

## The North Face of Notchtop Mountain by Dave Cooper



*The north face of Notchtop with approximate route shown in red-small.jpg*

If you're looking for a good mountaineering challenge, this one might be for you. Long, technical and with great position, the so-called North Face of Notchtop is a classic mountaineering route. (Note: the route has been called variously, the North Face, the North-east Face and the East Face. It really ascends an east-facing bowl below the North Face. For clarity, I'll stay with the traditional name).

When the climb is "in shape," – something that doesn't happen every year, there is climbable ice covering the multiple rock bands, but not so much snow deposited on the face to make for hazardous avalanche conditions. This happy occurrence is most likely to be found sometime in November, so when we heard word that the route was "in shape", Kevin and I headed up mid-week to check it out.

Now, you should understand that this isn't the first time I've tried to do this route, only to find less-than-ideal conditions. On those occasions we have been forced to

**Getting to the Trailhead:** From the major intersection of US Highways 34 and 36 in the town of Estes Park, head west through town on US 36. Turn south in 0.4 miles and continue on US36 as it turns west to Rocky Mountain National Park. Turn left (south) on Bear Lake Road after 4.4 miles and drive to its terminus at the large parking area, a total of 14 miles.

**Statistics:** Trailhead to the base of the chimney (10,900 feet): 1600 feet of elevation gain in 3.3 miles one way. The climb adds 1500 vertical feet of rock, snow, ice and mixed climbing. With a descent of the Flattop Trail the round trip distance is 8.8 miles.

**Difficulty:** The rating normally given to this climb is WI4 M4/5. When in good shape it may not exceed WI3+, but it is a long committing climb in a remote location with substantial objective hazards and should be approached with respect.

**Gear:** A single 60 meter rope, standard ice rack and an alpine rock rack including small to medium cams. It is possible to rappel the route if you have double 60 meter ropes, but isn't recommended unless snow conditions above the ice pitches so dictate.

**USGS Quad:** McHenrys Peak, CO

substitute a different objective such as the enjoyable Grace Falls, a nice, single pitch of steep WI4 ice. However, setting the alarm for 2:45am, driving for three and a half hours to the trailhead, then hiking in for several miles only to find that the route isn't climbable, isn't my idea of a good time. So when we reached a point on the approach where we could evaluate the route, I was extremely happy to see that we had a chance of completing the route this time .

The climbing difficulty varies widely depending on the amount and quality of ice you find. I'll describe the conditions we found on our climb. You may find the route to be easier or more difficult.

Since much of the climbing is on steep snow, make sure you monitor avalanche conditions before and during the climb. Some of the snow pitches are best roped, using rock protection, or the route foregone altogether, if you are at all unsure.

### **Approach**

From the Bear Lake parking area, take the trail toward Odessa Lake, leaving the Bear Lake Trail and going right at a junction at mile 0.2, left at mile 0.4 and straight ahead (right) at mile 0.9, where the Flattop Mountain Trail heads left.

At mile 3.0, leave the Odessa Lake Trail at the sharp right hand bend in the trail and head left towards Lake Helene. On this last outing we actually left the main trail a little earlier than usual to follow an existing, well-broken trail. From Lake Helene, scramble up a rocky ridge interspersed with scrub pine heading southwest – the challenge is knowing when to stay on the rock and when to scramble through the pines. When the ridge flattens out, contour to the right then descend slightly, crossing a snow-covered stream and aiming for a chimney that starts near a huge boulder on the extreme east edge of the north face.

*Heading towards the chimney which accesses the north face-small.jpg*



Climb this chimney or the

stepped rib on its right side, both of which have a few lower fifth class moves. This chimney provides access to the huge bowl just north of the peak.

### The Climb

When we reached the level ground above the chimney we geared up in the sun, then moved right into the bowl proper. We stayed generally to the left side of the bowl, sticking quite close to the rock to avoid potential slide danger, and aiming for the obvious ice of the first pitch in the center of the face.

