

Wheeler Mountain

by Dave Cooper



Wheeler Mountain, seen from the lower lake-small.jpg

The upper basin of the Middle Fork of the South Platte River tends to hold snow well into late spring and often early summer, providing many opportunities for snow climbs.

One of my favorites is Wheeler Peak via Wheeler Lake. When the spring snow has consolidated, the climb up to the south ridge of Wheeler from the lower lake can be a good, moderate snow climb. The route along the ridge to the summit of Wheeler should only be attempted by experienced climbers, especially if snow-covered.

Description

From the parking area head SW on the road as it contours around to the west end of the lake, through a closed gate. The road heads up the valley, passing under the Magnolia Mill. Stay away from the buildings, which are privately

Getting to the Trailhead: One mile south of Hoosier Pass on SH9, take the sharp exit west onto Park County Road 4. Follow CR4 downhill, staying straight on CR4 after 0.8 miles where Nuthatch Drive makes a sharp turn to the left. 0.2 miles after this junction there is a three-way junction. CR4 turns sharply left, the middle fork continues slightly downhill to the Montgomery Reservoir Dam. Take the right fork (FSR408), which passes through an open gate and contours above the reservoir to a parking area by the spillway, a total of 1.6 miles from SH9. Later in the spring the gate will be open and it is possible to park approximately one third of a mile further. A little before the Magnolia Mill the road becomes very rough.

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to the summit of Wheeler Mountain (13,690 feet): 2900 feet of total elevation gain in 4.5 miles one way.

Difficulty: An approach along a 4WD road, with a moderate snow climb to a rough 4th class ridge which may be technical when snow-covered. A rope could be useful here. Ice ax and possibly crampons necessary. Know how to use them.

Wear a helmet and, as with all snow climbs, get an early start to ensure firm snow conditions. Check on avalanche conditions before heading out. The Colorado Avalanche Information Center is providing a new service this year-limited Spring forecasts until near the end of May. Check it out at <http://avalanche.state.co.us/>

USGS Quad: Alma, CO; Climax, CO; Copper Mountain, CO.

owned and currently undergoing some repairs.

After passing the mill the jeep trail stays to the right of the drainage to avoid private property (and also avoid the willows filling the bottom of the valley).

After 2.9 miles the road starts to diagonal up the righthand side of the valley towards the lake and should be obvious. Follow the road as it climbs until snow slopes allow you to head directly towards the lake. This avoids some potential avalanche slopes just west of the road.

Contour around the left side of the lower lake and follow the drainage from the upper lake, usually staying left (west) of the drainage itself (there is a very real danger in the spring of falling through a snowbridge into these fast-flowing streams, which then go back under the snow making an exit next to impossible). Also, stay clear of the potential avalanche paths coming off the shoulder of Clinton Peak.

From the upper lake the steepest snow line climbs left of the lake and up a finger of snow to a flatter area.

