

The Sand Creek Lakes and Music Mountain

by Dave Cooper



Sunrise over Lower Sand Creek Lake. Tijeras is the peak at left, while Music Mountain can be seen at right..jpg

Located south of the famous Crestone Group Fourteeners and north of the Great Sand Dunes, the area around Music Pass can easily go unnoticed. However it is home to some very nice scenery and rugged peaks. Two popular destinations (especially for fishermen) are the Lower and Upper Sand Creek Lakes. For mountain climbers, the upper lake is the starting point for a climb of Milwaukee Peak, while the lower lake provides access to two more peaks - Tijeras Peak and Music Mountain. All of these peaks are considered to be relatively difficult climbs and should be attempted only by experienced mountaineers.

Music Mountain is climbed infrequently, perhaps due to its lower stature (13,355 feet) and perhaps due to its challenging scrambling and routefinding. . In fact, according to

William M. Bueler in Roof of the Rockies (Third Edition, 2002, CMC Press), it wasn't until 1967 that the peak saw its first ascent, when climbers Wilbur Arnold and Ron Pevny reported difficult routefinding.

If you have the requisite skills you will find an ascent of the east ridge of Music Mountain a rewarding experience, and the views from the summit, outstanding.

Getting to the Trailhead: From the town of Westcliffe, head south on Highway 69 for 4.5 miles. Turn right onto Colfax Lane and head south for 5.5 miles to a T-junction. Make a left turn and follow the road for 5.25 miles to the Rainbow Trail and Grape Creek trailhead. There is a large parking area here where passenger cars should be left. Four-wheel drive vehicles can continue up the rough road for a further 2.6 miles to another large parking area. As you enter the parking area you will see a sign for the Music Pass trail, pointing to the right.

Hike Statistics: From the 4WD parking area to Lower Sand Creek Lake (11,471 feet): 1360 feet of elevation gain and 470 feet of elevation loss in 3.3 miles one way.

From the 4WD parking area to Upper Sand Creek Lake (11,745 feet): 1725 feet of elevation gain and 470 feet of elevation loss in 3.6 miles one way.

From the 4WD parking area to the summit of Music Mountain (13,355 feet): 3080 feet of elevation gain and 470 feet of elevation loss in 4.6 miles one way.

Parking at the Rainbow Trail parking area adds 2.6 miles each way and 1430 feet of elevation gain.

Difficulty: A moderate trail hike to either of the lakes. The east ridge of Music Mountain is a difficult scramble, (Class 3/4) with exposure.

Gear: Helmet. I prefer to also take along a rope in case of wet/iced up rock or routefinding problems.

USGS Quad: Beck Mountain, CO; Crestone Peak, CO.

The roads into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains have rightly earned the reputation for being some of the roughest in the state, but recent improvements to the Music Pass Road have made the driving approach a little less of an adventure. A four-wheel drive vehicle is still needed to reach the upper parking area, while passenger cars can drive to the Grape Creek Trailhead, 2.6 miles earlier.

Hike Description

From the upper parking area a good trail climbs 1.2 miles to the top of Music Pass (11,400 feet). Take a break here and enjoy the views of Tijeras Peak, Music Mountain and Milwaukee Peak. The trail descends more than 400 feet into the Sand Creek drainage, reaching a trail junction at mile 2.0. Stay right and continue northwest to a second trail junction after 2.3 miles. For Upper Sand Creek Lake, stay right and reach the lake after 3.6 miles. For the lower lake, turn left and almost immediately cross Sand Creek before starting up the gentle switchbacks, reaching Lower Sand Creek Lake after 3.3 miles.



Music Mountain, with the east ridge descending towards the camera. The steep cliffband can be seen extending all the way across the east face of the peak small..jpg



To continue on to Music Mountain, skirt around the north side of the lower lake and look for a faint climbers' trail that takes you to treeline in the basin between Music and Tijeras. Choose a spot to gain the east ridge, to the east of the cliffband that stretches all the way across the head of the valley. A grassy ramp offers the westernmost point to access the east ridge at an elevation of 12,870 feet, just before the ridge steepens dramatically.

