

South Zapata Lake by Dave Cooper

Hike from the Sand Dunes to a high mountain lake in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains



The Sangre de Cristo Range forms the eastern boundary of the San Luis Valley

In the recent column on Penitente Canyon we explored the western reaches of the San Luis Valley. This week we turn our attention to the other side of the valley, bounded by the rugged Sangre de Cristo range. I hoped to combine a day of photography in Great Sand Dunes National Park with a day spent researching this hike, so naturally I turned to my long-time friend and authority on this area for advice. Charlie Winger (along with Diane, his wife) has written the definitive guide to this area, “The ESSENTIAL Guide to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve”. Charlie’s advice was the trail to South Zapata Lake. It turned out

to be an excellent suggestion, as I’m sure you will agree!

The Great Sand Dunes

After a wonderful, windy day on the Dunes we headed the next day to the South Zapata Lake Trailhead.

What a contrast! In a few miles you transition from a world of sand to one of snow and high peaks. Remember to take warm clothing on this hike (as well as the Ten Essentials, of course). Be prepared for



a spectacular and unusual view of one of Colorado’s Fourteeners, Ellingwood Point. We also visit the remarkable Zapata Falls, a local attraction.

Hike Description

First, take a moment to enjoy the view of the Crestones and Sand Dunes from the parking area.

View from parking area of the Sand Dunes with Crestones in the background

From the parking area follow the signed trail for 0.5 miles to Zapata Falls. Let's bypass these for now since we want to get an early start on our hike to South Zapata Lake. We have a strenuous hike ahead!

Turn right at the signed trail junction just before the Falls (Waypoint TRAIL JUNCTION) and follow the signs to South Zapata Lake. This trail climbs 3100 feet in 4.5 miles through varied terrain, starting in juniper groves and semi-arid conditions, then passing through aspen groves and pine forest to finally reach the alpine zone above treeline.



As of November 6th, the trail was mostly snow-free, with the few snow patches well packed down. This flank of the Sangres received intense afternoon sun, which makes this time of year much more comfortable for me. Even in February one year, hiking out from a climb of Electric Peak, the baking sun proved to be quite uncomfortable, while the summertime hike out from Lake Como has most people complaining.

The first stream crossing (Waypoint STREAM CROSSING1) is shortly before passing an old cabin, the first of several along the trail. Note: Be careful at the small stream crossings – the rocks may have a covering of verglas (thin layer of ice) that makes for a slippery step!

At Waypoint CAMPSITE, the trail turns sharply right, rather than taking one of the multiple social trails around the camp. At waypoint STREAM CROSSING2 you leave the sunny hillside and enter trees on the south side of South Zapata Creek. This is where you will encounter more snow on the trail (possibly icy), but shortly you reach treeline and see the end of the valley with Ellingwood Point dominating the skyline.

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.



As you approach the head of the valley, Ellingwood Point dominates the skyline

The lake, partially frozen as of November 6th., is a short distance further at 11,900 feet

As you head down the trail you will be reminded that the days are drawing shorter – as soon as the sun drops behind the Twin Peaks ridge the temperature plummets.

South Zapata Lake

Zapata Falls is worth the short detour, though the rocks are currently covered in verglas, so use extreme caution in following the stream to a viewpoint immediately below the falls. This spectacular location feels subterranean. In the summer it is possible to wade in the stream.