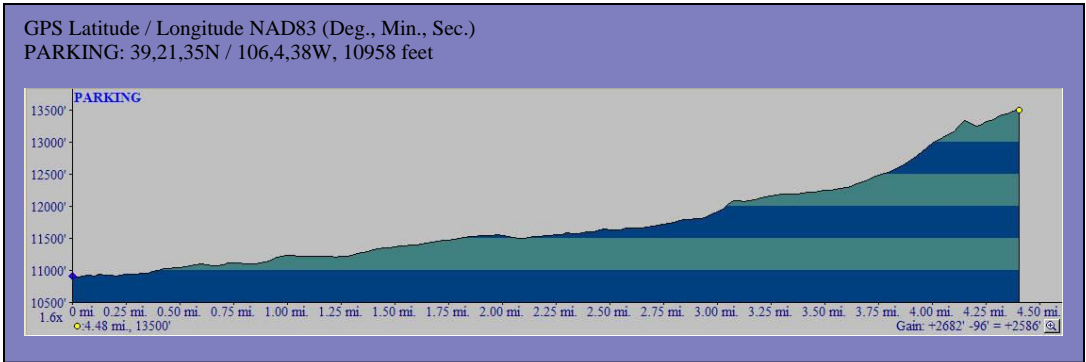
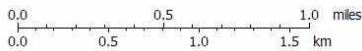
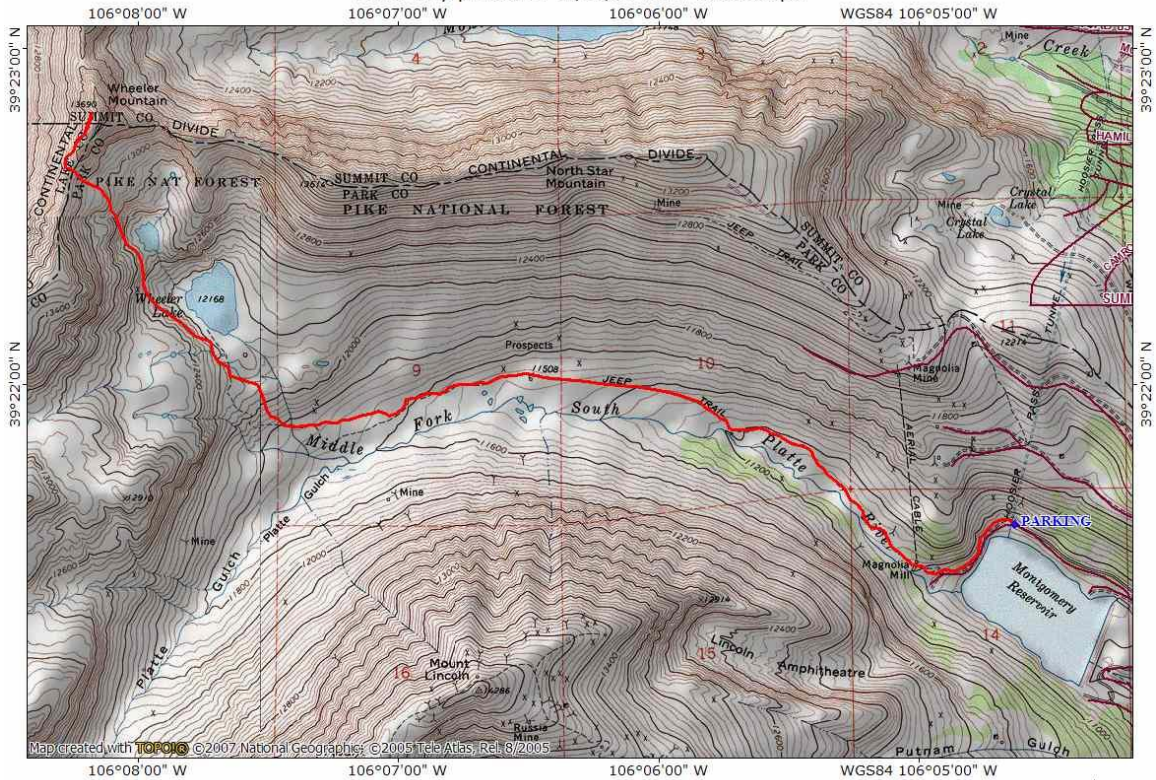


Climbing the slopes to the Wheeler ridge, with views of North Star Mountain.jpg

From here either angle left towards the Clinton-Wheeler saddle or, if snow conditions are good, head up a steeper (approximately 40 degrees) snow slope to the right, aiming for the first ridge point to the right (north) of the saddle. From here the route will depend on snow conditions. A climbers' trail of sorts stays slightly west of the ridgeline, but this may not be a good choice when covered in snow. Staying on the ridge crest requires some 4th class scrambling when dry; with snow a rope might be useful. The short distance from the Clinton-Wheeler saddle to the summit of Wheeler Mountain can be slow going on this quite challenging terrain.

To descend, head back to the saddle, then pick a route back down (the exact route chosen will depend on how soft the snow has become).

TOPO! map printed on 05/08/07 from "Untitled.tpo"



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.

