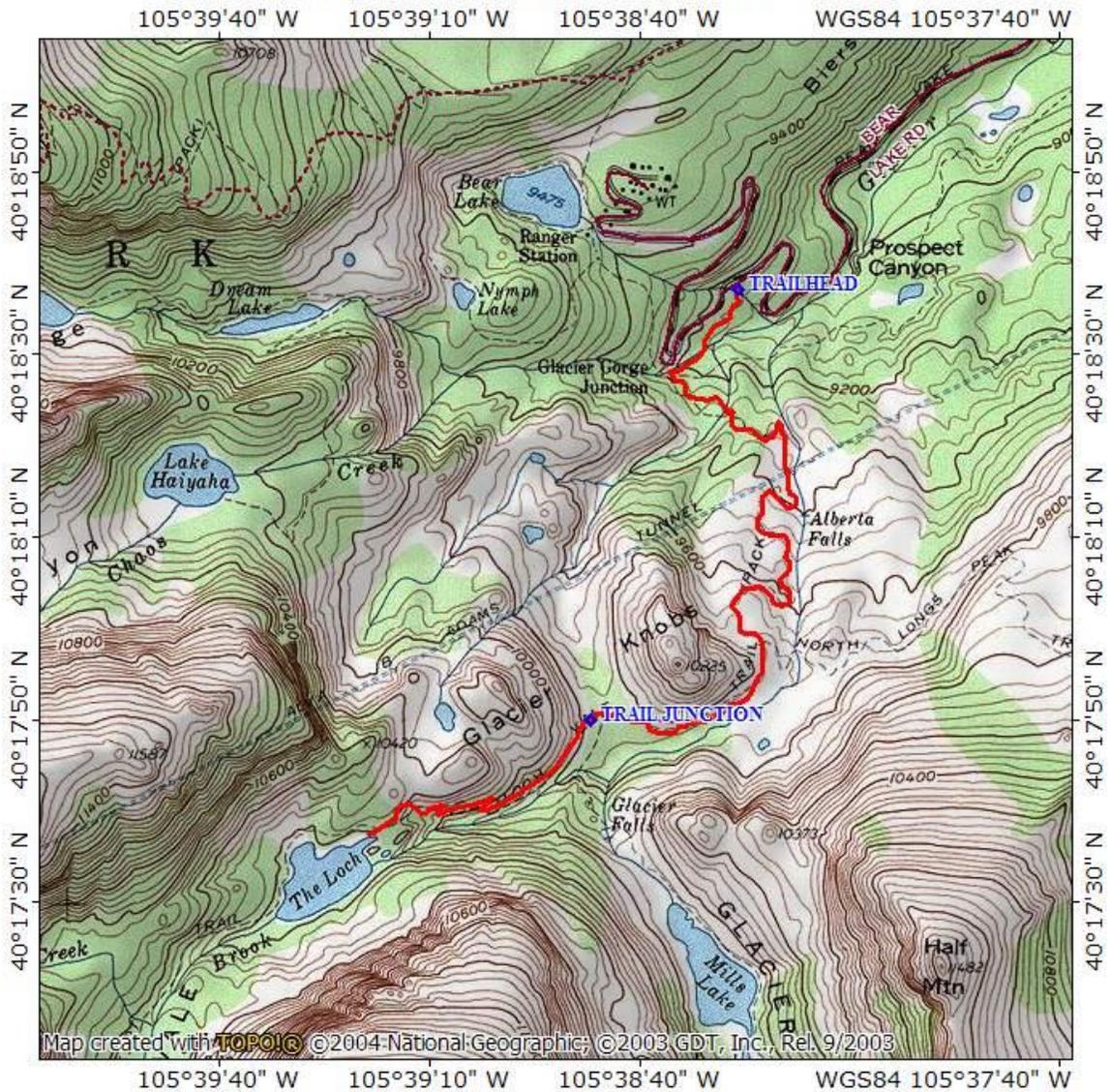


Limited visibility and high winds at The Loch

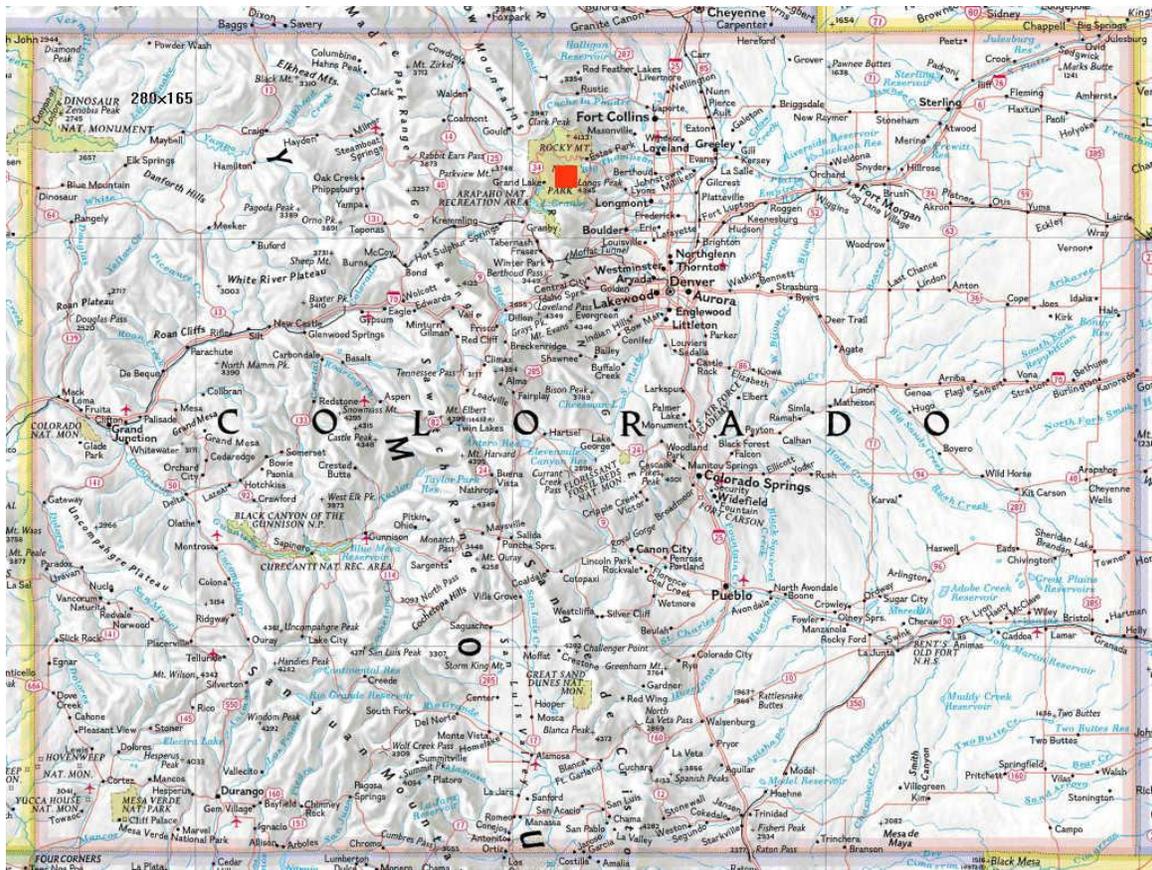
GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 TRAILHEAD: 40,18,37N / 105,38,26W, 9174 feet
 TRAIL JUNCTION: 40,17,50N / 105,38,47W, 9790 feet



TOPO! map printed on 11/18/05 from "The Loch.tpo"



TN MN
 10 1/2
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Colorado locator map