

Mount Zirkel

by Dave Cooper



Impressive views on the way to Mount Zirkel's summit, the second point from the right. The snowy peak is Big Agnes-small.jpg

Several months ago we came across a new guidebook by Joe Kramarsic. Similar in format to his previous self-published guidebook to the Gore Range, but with the addition of maps and photos, Kramarsic's new guide covers the mountains of the Park Range, including the Mount Zirkel-Dome Peak Wilderness Area. This was an exciting discovery, since I'd been planning to spend time exploring this area of the State for quite a while. It's been a quarter of a century since I last backpacked and climbed in this area, but armed with the new guidebook we set off to spend a few days exploring.

Our first day was spent hiking to the high point of the Mount Zirkel Wilderness, Mount Zirkel itself. This hike, though long, took us through some extremely nice scenery to an impressive mountaineering summit, albeit by a moderate Class 2 route (basically, a route that you can hike with your hands in your pockets).

The area has a rich mountaineering history, well documented by Kramarsic. We were anxious to scope out some of the technical climbing routes on the mountain, mainly on the west face, an impressive expanse of rock that looks quite inviting. According to Kramarsic, many of these routes were pioneered by the legendary climber Michael Covington, back in the 1960's. We'll have to go back to attempt some of these routes on a future trip.

Given the remoteness of the peak, the technical routes require a backpacking approach. In fact that would also be a good way to experience the standard route described here. A one-day hike up

Getting to the Trailhead: From the intersection of Highway 40 and Highway 129 at the north end of Steamboat Springs, turn north on Highway 129 (Elk River Road) and drive 17.5 miles to the junction with County Road 64, just north of the small town of Clark. (Note that this is CR64, not CR60 as Kramarsic states) . Drive east on County Road 64 (aka Forest Service Road 400) to its terminus at the Slavonia Trailhead, 11.9 miles from Highway 129. Passenger cars should have no difficulty on this well-maintained road.

Statistics and Difficulty: The hike gains a total of 4000 feet in 17.0 miles round trip. The summit of Mount Zirkel is at an elevation of 12,180 feet.

The trail is generally good, but there are two significant stream crossings, the first negotiated on large logs, the second probably waded. (Sandals and hiking poles definitely make the crossing easier.)

Resources: "Mountaineering in the Park Range. A guide to the Mountains of the Mount Zirkel-Dome Peak Wilderness Area" by Joseph Kramarsic Copyright 2008. The book is self-published so if you are unable to find it in your local mountaineering store or bookstore, you can write to Kramarsic at PO Box 1342, Dillon, CO 80435. We found our copy at Epilogue Books in Steamboat Springs.

Camping is available at two Forest Service Campgrounds along County Road 64. Dispersed camping is not allowed along this road, but is allowed along some of the side roads (signed). Some campsites are currently closed due to the beetle kill. This area has been hard-hit by the Pine Beetle.

USGS Quads: Mount Zirkel, CO.

this peak makes for a long day, since it is 17 miles round trip and gains 4000 feet of elevation. Our one-day hike ended up taking 10 hours at a moderate but sustained pace. A camp below Red Dirt Pass would be a wonderful place to spend time.

Whether you decide to ascend Mount Zirkel in one day or at a more relaxed pace, you're in for a treat. Oh, and by the way, bring along some sandals for the stream crossing. They'll make it much more pleasant.

Hike Description

From the parking area, hike 200 yards to a trail junction and trail register. Take the right fork on the Gold Creek Trail (Trail #1150) and hike through lush undergrowth, reaching the Mount Zirkel Wilderness Boundary at mile 1.0. You're now entering one of the five original areas in Colorado designated as wilderness in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Ginni showing how to cross the log bridge-small.jpg

