

Mill Creek Ski Touring
by Dave Cooper



Dramatic cliffs tower over Mill Creek-small.jpg

Mill Creek, north of the town of Gunnison, offers some excellent ski touring in a very scenic area. The upper valley in particular is dominated by sheer, colorful cliffs which line both sides of the valley. The rock has been weathered into improbable-looking spires. These rock formations, in combination with the aspen-covered slopes below, also make this a popular destination for photographers in the fall.

Much of the skiing is along roads, sometimes groomed by the Gunnison Nordic Club, a non-profit organization which typically sets 40-45 kilometers of groomed tracks for free public use in several locations close to Gunnison. (For more information, go to <http://gunnisonnordic.net/gunnison-nordic>).

We found excellent skiing on both groomed and skier-set trails in classic touring terrain. Whether you prefer to tour one of several possible loop routes, or explore further up-valley, you should enjoy a fun day in this area.

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on Highway 50 to the town of Gunnison. Turn north onto Main Street (Highway 135), and drive north for 3.5 miles. Turn left at an intersection onto County Road 730 (Ohio Creek Road). Drive north on CR730 for 9 miles to an intersection with the Mill Creek Road (County Road 727) on your left. Turn west (left) and drive 3 miles on this snowy road to a large parking area, a total of 15.5 miles from Highway 50.

Statistics: The route described here gains and loses a total of 1090 feet in 8.5 miles round trip.

Difficulty: The main loop is suitable for all ability levels, but the Little Mill Creek Loop extension, when skied in the direction we took, requires strong downhill skills. Skiing this loop in the reverse direction would be best for those with intermediate downhill skills.

USGS Quad: Squirrel Creek, CO. A trail map may be available at the trailhead, but I'd recommend downloading a map from: <http://gunnisonnordic.net>.



Trail Description

There are many variations possible, but I'll describe the route we took.

Starting up the groomed Mill Creek Road-small.jpg

From the parking area, pass the closed gate and stay right at the road junction immediately beyond the gate. Follow the road (possibly groomed) as it heads west into Mill Creek. At mile 1.2, at the beginning of a clearing, a road sign indicates that County Road 727 turns left (south). Head south as the road climbs steeply up out of the valley bottom and back into the trees. At mile 1.4 the road makes a hairpin turn to the left at the Eilebrecht Ditch (not signed). For a shorter day, continue on the road as it heads back to the east. For those wanting to explore further up the valley, leave the road and continue west along

the ditch road, unmarked except for a trail-use sign. We found skier-set tracks along this section of the trail. The ditch road is quite flat except for one short, steep hill, which provides a bit of excitement on the return trip. Ski the ditch west until it finally drops into the bottom of the drainage, continuing along, passing stands of aspen and excellent views of the cliffs bordering the drainage. The rock formations are quite impressive - towering pinnacles and vertical walls reminiscent of the nearby "Castles" formation that often form the backdrop to fall foliage photos taken from Ohio Pass.

The Castles, seen from the vicinity of Ohio Pass-small.jpg (archival photo)

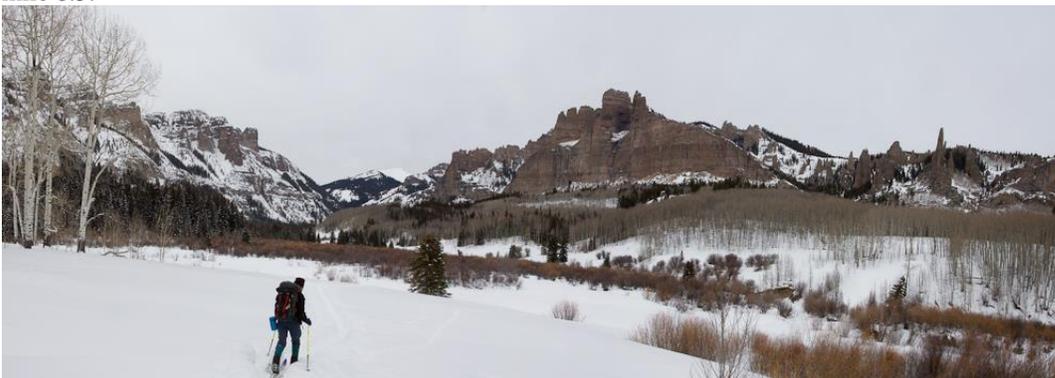
At mile 2.7 the tracks ended in dense willows, a sign that it was time to turn around.