Yes, scrambling can be fun. High on Music's east ridge-Upper Sand Creek Lake below.jpg

Before continuing, assess the weather conditions. The east ridge of Music Mountain is not the place to be in a storm. Make sure you have time to complete both the ascent and descent in good weather. Scramble steeply up the east ridge on grassy ledges and rock steps. This is not a place for a misstep, but if you are comfortable on Class 3/4 terrain you will enjoy the challenge.

Upon reaching the south summit you'll realize that it's not over yet. The traverse to the north summit, the high point of the peak, requires more scrambling. If you stay close to the ridgeline the climbing is Class 4, but by dropping a little distance to the southwest of the ridge it is possible to keep the difficulties to Class 3.

To descend, carefully retrace your steps to the south summit, and then back down the east ridge.

As the ridge steepens, you will be forced to move to your left (north) to stay on the ridge proper to avoid being cliffed-out.

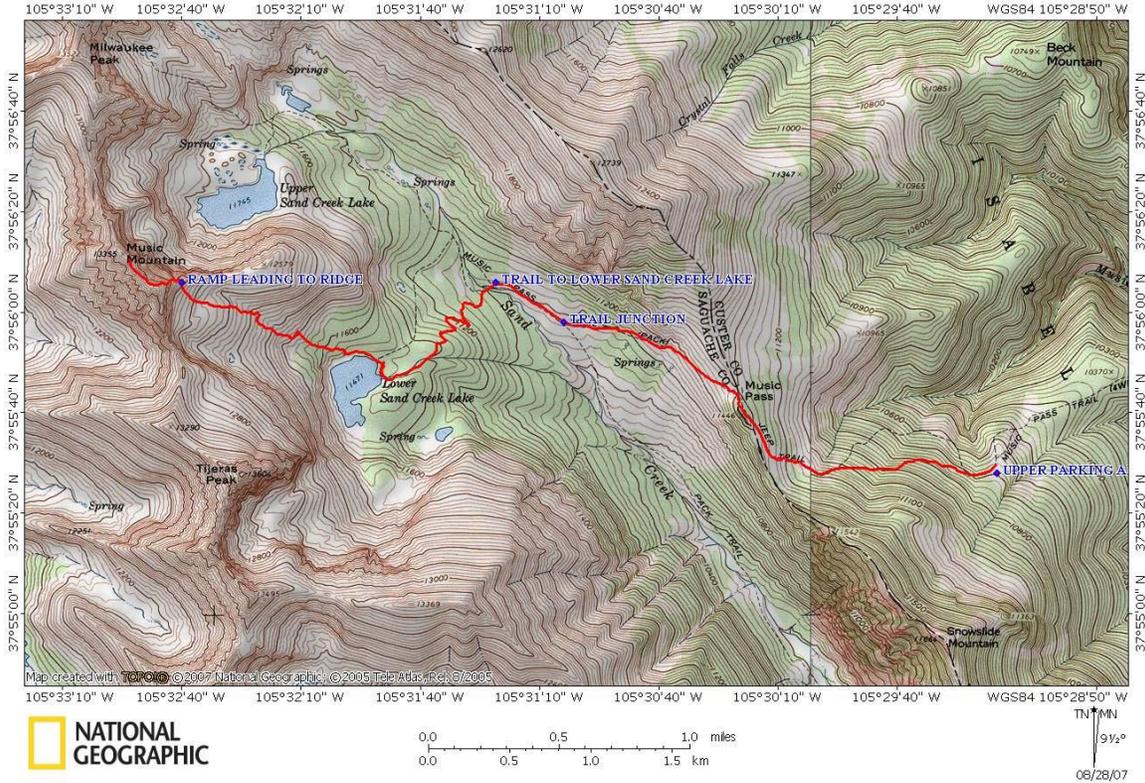
The steep terrain requires all your attention.jpg



Steep scrambling on the way to the north summit-small.jpg

Mountain climbing is dangerous etc.....

TOPO! map printed on 08/28/07 from "Untitled2merged withtjeras-book1.1-modified2.tpo"



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

UPPER PARKING AND TRAILHEAD: 37,55,28N / 105,29,15W, 10705 feet

TRAIL JUNCTION: 37,55,58N / 105,31,4W, 10981 feet

TRAIL TO LOWER SAND CREEK LAKE: 37,56,6N / 105,31,21W, 11040 feet

RAMP LEADING TO RIDGE: 37,56,6N / 105,32,40W, 12871 feet

