

## Wheeler Lake (12,168 feet) – Snowshoe/Ski tour by Dave Cooper



*Stormy day on the Wheeler Lake Trail*

Popular with hikers, peak-baggers and four-wheelers in the summer, the trail to Wheeler Lake takes on a very different character during the winter months.

This high alpine valley, the Middle Fork of the South Platte, can be a raw, desolate place on a cold, windy day. Recently I headed up to the lake on a day when the high temperature was only 10 degrees F. and the wind was blowing down the valley at 30 to 50 miles an hour – challenging conditions and limited visibility.

On other days however, spectacular views of the surrounding peaks reward the winter traveler. The valley is flanked by the long ridge of North Star Mountain to the south and the mass of Mount Lincoln to the north, while the head of the valley is dominated by Mount Democrat.

**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. The road is usually kept open to the spillway all winter, but expect snowy and sometimes icy road conditions. Four-wheel or all-wheel drive vehicles are recommended.

**Hike Statistics:**

Trailhead to Wheeler Lake: 1300 feet of total elevation gain in 3.4 miles (one way).

**Difficulty:** Easy snowshoe or ski, mostly above treeline, to a high alpine lake.

**USGS Quads:** Alma, CO; Climax, CO.



*Mount Democrat dominates the head of the valley*

Often scoured by the wind, the road can be difficult to ski. This year's better-than-average snow conditions, however, mean that most of the road is well covered. Snowshoes are always fine for this outing.

## Hike 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 owned and currently undergoing some repairs.



*The road passes under the Magnolia Mill*

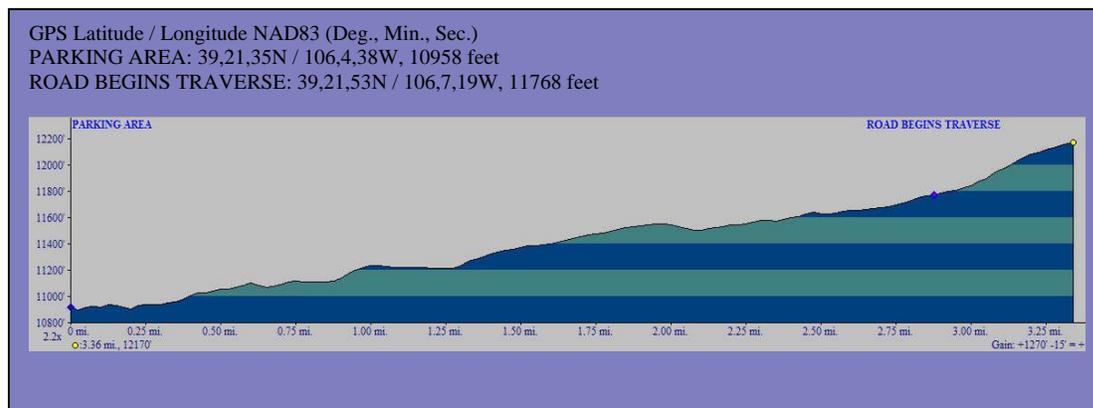
After passing the mill the jeep trail stays to the right of the drainage to avoid private property (and also avoid the willows filling the bottom of the valley).

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 reaching a flat spot just below the lake. Leave the road here and head directly towards the lake to avoid some potential avalanche slopes just west of the road.

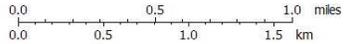
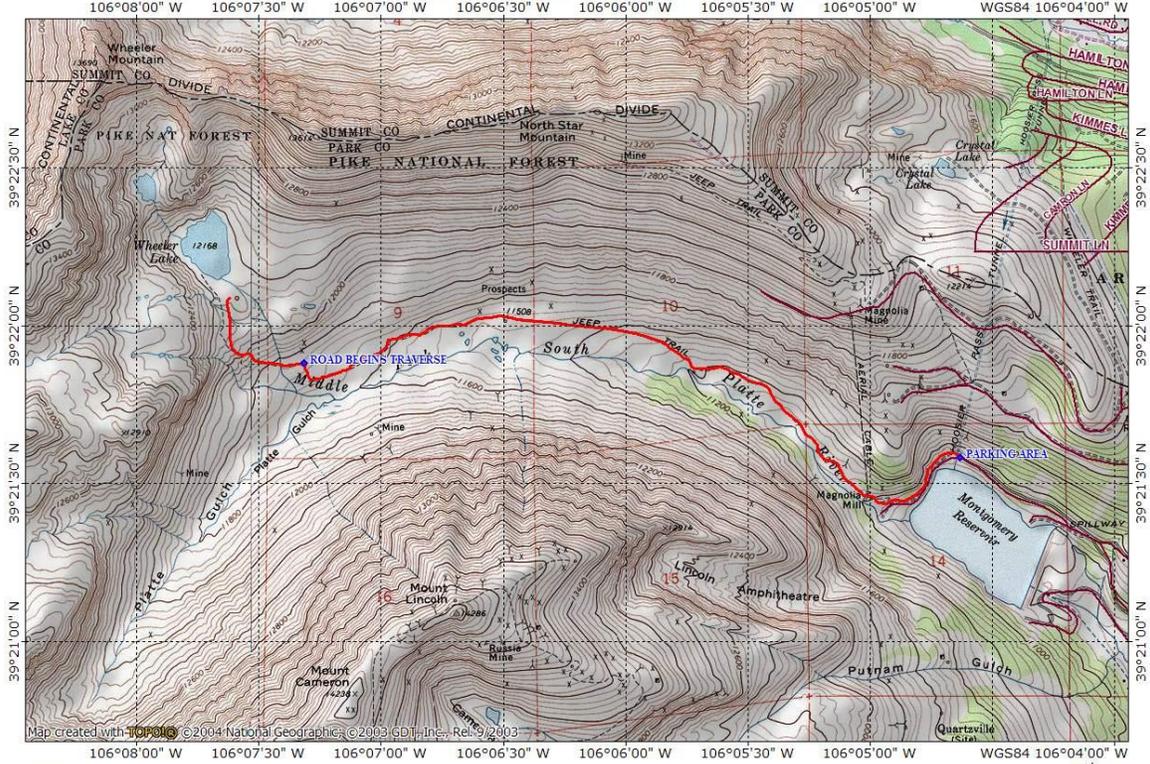
If you're on skis you may be tempted to continue on above the lake. At this time of year though, the slopes of Clinton Peak are prone to avalanche, so the lower lake makes a good turnaround point. Save these slopes for late spring when snow conditions stabilize and can provide fine skiing and snow-climbing opportunities (possibly combined with a climb of Wheeler Peak and/or Clinton Peak via their connecting saddle).



*Spring conditions above Wheeler Lake offer skiing and snow-climbing opportunities. The peak at upper right is Wheeler Peak. The ridgeline on the upper left of the photo leads to Clinton Peak.*



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TN MN  
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