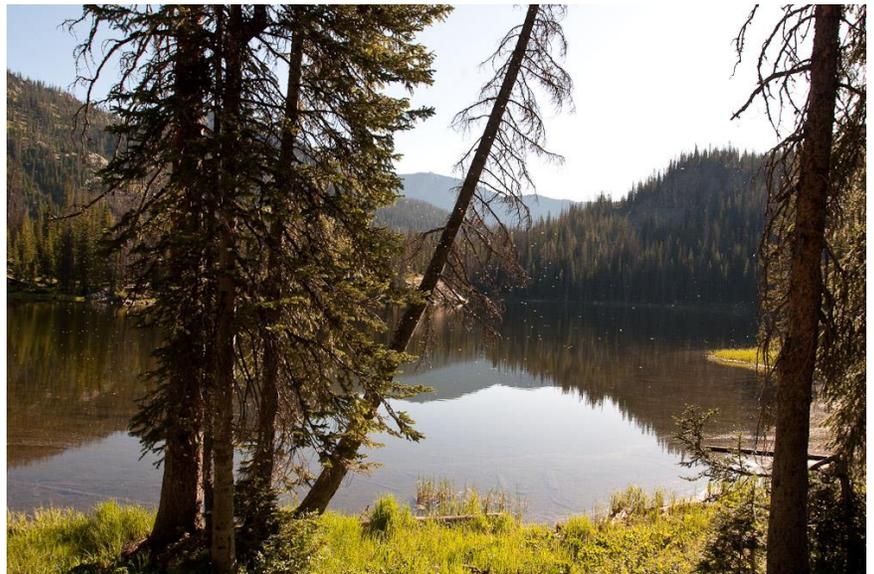


At mile 1.8 there is the first major obstacle - a crossing of Gold Creek via large logs. A technique that worked well for us was to have our feet on the lower log, hands on the upper. Just be careful if the lower log is wet or icy.

Continue on the trail as it climbs steadily to Gold Creek Lake, reached at mile 2.8. The lake is a popular destination and you may well encounter other hikers along this section.

Gold Creek Lake, plus flying insects-small.jpg

Follow the trail as it circles around the left side of the lake before continuing northeast. Pass the trail junction for the Wyoming Trail at mile 3.0, staying straight on the Gold Creek Trail. In a tenth of a mile you reach the day's crux, another stream crossing. There are places where you might find a log to cross sections of the braided stream, but we found it best to take off the socks and boots and wade across at a relatively shallow spot by a gravel bar. To reach this, turn right at the creek and walk upstream for 50 yards. Cross a narrow branch of the stream and walk



upstream for another 50 yards to a spot where the water is shallow. Sandals and hiking poles definitely make the crossing easier.

After drying off your feet and putting boots back on, follow a faint trail west and rejoin the main trail in approximately 50 yards. There are several large cairns here that make the spot easy to find on your way back.

After passing a trail heading towards Gilpin Lake at mile 4.4, the trail contours into the basin below Red Dirt Pass. Stay straight at mile 5.2, now on the Red Dirt Pass Trail, and enter the scenic basin, absolutely covered in wildflowers when we were there. Pass mine ruins at mile 5.8 and continue on the trail up to the pass, crossing the large, low-angled snowfield on the way.



Mine ruins below Red Dirt Pass, seen at right in this photo-small.jpg

We leave the trail at the top of Red Dirt Pass (mile 7.3), turning left and hiking up the gentle slopes of Mount Zirkel's southeast ridge. A climbers' trail stays generally close to the ridgeline, which is precipitous on your left-hand side but gently falls away on your right.

The ridge narrows in a couple of spots and you may have to cross a gentle snowfield or two, but the hiking remains moderate. The views at several points along the ridge are stunning, especially of Big Agnes, off to the west. Reach the summit of Mount Zirkel at mile 8.5 and take a well-earned rest.



The trail passes through fields of Indian Paintbrush on the slopes below Red Dirt Pass-small.jpg

Crossing the large snowfield below Red Dirt Pass-small.jpg



Ginni on her way to Mount Zirkel's summit-small.jpg



GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 TOPO! GPS Data Format DegMinSec NAD83 ElevFeet Local-Time
 Trailhead,40,46,59,-106,43,23,8448 feet
 Trail junction and register,40,47,3,-106,43,18,8451 feet
 Wilderness Boundary,40,46,43,-106,42,30,8704 feet
 Log bridge,40,46,44,-106,41,40,9039 feet
 Wyoming Trail Junction,40,47,4,-106,40,37,9577 feet
 Ford Stream,40,47,7,-106,40,31,9649 feet
 Cairns marking stream crossing,40,47,7,-106,40,32,9908 feet
 Gilpin Lake Trail Junction,40,47,23,-106,39,47,10089 feet
 Red Dirt Pass Trail,40,47,51,-106,39,4,10239 feet
 Mine Cabins,40,48,18,-106,39,10,10505 feet
 Red Dirt Pass,40,49,18,-106,38,54,11495 feet
 Mt Zirkel,40,49,52,-106,39,47,12012 feet

