

Skyscraper Glacier by Dave Cooper



Skyscraper Glacier rises above Bob Lake-small.jpg

In previous columns I've talked about the enjoyable climbing to be found on Colorado's drift glaciers once the seasonal snow has melted off, leaving the permanent ice and hard snow exposed. I've also talked about some of the objective hazards associated with these climbs, especially when that layer of hard ice/snow is covered by new snowfall. This situation occurred recently when an early season snowfall left several inches of snow in the high country.

Headed up early on the morning of September 14th. to check out two of the glaciers near Rollins Pass, we knew that there was a chance we'd enjoy nothing more than a pleasant hike. We left the vehicle just before

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive to the small town of Rollinsville, 4.3 miles south of Nederland on Highway 119. Drive west on County Road 16 for 7.3 miles to the intersection with County Road 117, the Rollins Pass Road. Turn right and drive on this rough road (high clearance vehicle recommended) for 12.7 miles to the road closure shortly before the Needles Eye tunnel.

Statistics: From the road closure to Skyscraper Glacier and back along the Corona Trail, you will gain approximately 2000 feet in 8.2 miles round trip.

Difficulty: A pleasant hike mainly on old roads and trails to Bob Lake, with a technical ice/snow climb beyond, followed by a good trail descent.

Gear: A rope, crampons and 2 ice tools, plus a few ice screws and one or two snow pickets should suffice. And don't forget your helmet!

USGS Quad: East Portal, CO.

the Needles Eye tunnel and headed towards Rollins Pass, walking on the fresh snow that had fallen two days earlier. In places the snow had drifted to a depth of almost two feet. We passed skiers heading up to ski the slopes above King Lake, a very scenic spot that morning with clear blue skies and the fresh coating of snow.

Hiking towards Rollins Pass-small.jpg



Skyscraper Glacier is the permanent snowfield located to the north of Rollins Pass, above Bob Lake. As we approached we could see that some of the old snow/ice layer was exposed. We followed footprints from the previous day as we headed past Betty and Bob Lakes. As we neared the start of the glacier it became obvious that several fresh sloughs had occurred, producing quite a bit of avalanche debris at the base. We could also see that ski tracks entering at the top of the slides must have triggered them. It appeared that none of the skiers had been injured, since we could see exit footprints at the lake. (I later found an account on the web of one skier's ride on the slide - it was obviously pretty scary but turned out OK). For an account of that ride, check out <http://offcamber.typepad.com/dv8/2008/09/slide.html>.

Heading up through the avalanche debris. You can see the old snow and ice layer below-small.jpg

Since the new snow had been inadvertently cleared off by the skier, we evaluated conditions and decided that we could safely climb that line, which we did. We would not have climbed if the new snow layer was still intact. Some of the debris consisted of quite sizeable blocks that would definitely have knocked us off if we had been the ones triggering the slide.



The climbing was excellent on the old snow-ice surface-small.jpg

On reaching the top after a short but fun climb, including an exit over the old cornice that was quite steep, we walked over to check out the neighboring glacier just north of Skyscraper. With its steeper grade and usually harder ice underneath, we concluded that this climb was out of shape (it was primed to slide). Will these climbs be safe later this season? It all depends on



weather, how well the snow bonds to the old layers and a host of other factors.

The bottom line is that you must have the skills to evaluate conditions and be willing to back off if conditions are marginal. Be conservative, climb within your ability and you should enjoy a long and rewarding climbing career.



Topping out on Skyscraper Glacier. You can see one of the slide paths behind Kevin-small.jpg

Climbing disclaimer.

Approach

Skyscraper Glacier is located above Bob and Betty Lakes and can best be approached either by a trail starting at the old town of Hessie, or by driving the Rollins Pass Road to the closure at the Needle's Eye Tunnel. The latter involves a long drive on a rough road but has a shorter hiking distance and is the approach described here.

From the road closure, walk through the rock cut and along the road towards the tunnel. Just before reaching the tunnel leave the road on your left, following an obvious but unsigned trail that climbs the hill. Follow the trail, indistinct at times, as it curves around to the west, eventually meeting the old stagecoach road. Follow the road west as it parallels the railroad grade, staying approximately 100 feet above the railroad grade until dropping down to join it at Rollins Pass (mile 1.6).

At the pass, continue north on the Corona Trail (also called the High Lonesome Trail) to the start of the King Lake Trail (mile 2.0). Drop down to King Lake and continue to the trail junction for Bob and Betty Lakes (mile 2.6). Take the left fork at this junction and try to stay on the trail as it heads towards Betty Lake (snow on the trail can make this difficult). Contour around the left side of Betty Lake and continue to Bob Lake (mile 3.5). Skirt around the right side of Bob Lake and reach the base of Skyscraper Glacier at mile 3.7. Now the fun begins.