Zapata Falls



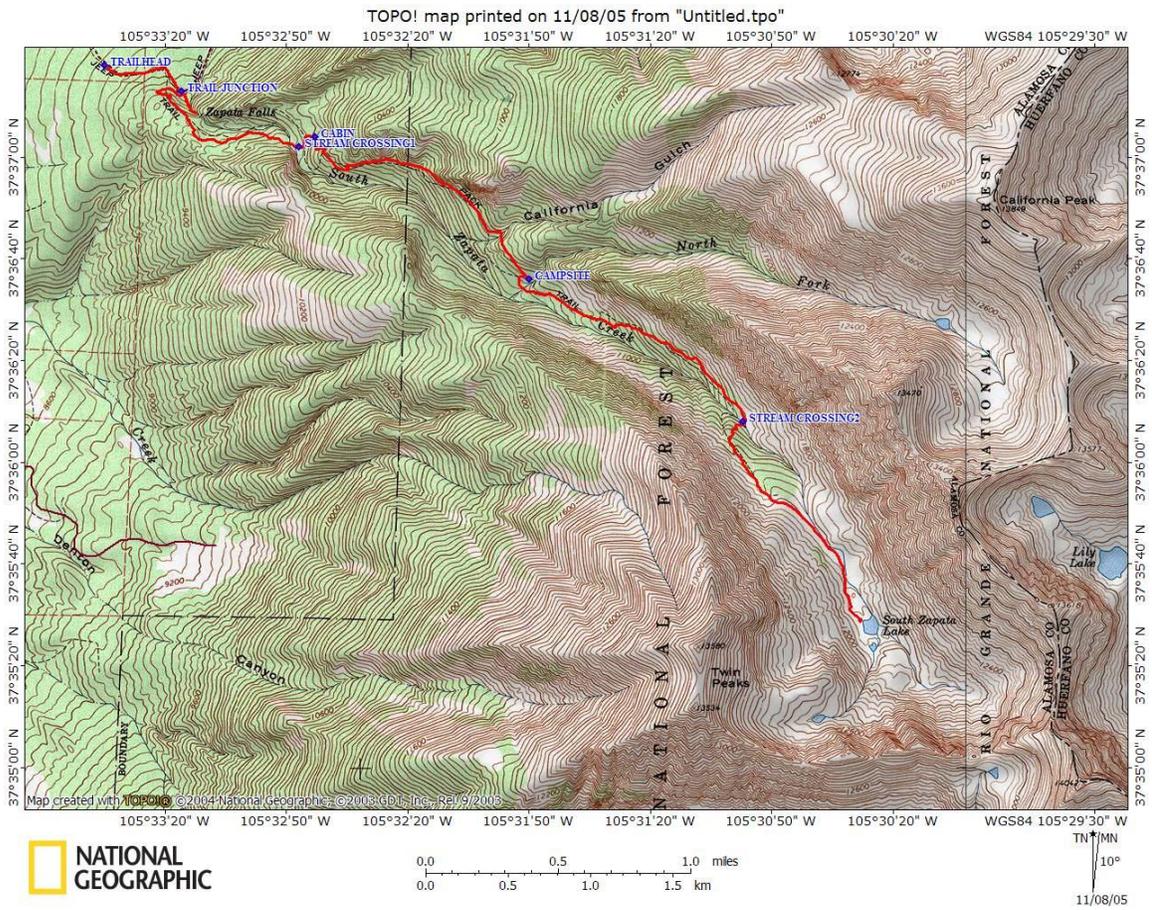
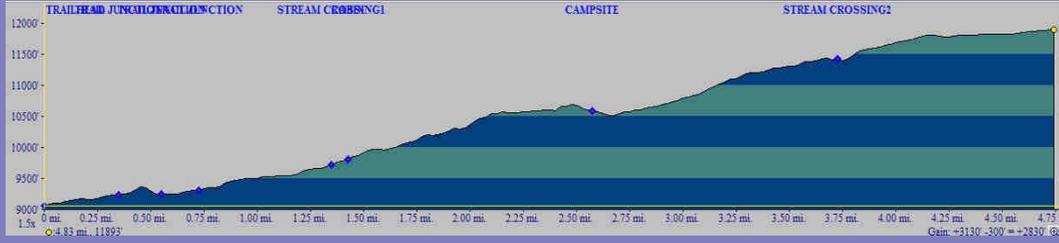
Hike Statistics:

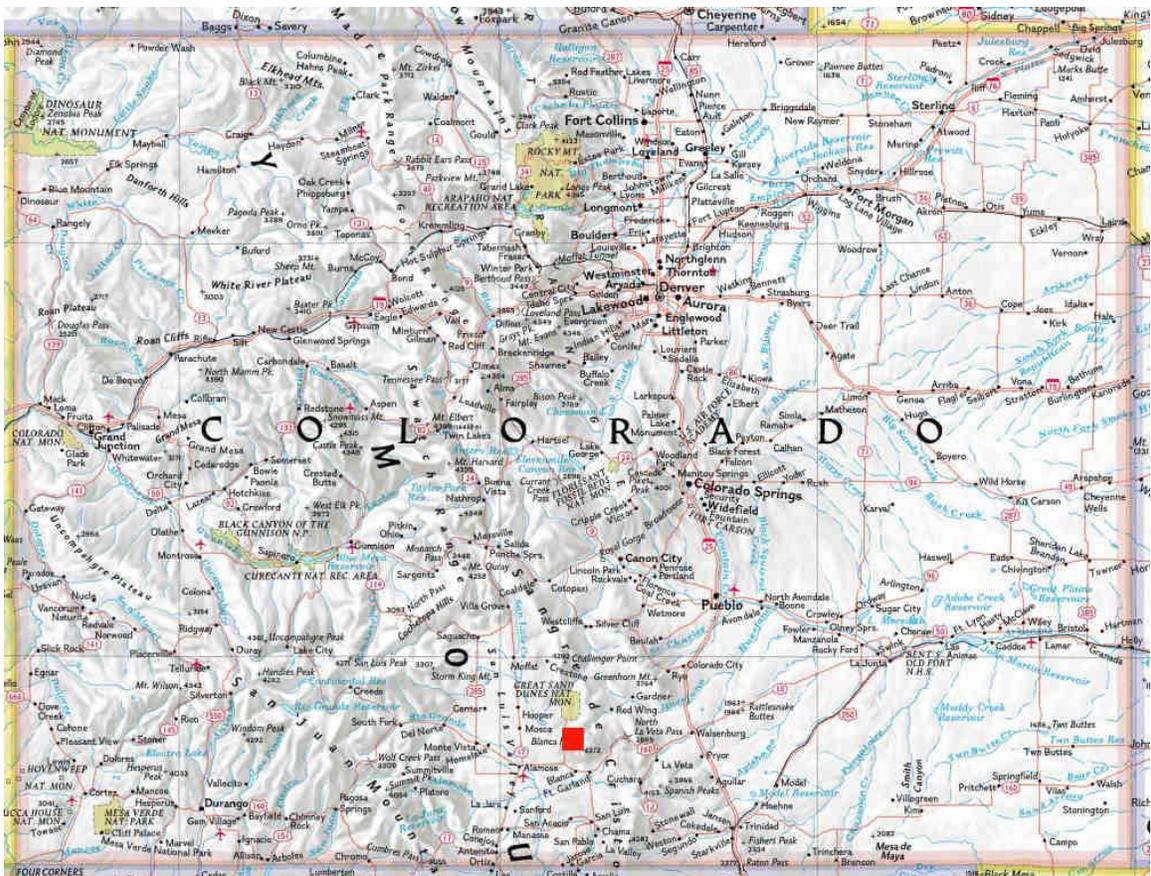
Trailhead to South Zapata Lake: 3300 feet of total elevation gain in 9 miles.

Difficulty: Strenuous on-trail hike

USGS Quad: Twin Peaks, CO

GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 TRAILHEAD: 37,37,18N / 105,33,35W, 9068 feet
 TRAIL JUNCTION: 37,37,13N / 105,33,16W, 9272 feet
 STREAM CROSSING1: 37,37,2N / 105,32,47W, 9734 feet
 CABIN: 37,37,4N / 105,32,43W, 9856 feet
 CAMPSITE: 37,36,36N / 105,31,50W, 10604 feet
 STREAM CROSSING2: 37,36,8N / 105,30,57W, 11394 feet





Colorado locator map