

Mount Massive (14,421 feet) by Dave Cooper



A windy day on Mt. Massive

I recently had the opportunity to spend a day climbing with one of Colorado's most prolific mountaineers. Ken Nolan is not only the third person to climb all of Colorado's peaks over 12,000 feet but has also climbed extensively in many other parts of the US and the world.

Ken especially enjoys climbing our State's peaks in winter, a much more committing goal than scaling those same summits in summer. As Ken says, "to truly 'know' the mountains you need to experience them in all seasons". When Ken invited me to join him recently on a winter peak I jumped at the chance.

We chose a one day ascent of Mount Massive, normally considered a long day during the summer months and often climbed over two days in winter.

The normal access via the Halfmoon Creek Road is not a good option in winter since the road is not plowed, so we used the Leadville National Fish

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive on US Highway 24 to the intersection with State Highway 300. This is 1.5 miles south of the Leadville town limit or 29.7 miles north of the Buena Vista town limit. Drive west on US300 for 2.3 miles and turn left (signed) into the Fish Hatchery. Drive a short distance to the trailhead parking area, also well signed.

Hike Statistics: Trailhead to the summit of Mount Massive (14,421 feet): 4750 feet of total elevation gain in 6.6 miles one way.

Difficulty: A strenuous winter peak climb on moderate terrain, though an ice ax is required for some sections above treeline. If you are not in "peak" condition, consider making this an overnight trip. Depending on conditions, there may be many miles of trail-breaking in deep snow, making a larger group an advantage to help share the burden. Above treeline on Mount Massive isn't the place to be in bad weather. Check the forecast and plan accordingly.

We used snowshoes to reach treeline, but skis equipped with climbing skins would be fine for advanced skiers.

While the lower part of the trail is well marked with a combination of blue diamonds, trail signs and small reflective white dots (useful when traveling with a headlamp), good routefinding skills are needed higher on the mountain.

USGS Quad: Mount Massive, CO

Hatchery Trailhead to access the Highline Trail, deservedly a favorite of skiers and snowshoers alike. In fact, if a climb of the peak is not attractive to you, consider an outing along the Highline Trail.

With high winds and cold temperatures forecast (a typical February day), we made sure to take appropriate gear. We also elected for an early start, so snowshoed the first hour or so by headlamp. It was eleven and a half hours later that we returned to the trailhead after an enjoyable climb.

Hike Description

From the parking area head up the trail towards the Evergreen Lakes. After reaching the first lake in 0.1 mile, turn right, following the signs to the Highline Trail. After 0.3 miles you will reach the second lake, the site of the historic Evergreen Lakes Hotel (an interesting display of artifacts and information about the hotel's history is located here).

Again take a right, following more signs for the Highline Trail and arrive at another well-marked trail junction (Rock Creek) 0.7 miles from the parking area. Stay straight here, following signs to the Highline Trail and Rock Creek Dam.

At 1.0 miles stay left at a junction signed Highline Trail (the trail to the right would take you to the Colorado Trail by a more circuitous route). Continue southwest, climbing steadily until the next trail junction at mile 3.0. Here you cross the Colorado Trail, staying straight on the Highline Trail (signed to Native Lake) and continuing until you reach an open meadow at 11,260 feet after 3.7 miles.

The meadow is where you leave the Highline Trail. Contour along the south margin of the meadow for one tenth of a mile until you can start heading southwest up a reasonably gentle, broad ridge, picking your way through the open trees. Continue on this bearing to treeline.



Ken heading up the north east ridge of Mt. Massive-compressed

After removing your snowshoes or skis, head up the ridge, taking note of the point where you will reenter the trees on your descent. The route is quite straightforward, staying either on or a little to the left (south) of the ridge. With extremely high winds the day we were climbing this route we found it better to stay left, on the lee side of the ridge. The wind sounded like the proverbial freight train. Rocky outcrops and boilerplate snow patches can either be climbed directly or skirted, generally to the left. An ice ax is strongly recommended.

Descend by retracing your steps.