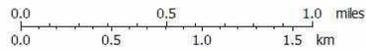
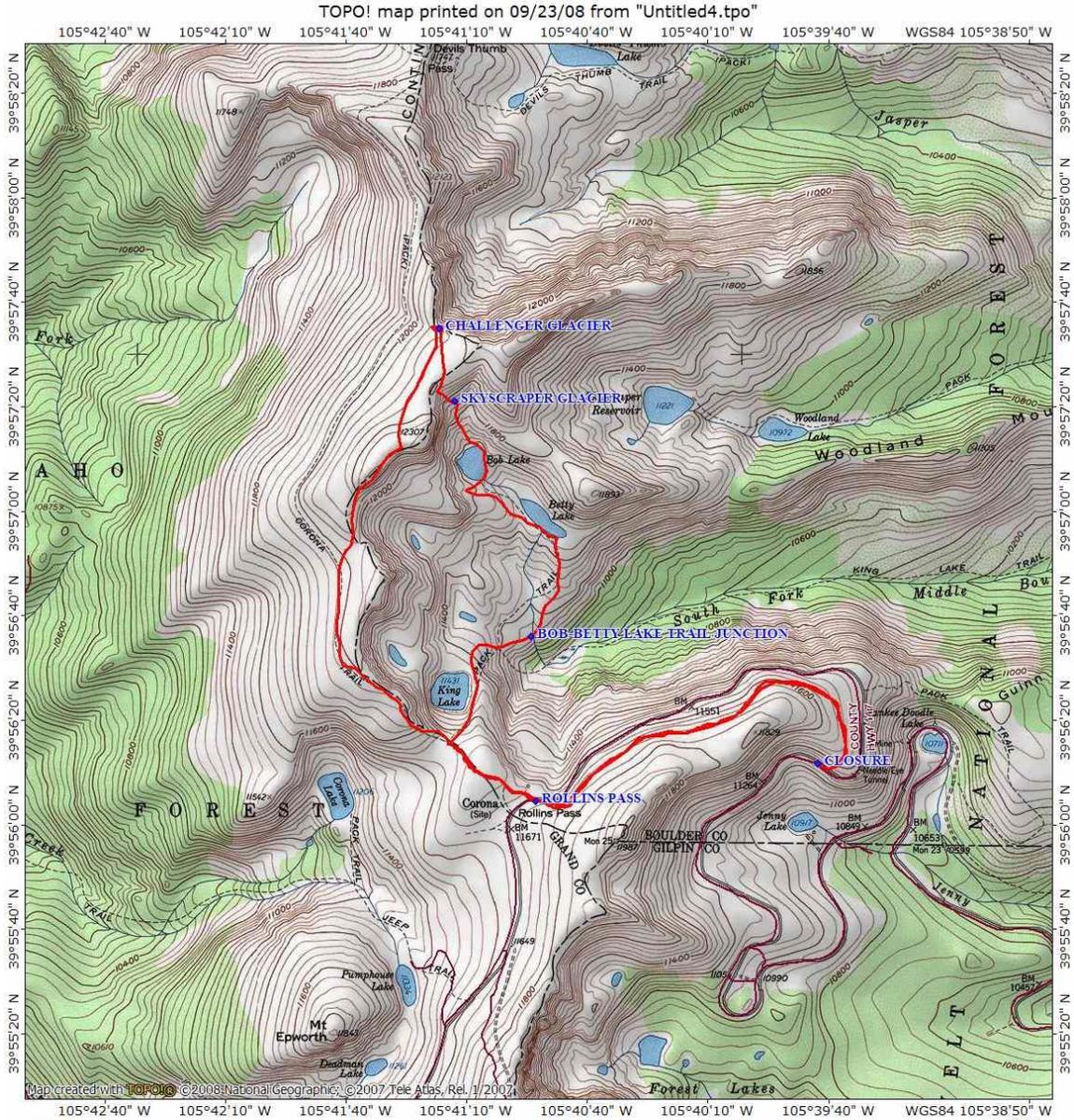
The Climb

The glacier is wide enough to allow several different lines of ascent. Most offer climbing at an angle of between 30 and 45 degrees after climbing the initial low angle apron, though the headwall can be quite steep. We chose a finish that was probably 70 degrees for 20 feet, providing a nice exit to a flat spot just below the Continental Divide.

Depending on snow conditions and the experience level of the group, a rope, ice screws and even a snow picket will be used. Crampons, two ice tools and helmet are also needed. We've climbed this route several times in September/October, and found conditions to vary between hard snow and ice, sometimes even with a thin layer of water streaming over the surface.

The Descent

The climb deposits you on the Continental Divide. Just head south on the High Lonesome Trail back to Rollins Pass and rejoin your approach tracks. A short detour allows you to check out conditions on Challenger Glacier, though to climb this second route requires a bit of work. Expect this to add at least 2-3 hours to your outing.



TN MN
9 1/2°
09/23/08

GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)

CLOSURE: 39,56,12N / 105,39,43W, 11307 feet

ROLLINS PASS: 39,56,5N / 105,40,53W, 11679 feet

BOB-BETTY LAKE TRAIL JUNCTION: 39,56,36N / 105,40,54W, 11132 feet

SKYSCRAPER GLACIER: 39,57,21N / 105,41,13W, 11902 feet

CHALLENGER GLACIER: 39,57,35N / 105,41,17W, 12098 feet



