

Twin Peaks by Dave Cooper

Ellingwood Point, Blanca and Little Bear Peaks seen from near the summit of Twin Peaks - compressed



This week's adventure takes us to a high peak providing spectacular views of some of Colorado's more rugged "Fourteeners", even more impressive wearing their winter mantle of snow.

Getting to the Trailhead: Take US285 south over Poncha Pass into the San Luis Valley. 4.7 miles south of Villa Grove, turn left onto SH 17 and follow this road south for 36.6 miles to Sixmile Lane (Ln 6 N). Take Sixmile Lane (following signs to the Great Sand Dunes National Park) east for 16.1 miles to the intersection of SH 150. Drive south for 2.8 miles to the entrance to the Zapata Falls Recreation Area (administered by the BLM). Turn left into the recreation area and drive 3.6 miles to the parking area for Zapata Falls. This trailhead is by the outhouse, not the Wilderness parking area you pass a few hundred yards earlier. Expect icy and/or snowy conditions on the road to the parking area.

Seeing familiar mountains from unusual perspectives and in different seasons is something I find intriguing. Last winter in this column I described such a climb on Marble Mountain in the heart of the Crestones. A climb of Twin Peaks offers a similar experience, but this time for the Blanca Massif.

Starting from the San Luis Valley the hike offers excellent sunrise photo opportunities of the Great Sand Dunes with the rugged Crestones forming a dramatic backdrop, passes the frozen Zapata Falls (worth a side trip) and then gains a long, relatively gentle ridge which we follow to the dual summits of Twin Peaks at an elevation of 13,580 feet.

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to the summit of Twin Peaks (13,580 feet): 4500 feet of total elevation gain in 3.8 miles one way.

Difficulty: A long but moderate ridge climb, with all of the attendant challenges of a winter ascent at high altitude. Snow shoes and ice axe required.



Sunrise highlights the Sand Dunes and Crestones-compressed

Hike Description

From the parking area head east along the trail towards South Zapata Lake. Turn right at the signed trail junction after one-third of a mile, on the trail to South Zapata Lake. Hike up the switchbacks on the often well-packed trail (though the trail may be hard to follow after a recent snowfall).

The trick is to find the best way to gain the ridge to your right. There are several places where this is possible, but generally it is better to head for the ridge as soon as possible. We found a good spot 0.7 miles from the trailhead, at an elevation of 9500 feet. This required a short scramble up a snow-covered slope.

Once on the ridge start the long climb southeast through initially open trees and glades. Snowshoes will be necessary at some point, depending on conditions. Skis would not work well on this route due to the dense trees encountered further along the ridge. You will often find the best path just to the right of the ridge crest as you pick your way through aspen and conifer.

The long northwest ridge of Twin Peaks can be seen on the left skyline -compressed



Reach treeline after several hours on the ridge, 2.8 miles from the trailhead at 11,900 feet. This is a good spot to take off the snowshoes, take a break and prepare for the last part of the climb. An ice axe will be handy from here on, since some of the snow patches along the ridge can be very consolidated.

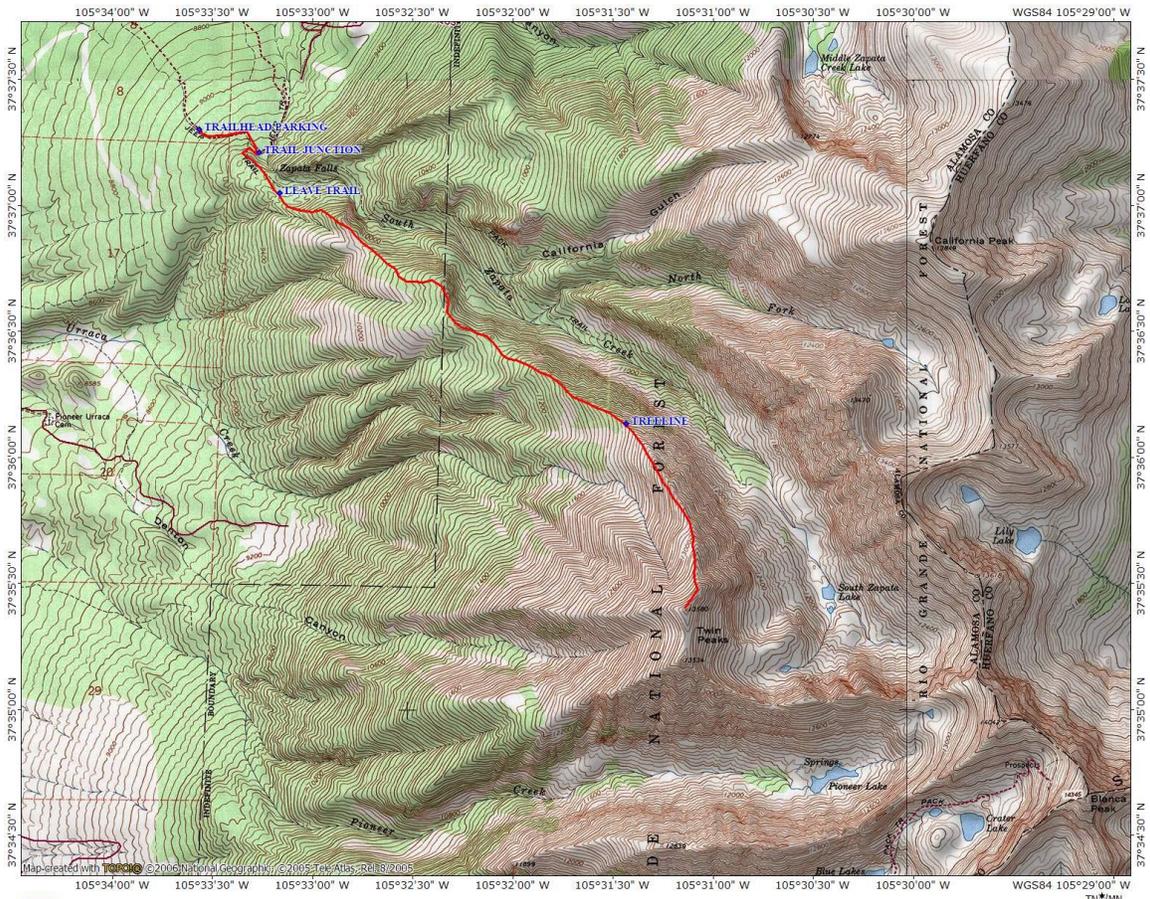
Continue up the ridge on talus and snow, never steep but sometimes with loose footing. As you climb higher on the ridge you will be treated to spectacular views. See if you can pick out California Peak, Mount Lindsey and then, on the final push to the summit, the fourteeners surrounding the Lake Como basin.

The first summit is the high point, at 13,580 feet. Peak baggers may want to stroll over to the lower summit (13,534 feet).

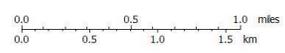
Carefully retrace your steps back down the seemingly endless ridge, and if you have time and energy detour back up the trail to take a look at Zapata Falls.



Descending the ridge - compressed



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