

Mount Columbia (14,073 feet) – East Ridge – Winter/Spring Mountaineering by Dave Cooper

One way to make some of Colorado's "easier" "Fourteeners" more interesting (and challenging) is to climb them in winter or spring conditions. Mount Columbia is a good candidate for this, via its long east ridge. Quite visible from the vicinity of Buena Vista, the east ridge provides reasonable winter access to Columbia's summit, albeit in a very long day. So, if you're itching to climb a "fourteener" in winter or spring conditions, and if you're up for a long, strenuous day on a route with no technical difficulties, this climb may be for you.



Leaving the shelter of the trees on a stormy day

Since the snow cover above treeline is unpredictable, snowshoes are a better option than skis for this outing. Also, since there is a strong possibility that you'll spend some time bushwhacking up through tight trees, skis may end up being a liability!

Getting to the Trailhead: A four-wheel drive vehicle is required to reach the trailhead.

From the traffic light in Buena Vista (Cottonwood Pass Road junction), drive north on US Highway 24 for 2.8 miles to the intersection with County Road (CR) 384. Drive west (left) on CR384 for 1.3 miles to a T-junction. Turn north (right) and drive 1.5 miles on CR361. Turn west (left) on CR368 and drive 1.2 miles to another intersection. Turn left on CR368A and drive 0.2 miles on the graded road to an intersection with a Forest Service road to the right. Take this snow-covered road, marked Jeep Trail on the topo. 0.8 miles to a parking area. Beyond this point the road becomes steeper and difficult to drive in the snow.

While in summer the route should be quite obvious, with the trail covered in many feet of snow, plus a good chance that nobody else has provided a track to follow, you'll need strong route-finding skills to reach treeline. Above that, routefinding can be either easy or almost impossible, depending on weather conditions. I recommend

taking a GPS along on this trip, allowing you to retrace your steps if you encounter white-out conditions. Above treeline your snowshoe tracks can be obliterated in minutes. Of course with good weather, nothing more than solid map and compass skills are required.

Hike Statistics:

Trailhead to the summit of Mount Columbia: 5200 feet of total elevation gain in 4.7 miles (one way).

Difficulty: A long, winter mountaineering outing on a gentle ridge – much of it above treeline and exposed to the elements. Snowshoes required.

USGS Quad: Mount Harvard, CO

I probably shouldn't admit this, but on our first wintertime climb of this ridge, back in the late 1980's, we decided to take a "short cut" on the way down and ended up in the wrong drainage, several miles from our starting point. It was quite dark when we finally reached the vehicle. Bring headlamps, it can be a long day!

Hike Description



Assuming that you are able to drive to the point described, start walking west up the jeep road. Cross the Three Elk Trail after 0.1 miles, staying on the jeep road. The jeep road disappears at the Wilderness Boundary, marked by an information board and register, approximately a mile from the car. The trail now becomes more of a challenge to follow, but generally staying just south of a small drainage.

At approximately 10,600 feet you should intersect the Colorado Trail (formerly the Main Range Trail), after 1.5 miles of hiking. The Colorado Trail is occasionally marked in this area by red tags on trees, but they are easy to miss. Depending on exactly where you hit the Colorado Trail, you may follow it north for a short distance to the vicinity of some old mine buildings (Waypoint "LEAVE COLORADO TRAIL"). Although it is possible to stay on the Colorado Trail a little longer as it contours north across the head of the small drainage, it is best to leave the trail at this point and bushwack directly west to intersect a minor ridge in a quarter of a mile, then stay near the crest of the ridge as it heads northwest towards treeline.



Deep snow below treeline

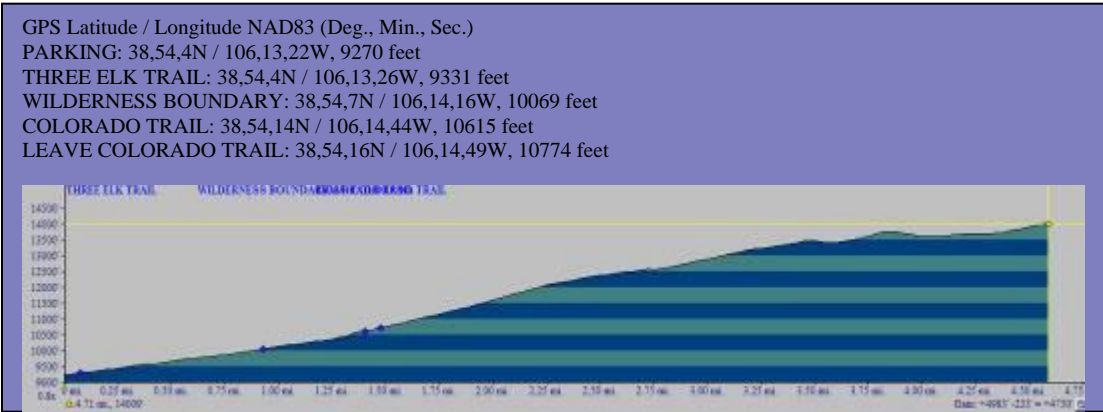
As you reach treeline the prominent ridge to your left is Columbia's southeast ridge

Continue northwest until you reach the east ridge proper. From here it is still a little over two miles to the summit, over



what seems like an endless procession of false summits. This isn't a good place to be caught in a whiteout, but on a clear day you will be rewarded by excellent views of the surrounding "fourteeners".

Looking along the endless east ridge of Columbia, from near treeline



Map showing driving approach in yellow dashed line

