

## Peak “K” (Unnamed 12920) by Dave Cooper

*Meadow where the trail fades. Peak “K” can be seen in the distance.jpg*

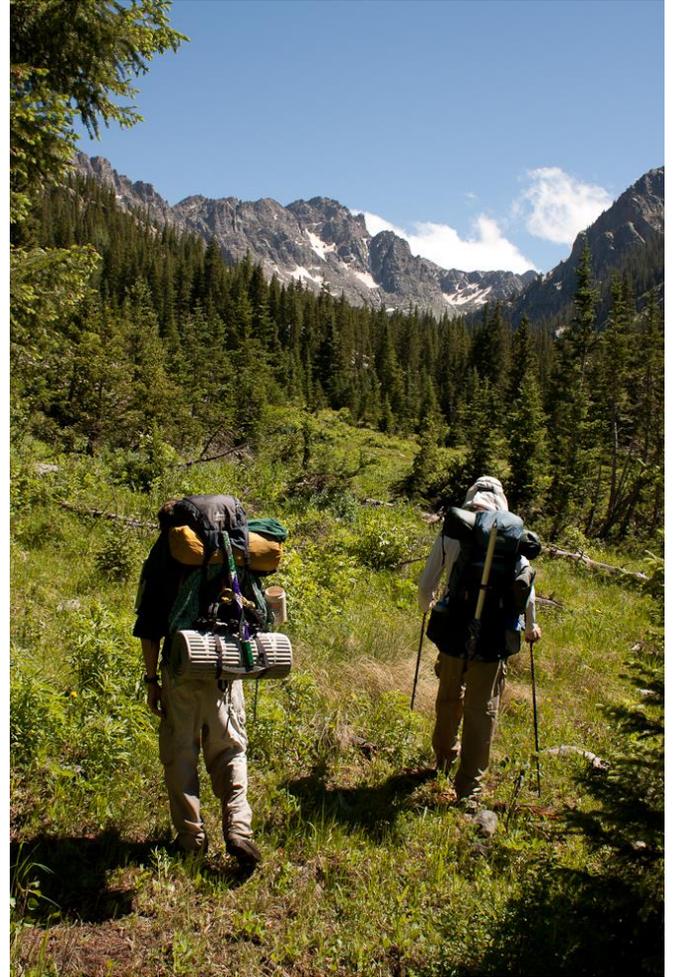
Over the years I’ve had the opportunity to explore much of the Gore Range, visiting most of the drainages and climbing many of the peaks. One area, however, has eluded me; the valleys and peaks at the head of the Black Creek drainage. I’ve looked down into this wild and scenic place from many places; the high plateau by Dora Lake and from the surrounding summits including Eagles Nest, Mt. Powell, and Peak “L”.

With very few roads, the Gore Range remains one of the more remote areas of the state, so most explorations of this range are not easy.

A couple of years ago, while compiling new routes for a guidebook, I photographed this area from the summit of Mount Powell. Shortly after that a friend (Dan) and I hatched a plan to explore the area. We pored over my photos, topographic maps, even Google Earth, attempting to identify viable routes to several of the surrounding summits. Several years earlier we had teamed up to climb several of the thirteen thousand foot peaks in adjoining Slate Creek. After Dan finished climbing all of Colorado’s 13ers, he turned his attention to the lower peaks. These “twelvers” may be less in elevation, but hardly in terms of difficulty and enjoyable scrambling. They also are often quite remote. Don’t look for trails to guide you to these summits!

It took us a couple of years to finally execute our planned trip, but early in July of this year we finally made it, and what a wonderful area it turned out to be. Once in the upper basin we found none of the usual signs of human activity - no fire rings, campsites or man-made trails. We were truly in the wilderness with a capital “W”. Along with another friend of Dan’s, Grant, we spent a couple of days in this special place, hiking and climbing. Our primary objective was Peak “K” (Unnamed 12920), rarely climbed from this side, and that’s the climb I’ll describe here.

Getting in to this area isn’t straightforward. Private property blocks access via County Road 1700



**Getting to the Trailhead:** Drive north on Colorado 9 from Silverthorne for 16 miles. Turn left on Heeney Road (County Road 30) and drive 0.6 mile to a rough road on the left (opposite the Pioneer Cemetery). Cars can be left at the cemetery parking area (recommended by the Forest Service), or you can drive up the steep, rough and sometimes muddy 4WD road for 2.4 miles to the Brush Creek Trailhead. This road had deteriorated significantly over the years, and should only be attempted by high clearance, 4 wheel drive vehicles with low range. Of course, hiking from the cemetery adds 2.4 miles each way and another 1000 feet of elevation gain to the backpacking statistics listed here.