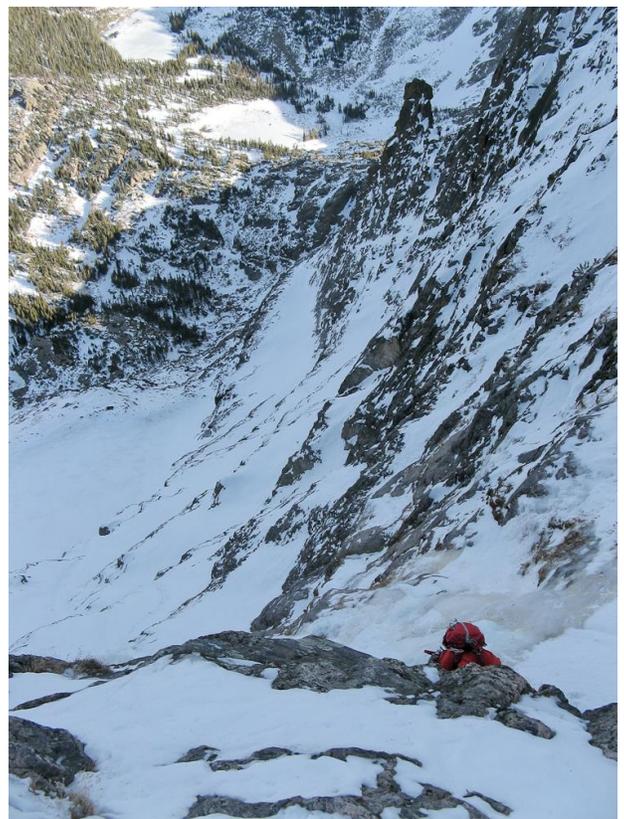


*Climbing the lower slopes. The ice steps can be seen up and right of the climber.jpg*

Climb easy ice (WI2) to a fixed rock anchor on the right side of the ice step, the first belay stance. With 60 meter ropes this will just allow the leader to reach the next rock band for the second belay. The pitch above this first rock anchor was definitely the crux on this day, being steep and fragile, especially at the start. Some delicate mixed moves led to better ice and good rock protection on the left side. More ice led to easier snow slopes and the second belay, a fixed piece of protection pounded into the rock plus a good crack for gear.

The third pitch consists of 60 meters of easy ice and snow, ending at the third belay stance, just below the next pitch, a full ropelength of good ice (WI3+). A fixed nut on the right side, supplemented with other pieces, forms a good anchor at the top of this last technical pitch.

*The view from the top of the last ice section-small.jpg*



If snow conditions are suitable, climb up and left towards a notch in the ridge leading to the West Gully, the normal descent route (reportedly somewhat unpleasant class 3 downclimbing). Since we had the time, we elected to continue up to exit onto the broad plateau of the Continental Divide. We headed towards an obvious snow ramp to the right of the top of the West Gully. An interesting move at the top of the ramp deposited us on the flats. Note that the ramp can be protected using rock gear.

