

## Tyndall Glacier

by Dave Cooper

Scattered along the east side of the Continental Divide, generally north of I-70 and concentrated in the area from Rollins Pass to Rocky Mountain National Park, are a series of permanent snowfields known as "drift glaciers".

Formed principally by wind deposition of snow during the winter, these snowfields survive summer melting due to their protected locations.

A characteristic shared by most of these drift glaciers is that during a brief period in late summer / early autumn, before new snow falls, the surface metamorphoses into alpine ice. This has long been my favorite time of year to venture onto these glaciers, typically offering several hundred feet of moderate ice and steep snow climbing.

A word of caution. Even a few inches of new snow on top of the alpine ice that forms in the autumn can create a significant avalanche hazard. Once it snows in the high country, it's best to leave these drift glaciers for the next year.

One fine example of a drift glacier is Tyndall Glacier in Rocky Mountain National Park. Nestled between Hallett Peak and Flattop Mountain, this glacier can be seen from many vantage points. Tyndall has some of the largest crevasses to be seen in Colorado.

The approach to Tyndall Glacier, at least as far as Emerald Lake, offers a pleasant outing for those not wanting a technical climb.

**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.

Consider using the shuttle bus rather than driving to Bear Lake. For more information go to: <http://www.nps.gov/romo/visit/shuttle.html>.

**Hike Statistics:** Trailhead to Emerald Lake: 700 feet of elevation gain in 1.5 miles one way. Trailhead to Tyndall Glacier, with return via the Flattop Mountain Trail: 3000 feet of elevation gain in 7.4 miles round trip.

**Difficulty:** An easy trail hike to Emerald Lake, with a rugged trail approach to a technical ice/snow climb beyond, followed by a good trail descent.

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

**USGS Quad:** McHenry's Peak, CO

**Climbing disclaimer.**



*Tyndall Glacier,  
nestled between  
Hallett Peak  
and Flattop  
Mountain*

## Approach

From the Bear Lake parking area, take the trail around the left side of Bear Lake, following the signs for Dream Lake and Emerald Lake. After 0.5 miles you will reach Nymph Lake, a delightful lily-covered lake.



### *Lily-covered Nymph Lake*

Continue on the excellent trail as it passes Dream Lake before reaching the outlet of Emerald Lake after 1.5 miles of hiking. Look for great views of Longs Peak along the way. For those requiring no more than a pleasant trail hike to a good lunch destination, Emerald Lake may be it. The trail becomes quite rugged beyond this point.

Once you reach Emerald Lake there are a couple of options to reach the glacier, the goal being to bypass the cliffs directly above the lake. A reasonable route follows a climbers trail that provides access to the north face of Hallett Peak. From the lake's eastern end, follow the rough trail as it climbs south approximately 100 vertical feet to a flatter area before turning west and contouring towards Hallett's vertical face. The trail ascends, staying close to Hallett, until reaching the top of the cliff band at about 10,800 feet. A sizeable cairn (Waypoint "CAIRN") with small pole marks this point.

Head northwest towards the center of the drainage and work your way west on rock slabs and grassy ramps, slow going all the way. Snow patches can speed progress, though in late summer most of these have melted out. Find the easiest way to surmount the moraine below the glacier.



*Tyndall Glacier with the moraine in the foreground*

### **The Climb**

Tyndall offers several pitches of good ice and snow climbing. The average steepness is around 40 degrees, depending on the line you choose, starting out gently with the steepest climbing just before the exit.

Note the crevasses high on the face as you approach the climb, and plan a route that avoids them. The snow bridges can be quite tenuous. In general the routes become steeper the farther left you go. Choose your route and head up.

The dark-colored part of the glacier is alpine ice and can be protected with ice screws, but it is usually helpful to have a pickets along for the snow-covered sections. Expect to find water running over the surface of the ice as the day warms. Most parties will prefer the security of a rope on the steeper part of the glacier, and with good ice conditions two ice tools and crampons are generally required.

### **The Descent**

As you top out, you will be very close to the trail heading over to Flattop Mountain. Take this trail north over the broad summit and continue down the well-marked and well-worn Flattop Mountain Trail as it heads generally east, descending back to Bear Lake. At the trail junctions shortly before Bear Lake, the trail signs should keep you on track.

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