**GPS coordinates for the 4WD trailhead (NAD83):** 39°48'17"N, 106°13'49"W, 9,046 feet.

**Statistics:** From the 4WD trailhead, a total of 21.5 miles and 5420 feet of elevation gain and loss round trip. The backpacking approach gains 2600 feet and loses 830 feet (to be re-climbed on the way out) in 8.2 miles one way. From camp to the summit of Peak “K” gain 2480 feet and lose 405 feet in 2.5 miles one way.

**Difficulty:** The approach consists of on-trail hiking followed by challenging off-trail hiking. The climb (in early July), involved some easy snow travel followed by a significant amount of Class 2 and Class 3 scrambling, with a Class 4 or lower Class 5 bouldering section near the summit. Don’t expect trails on this peak, so bring your routefinding skills.

**Gear:** In addition to the usual backpacking gear, we used crampons, ice axe, and carried a short length of rope. The crampons may not be required, depending on conditions. Don’t forget your helmet!

**USGS Quad:** Vail East, CO; Mount Powell, CO; Squaw Creek, CO

(Black Lake Road). This means that it is necessary to approach from the south, heading towards Lost Lake, then picking up an old abandoned trail that provides access to the Eagles Nest Wilderness west of Black Lake.

## Approach

From the 4WD trailhead, follow the trail southwest, passing into the Eagles Nest Wilderness at mile 0.3. Reach the trail junction (signed) with our old friend the Gore Range Trail at mile 0.6 and turn right. Follow the sometimes indistinct Gore Range Trail north and west, reaching the signed junction with the Lost Lake Trail at mile 1.7. Turn left towards Lost Lake as it heads southwest. At mile 2.6 (0.9 miles after leaving the Gore Range Trail), look for signs of a trail taking off to the right. It is critical that you find this unsigned and almost hidden trail junction, immediately south of a small ridge point (Point 9795 on the map). Several blazes on the trees along the right side of the trail should help locate the start of this trail.

### *Sunset on "Gore Thumb".jpg*

Walk southwest, across the small saddle, following blazes for 50 yards until the trail becomes evident. This excellent trail was well-constructed, but has not been maintained for many years, and isn't shown on the USGS map. With all of the downed trees at the start of the trail, I was concerned that use of this trail might be discouraged by the Forest Service, but a check with the Dillon Ranger District office revealed that the trail is indeed open.



The trail contours along the hillside until reaching switchbacks at mile 5.2. Climb the switchbacks as the trail leaves the main Black Creek drainage and heads south along the south fork of Black Creek, immediately west of Guyselman Mountain. At mile 6.2 the trails peter out in a meadow. We explored a little and found a choice of old trails, none easy to follow. A trail which climbs up about 100 feet to the left and contours along Guyselman's lower flanks avoids some very marshy areas in the valley bottom, but eventually has to cross an old

### *Sunrise on the head of the valley from near our campsite.jpg*

avalanche slope with almost impenetrable downed trees. Staying lower, skirting the marshy areas on the left side, while still tedious, is probably a better option, especially later in the summer when the ground may be a little less saturated. The trails you are following at this point are basically game trails, but still usable.



Choose a spot to camp, remembering to place your camp at least 100 feet from any lakes or streams. Also, campfires are not permitted within a quarter mile of lakes or above treeline. We found a good camping spot at mile 8.2. Sunset and sunrise views were excellent.

### The Climb

Continue southwest, passing a couple of small lakes, shown on the map as marshy areas. Climb steeply up grassy slopes to an unnamed lake at 11,550 feet, which is best passed on its west side. From this lake you will have a good view of the beginning of the route, southwest up a high valley to a tiny lake at 12,073 feet. In early July this was an easy snow climb, but still required an ice axe and, depending on your comfort level on snow, crampons. From the vicinity of the lake at 12,073 feet a couple of possible routes presented themselves. One possibility was to climb past the lake then up a snow slope to the south before heading over Peak “J”, but this would be longer and the ridge from Peak “J” to its saddle with Peak “K” looked a little tricky. We decided to use a grassy ridge to our left, just before the lake.