*Climbing the exit ramp-small-2.jpg*

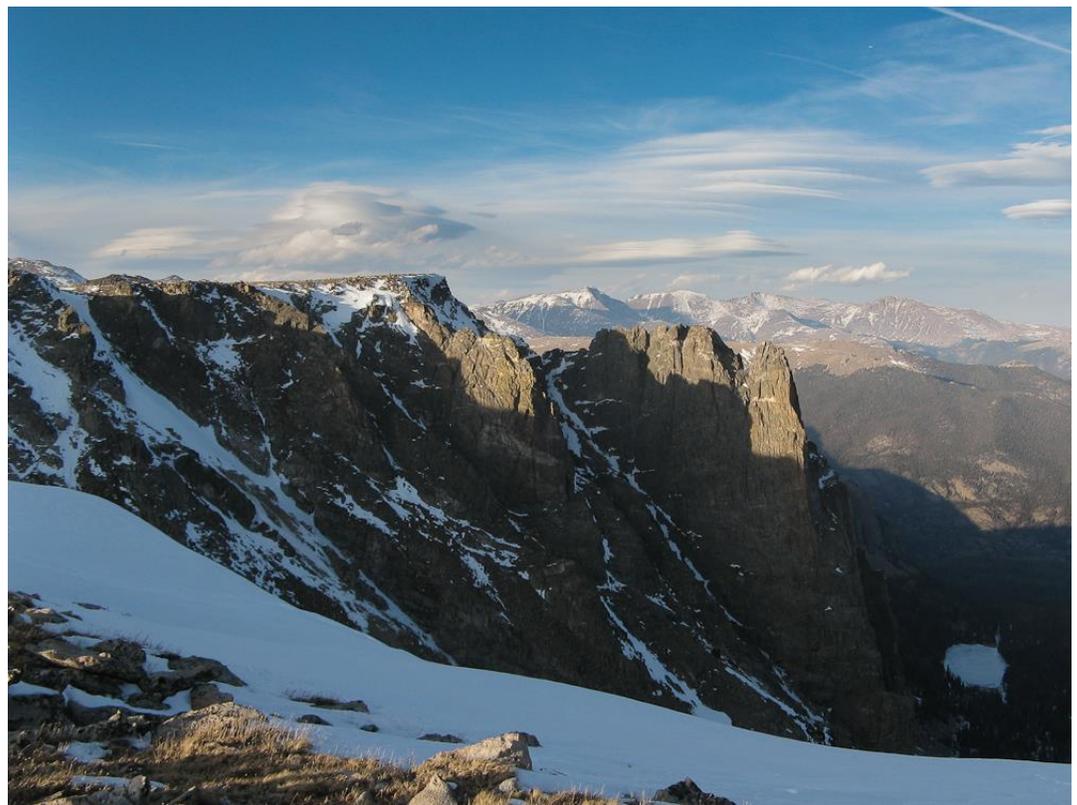
### **Descent**

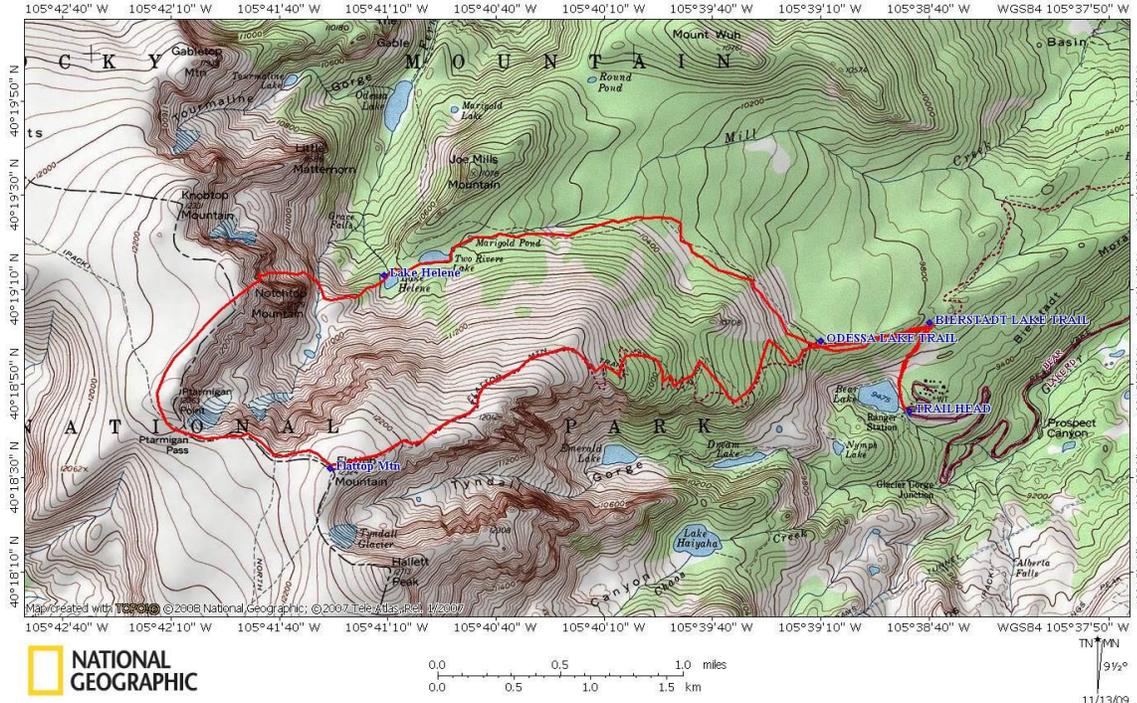
We descended via the Flattop Mountain trail, which returns you to the Bear Lake parking lot. To reach the trail walk southwest to pass Ptarmigan Point on its west side, then pick up the well-cairned trail heading east to the broad summit of Flattop Mountain. From the summit continue east on the trail to reach the parking lot in 3.6 miles (the sign says 4.4 miles, but I trust my GPS).

The walk back down the icy, snowpacked trail seems endless, but I think the views make it worthwhile.

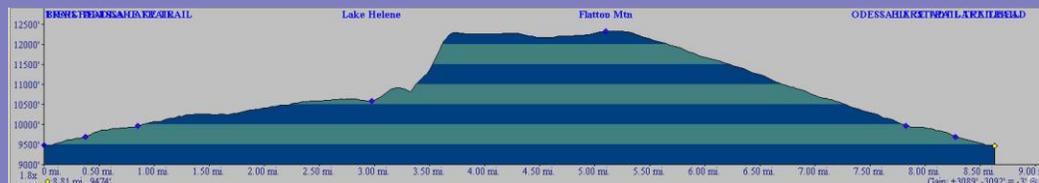


*Looking across at Notchtop from the Flattop Mountain Trail. The west gully can be seen in the center of the photo-small.jpg*





GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)  
 TRAILHEAD, 40,18,44, -105,38,46, 9472 feet  
 BIERSTADT LAKE TRAIL, 40,19,3, -105,38,40, 9491 feet  
 ODESSA LAKE TRAIL, 40,18,59, -105,39,10, 9846 feet  
 Lake Helene, 40,19,13, -105,41,11, 10590 feet  
 Flattop Mtn, 40,18,32, -105,41,26, 12326 feet



**Caution:**

Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route. We write about it, you take all the risks.

