

Observatory Rock

by Dave Cooper

What! Another hike in the Lost Creek Wilderness, you say. Yes, but this one is quite different in nature from many of the other hikes in the area. The approach is over trailless tundra which, though short, is quite enjoyable. And the scramble to the summit, while not difficult, is quite entertaining.

The start to this weeks' hike is a little obtuse. Finding a way around private property in the area limits your choices for a starting point. I explored several variations but found the one described by the Roaches in "Colorado's Lost Creek Wilderness" to be the best. That's the one I'll use here.

There are actually two ways to approach Observatory Rock from the trailhead. By starting on the trailless direct approach and returning via the Forest Service roads that criss-cross the area your path will trace a clockwise circular route that allows you to enjoy more of the area.

This short outing is lots of fun and one that we have returned to on more than one occasion. The roads can be confusing, so bring along a map and compass. Also useful is the Pike National Forest map.

Hike Description

From the trailhead (such as it is), walk east along a faint trail (hard to follow initially but becoming stronger after reaching the fence), keeping the fence on your left and the stand of trees to your right. Continue to walk east along the fence line until shortly after the fence and trees come together. At this point, 0.45 miles from the trailhead, you will reach an opening in the fence (where there had previously been a gate). Cross through the fence and take aim directly at Observatory Rock, very visible to the north-north-east. Walk across the gentle slopes, passing a small wooded knoll to the left, until you reach a two-track road that runs along Swigler Gulch at mile 0.9. Turn right on this road and follow it east then northeast, reaching the unmarked junction with Forest Service Road 834 at mile 1.3. Turn left and walk north along this well-defined road to a parking area just south of Observatory Rock at mile 1.6. The approach is over!

At this parking area you are looking directly up at the impressive cliff that forms the south-east face of Observatory Rock. You will bypass this cliff by following one of the grassy gullies to the left of the face, so choose a gully and head northwest and then north, aiming for a low point on Observatory Rock's west ridge. Easy scrambling brings you to the ridge, or you can angle a little more to the right to approach the summit rock directly. Depending on the line you choose, the final scramble up to the rocky summit will be Class 3 or Class 3+, the direct approach offering the steepest scrambling that heads left around a false summit on a small ledge before leading to a steep, slabby gully with a large dead tree at the base. A short, fun scramble on good clean rock takes you to the summit ridge a few feet to the right of the summit.

As I mentioned above, going all the way to the west ridge will provide an easier finish, up a rocky gully with a second, large, dead tree at its base. This gully tops out directly at the summit. Whichever route you choose for the ascent, I'd recommend the easier of the two for the descent. Nice views abound from the summit of this well-named rock.

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on Highway 285 to the town of Jefferson in South Park, 4.4 miles south of Kenosha Pass. From Jefferson, drive south on County Road 77 (the Tarryall Reservoir Road) for 8.6 miles to the junction with Stage Stop Road. Turn right on Stage Stop and drive 3.7 miles to the junction with Longbow Drive. Turn left on Longbow and drive 1.2 miles to an unsigned intersection with Forest Service Road 148. Turn left and cross a Texas Gate, drop down the hill on a washed out road. Actually the road divides into two just after the Texas Gate (both rough and not suitable for all passenger cars), only to rejoin again in 0.3 miles at the trailhead, a small unsigned parking area on the left side of a sharp right bend.

Hike Statistics: From the passenger car parking area to the summit of Observatory Rock, returning via the four wheel drive roads described here, you will gain a total of 1450 feet in a round trip distance of 6.7 miles.

Difficulty: A short walk across a trailless open area to a spicy but moderate rock scramble. The return is along four wheel drive roads.

USGS Quads: Eagle Rock, CO; Observatory Rock, CO.

Descend back to the parking area (mile 2.3) and either reverse your track back to your vehicle or, if you're in the mood for a slightly longer outing, take the network of Forest Service roads to complete the loop. For the latter, from the parking area at the base of Observatory Rock, follow FSR 834 south past where you joined it earlier, then south-east to a junction at mile 2.9. Road numbers here are a little confusing but you should stay straight on the left fork on FSR 834. Walk south-east then south as the road heads along Berkey Gulch to a T-junction at mile 5.0. Turn right on FSR 148 and walk northwest, staying straight on FSR148 at the junction with FSR831 at mile 5.8 and returning to your car at the trailhead at mile 6.7.