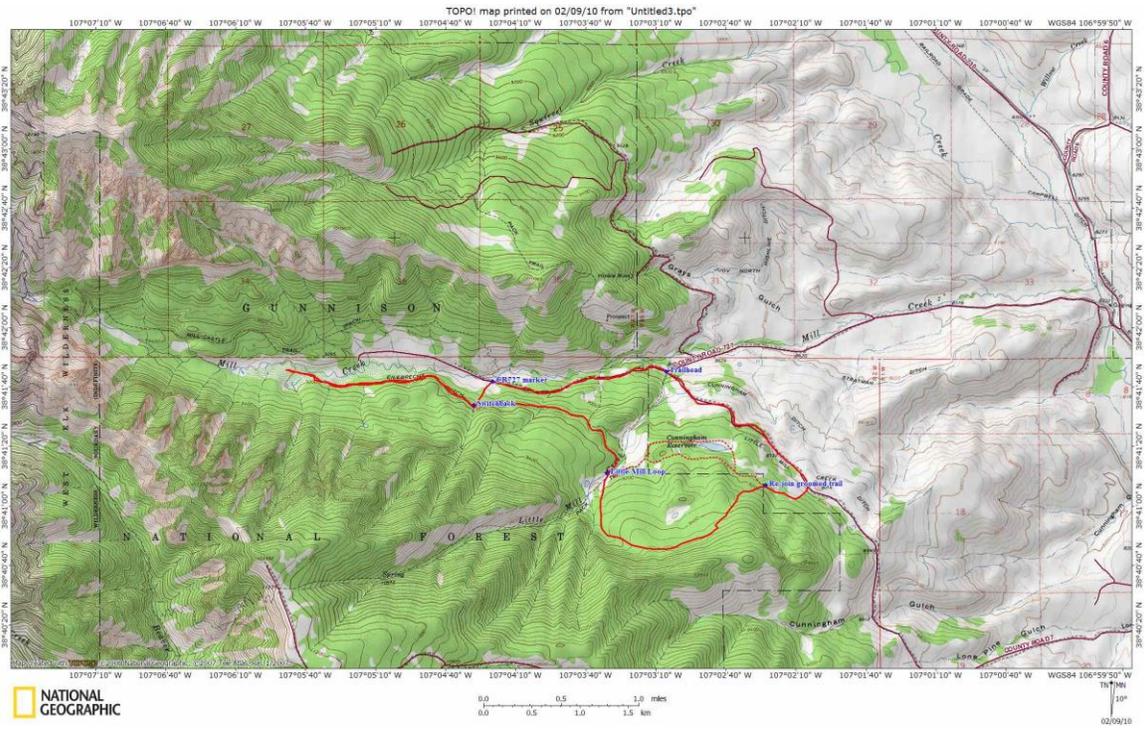
Cliffs composed of the same rock as the nearby -Castles--small.jpg

Retrace your tracks to the road, reaching it at mile 4.1, and either drop back down the road the way you came, or continue on the road as it heads east along the continuation of the ditch.

The road curves to the south to cross Little Mill Creek at mile 5.3. Either continue on the road towards Cunningham Reservoir, or do as we did and take the Little Mill Creek loop trail, which climbs south then east before descending steeply back towards the main groomed loop, rejoining the main loop after a thrilling and challenging descent at mile 7.0. Continue east on the groomed road to a junction at mile 7.3. Turn left and cruise the rest of the way as the road heads northwest, reaching the starting point of the tour at mile 8.5.



Mill Creek Panorama-2.jpg



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 Trailhead, 38,41,45, -107,3,6,8739, 02/05/2010, 12:40:08,
 Switchback, 38,41,34, -107,4,28,9167, 02/05/2010, 12:48:41,
 Little Mill Loop, 38,41,11, -107,3,31,9155, 02/05/2010, 12:49:02,
 Re-join groomed trail, 38,41,7, -107,2,23,9166, 02/05/2010, 12:50:30,
 CR727 marker, 38,41,42, -107,4,20,9003, 02/05/2010, 13:15:13,