*The lake at 11,550 feet. The ascent route followed the snow until we reached a moderate grassy ridge descending from the northwest ridge of Point 12685 at upper left of photo (not visible in this photo).jpg*

*An alternate but longer and more difficult route to reach the ridgeline would be up this nice snowfield to the right of Peak “J”, then continue over Peak “J” to the “J” - “K” saddle.jpg*

Climb up the grassy slopes to the crest of the ridge and follow it southeast to intersect the major ridge just southwest of Point 12685. Climb directly over this point. Here’s where the fun begins.



*Heading up the grassy ridge to meet the northwest ridge leading to Point 12685 The peak behind the climbers, split by the “Straight Arrow Couloir, is Peak “H” .jpg*



From the saddle on the northeast side of Point 12685, descend perhaps 100 feet to a grassy area and make an ascending traverse on ramps, avoiding the rock slabs as much as possible. Good routefinding skills will allow you to keep the climbing at no more than Class 3 until you are directly below the summit, on the southeast face. A 20 foot chimney provides access to the summit ridge, between two summits. This chimney is Class 4 to lower Fifth, so be warned.

*Peak "K", seen from the northwest ridge of Point 12685.jpg*

We climbed both summits, finding the one to the left (west) to be higher. A summit register confirmed that. Only two names were in the register - our friends Jerry and Jennifer Roach, three years earlier.

Carefully retrace your steps to descend.

