

McCullough Gulch by Dave Cooper

Deeply inset between the east ridges of Quandary and Pacific Peaks, McCullough Gulch offers quick access to some spectacular scenery. In particular the north side of Quandary is the peak's "wild side", with technical and scrambling routes available, while the east ridge of Pacific offers one of the nicest knife-edge ridges in the area.



The wild side of Quandary Peak-small.jpg

Justifiably popular with skiers and snowshoers, for much of the winter most people prefer to stay in the lower part of the drainage. Good touring is available from either of the two trailheads that access McCullough Gulch.

As spring arrives, however, it is worth venturing a little higher into the valley to see some truly spectacular alpine scenery. The upper basin holds snow into June.

Just below an unnamed lake at an elevation of 11,919 feet is a steep rocky section that is no problem in summer (there is a good trail) but can be tricky to safely negotiate in winter. As the snow consolidates in the spring it becomes reasonable to explore beyond this point.

Getting to the Trailhead: The McCullough Gulch trailhead is located at an unsigned road on the north side of Highway 9, 4.1 miles north of Hoosier Pass or 5.5 miles south of the Boreas Pass Road junction at the south end of Breckenridge.

Turn onto the unsigned road and drive 50 yards to the plowed parking area.

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to the unnamed lake at 11,919 feet: 1630 feet of elevation gain in 3.5 miles one way.

Difficulty: A moderate ski or snowshoe with a short section of the route exposed to avalanche hazard.

USGS Quad: Breckenridge, CO

A bit of trivia: McCullough Gulch is the location of what is likely the highest lake in Colorado. At 13,420 feet Pacific Tarn may be the highest in the US. To read more on the topic, go to <http://www.highestlake.com/index.html>.

I mentioned that there are two trailheads. The most popular is the Quandary Peak Trailhead on Blue Lakes Road. This road swings around the end of Quandary's east ridge before dropping into McCullough Gulch. Being higher, this approach has less elevation gain than from the McCullough Gulch Trailhead, though as

Dave Muller points out in his new guidebook “Colorado’s Quiet Winter Trails” (CMC Press), you shouldn’t meet snowmobiles on the lower trail. That’s the one I’ll describe this week.

Trail Description

From the McCullough Gulch trailhead head west through the trees and look for a spot to cross to the north side of the creek where you pick up an old road. There will usually be a track to follow to this point. Continue west on the road, passing an old cabin after three quarters of a mile and continuing on to the junction with County Road 851 in a clearing at mile 1.2.



Heading into McCullough Gulch-small.jpg

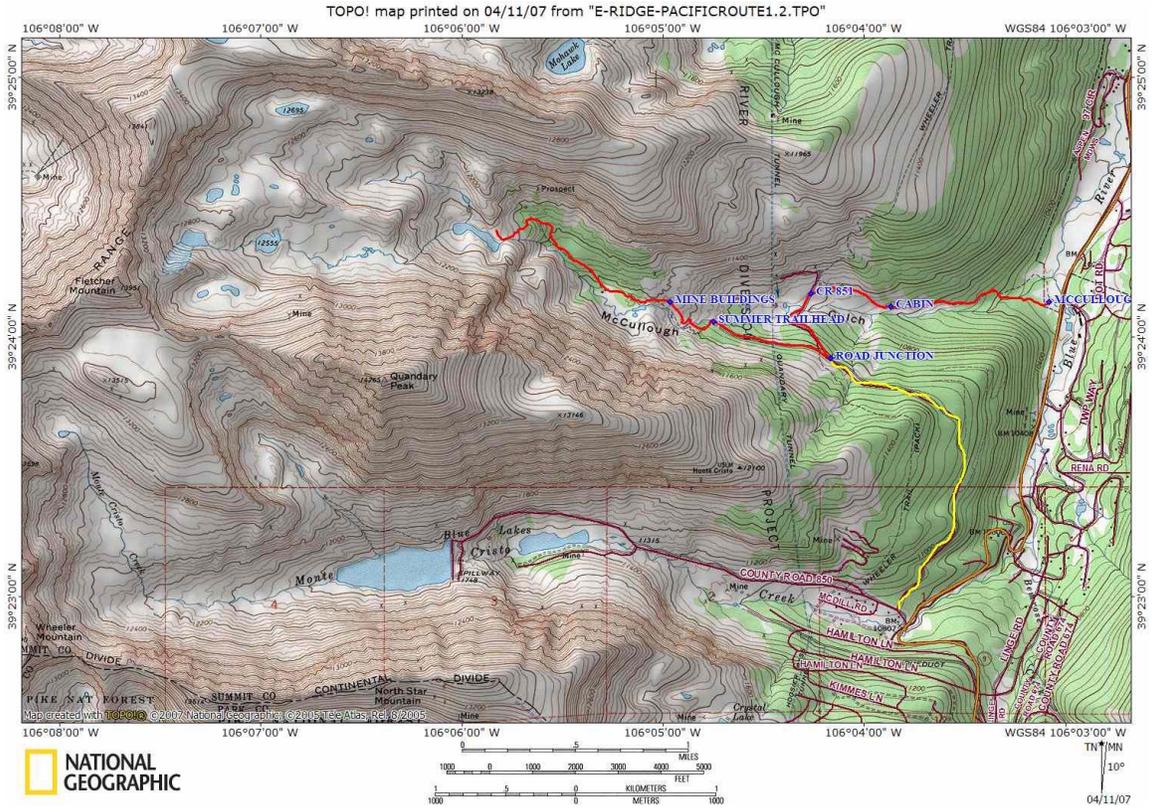
Turn left (south) and follow CR851 as it crosses the creek and heads uphill. At mile 1.6 there is a road junction. Turn right (west) and take the road to the summer trailhead at mile 2.2. Immediately past the gate closure the road turns left and heads uphill. At mile 2.5 you’ll pass some mine buildings on your left. The signs here leave you in no doubt that you should stay away from the buildings.

Shortly after passing the buildings the trail becomes more difficult to follow, but generally stays in the trees on the north side of the drainage and continues to head west. After 3.3 miles the summer trail switchbacks up the steep rocky area directly below the unnamed lake at 11,919 feet. Whether on skis or snowshoes it is necessary to bypass this area to the north, using a small gully. There is definitely some avalanche potential here, so assess conditions before continuing up the gully. Exit left as soon as possible and head up gentle slopes to the lake at mile 3.5. You are now directly below Quandary’s north ridge.

Cairns lead up from here, but the lake makes a good spot for lunch before you head down.

A quick lunch break-small.jpg





Note: Yellow track indicates alternate approach.