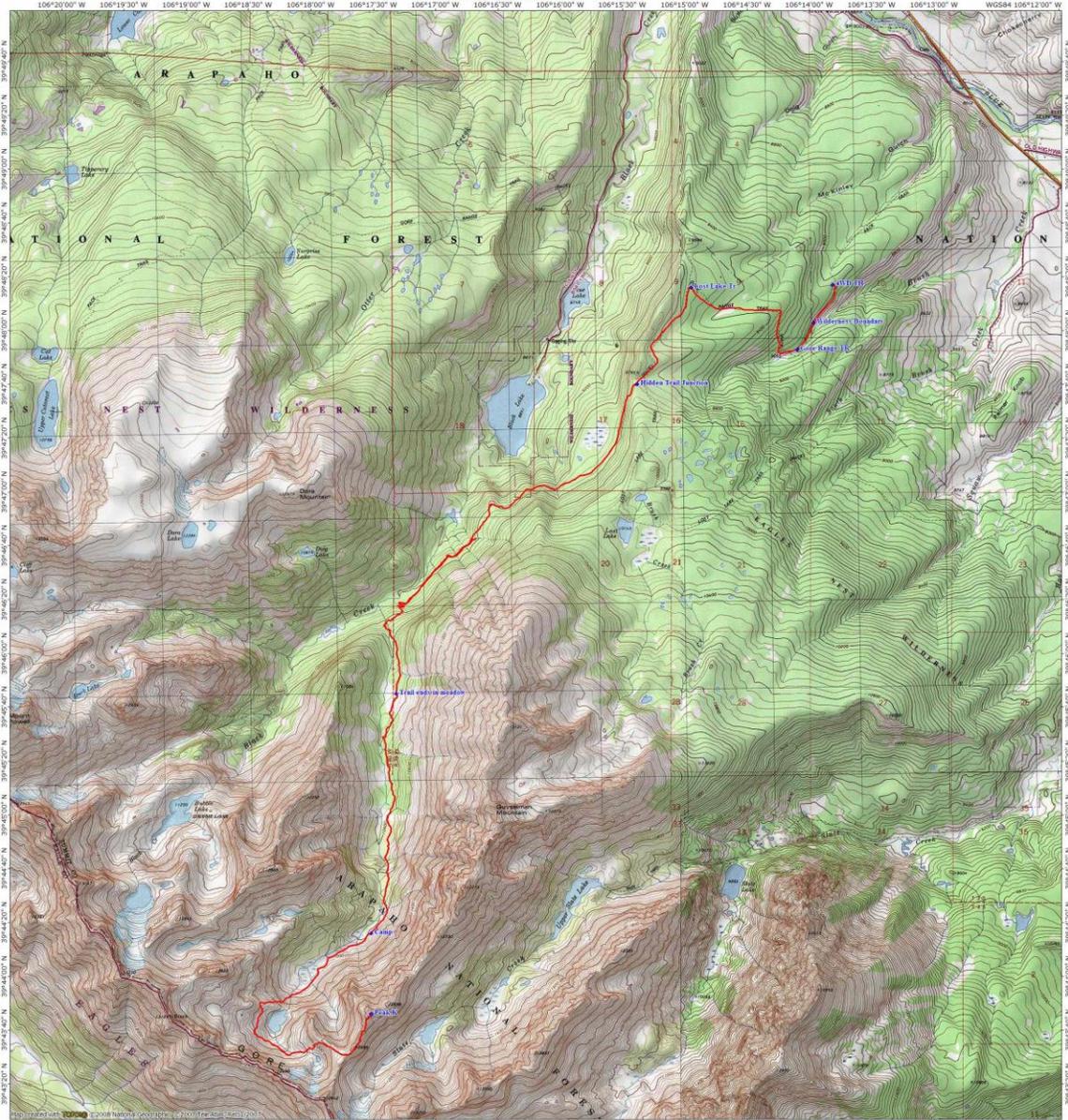


*The complex ridge to the summit of Peak "K".jpg*

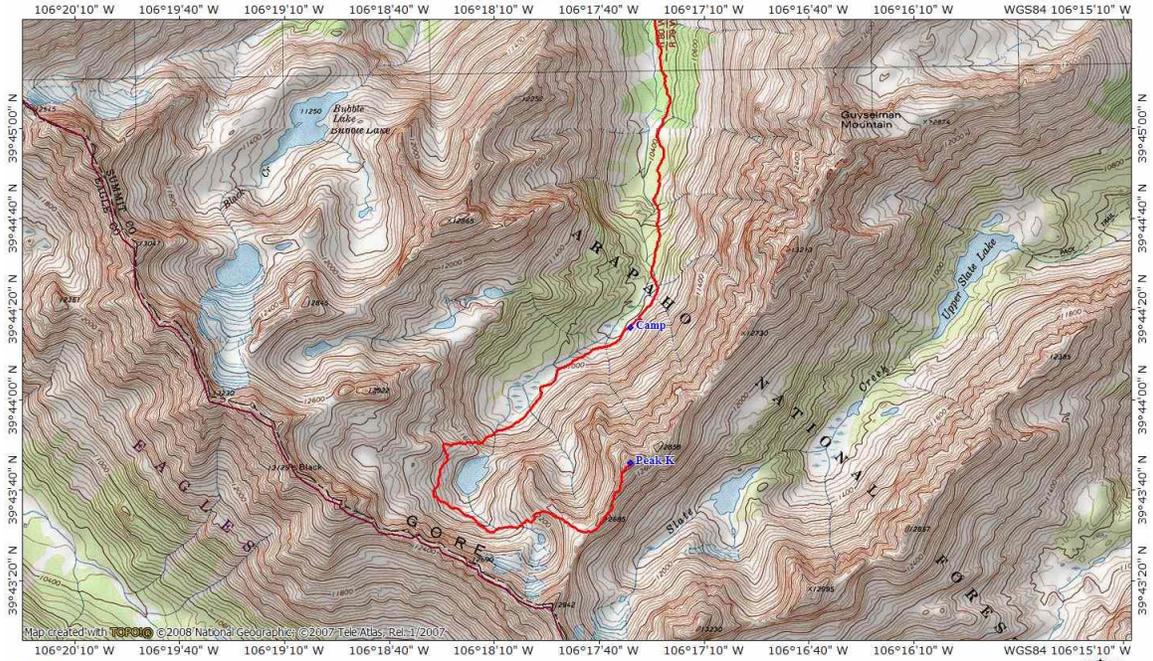
**Caution:**

Be aware of the potential for rockfall and always wear your helmet.

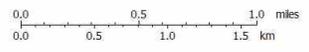
Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route.



TOPO! map printed on 07/31/10 from "Peak K2.tpo"



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



THMN 9 1/2° 07/31/10

- GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
- 4WD TH,39,48,17,-106,13,49,9046 feet
- Wilderness Boundary,39,48,3,-106,13,58,9012 feet
- Gore Range TR,39,47,53,-106,14,6,9065 feet
- Lost Lake Tr,39,48,16,-106,14,57,9560 feet
- Hidden Trail Junction,39,47,40,-106,15,23,9688 feet
- Trail ends in meadow,39,45,45,-106,17,19,10167 feet
- Camp,39,44,16,-106,17,31,10846 feet
- Peak K,39,43,46,-106,17,31,12913 feet

