The San Juan Mountains surrounding Telluride are among Colorado’s most beautiful and historic peaks. This chapter records some of the Telluride region’s most classic alpine rock routes.

Warning: These mountain routes are serious undertakings that should only be attempted by skilled, experienced climbers. Numerous hazards—loose rock, severe lightning storms, hard snow and ice and high altitudes—will most likely be encountered.

Come Prepared: An ice axe and crampons are almost always necessary for the approach, climb or descent from these mountains. Afternoon storms are very common in the summertime, dress accordingly. Loose rock is everpresent, wearing a helmet should be considered.

Rating Mountain Routes: Most routes in this section are rated based on the traditional Sierra Club system.
- Class 1  Hiking on a trail or easy cross-country
- Class 2  Easy scrambling using handholds
- Class 3  More difficult and exposed scrambling, a fall could be serious
- Class 4  Very exposed scrambling, a rope may be used for belaying or short-roping, a fall would be serious
- Class 5  Difficult rockclimbing where a rope and protection are used

Route Descriptions: The routes recorded here are mostly long scrambles with countless variations possible. Detailed route descriptions are not provided; good routefinding skills are therefore required. Routes described are for early to mid-summer conditions.

The Climbing Season: Climbers visit these mountains all year, but the main climbing season runs from June through September. Late spring through early summer is the best time, but mid-summer is the most popular. Less snow and more loose rock can be expected in late summer.
Peaks

Chris Boskoff on the summit of Lone Cone

Moab, Grand Junction

Norwood

Lone Cone

145

145

145

550

62

Mount Wilson

Wilson Peak

Gladstone

El Diente

Dallas Peak

Mount Emma

Teakettle

Mount Sneffels

South Lookout

U.S. Grant

Pilot Knob

Golden Horn

Vermillion Peak

San Miguel Peak

Dunton

Dolores

Cortez

Durango

Silverton

Ophir

Ouray

Ridgway

Montrose

Placerville

Telluride

Ouray

Ridgway

Moab, Grand Junction

map not to scale

High Country Climbs

130
Colorado’s most westerly mountain, the isolated pyramid of Lone Cone, is a striking regional landmark. From the summit on a clear day, one can see the Abajo, Henry and La Sal mountain ranges in Utah, the top of Shiprock in New Mexico and Monument Valley in Arizona.

Approach: Park at the pullout where USFS Road 612 crests the northeast shoulder of the mountain. Hike an abandoned road to a meadow and head south on old roads and faint trails leading to treeline on the Northeast Ridge.

Northeast Ridge, Class 5.1, follow the ridge crest past small towers. Where the ridge steepens, climb exposed slabs to the left on the east face.

Northwest Ridge, Class 2, ice axe and crampons may be needed. This is the easiest ascent route and the normal descent of the peak. From treeline, descend west and cross the moraine or snow below the north face, then up loose scree (or snow) to gain the crest of the Northwest Ridge, which follows to the summit.

North Face, Class 5/Snow & Mixed Numerous possibilities for challenging loose rock routes or snow and mixed routes. FA: Dwight and David Lavender, September 4, 1931.

Lone Cone is notorious for brewing deadly thunderstorms!
Lone Cone from the approach, NE Ridge on the left, NW Ridge on the right.

Lone Cone can be climbed quickly, in 3-5 hours roundtrip from the car. A high clearance vehicle is recommended for the drive to the trailhead.
Encompassing the high peaks of the rugged San Miguel Mountains, this compact area features three of Colorado’s most challenging fourteeners, one of the highest and most difficult thirteeners, and the state’s hardest summit, the namesake Lizard Head Peak.

SPECIAL RULES APPLY HERE:
- mechanized equipment is forbidden; this includes bikes and power drills
- campfires are banned in Navajo Basin
- camping is not allowed withing 100’ of lakes and streams
- cutting switchbacks and caching gear are prohibited

Approaches: There are many trails into this area, thus many options for approaching the peaks. Suggested approaches are noted. Be aware that there are private inholdings in and around the Lizard Head Wilderness and access to some routes may be temporarily closed—check locally.

Camping: The routes can all be done roundtrip from the car in a day by fit, acclimated climbers. However, camping is an option, with excellent sites in Navajo Basin and Bilk Basin. “Leave No Trace” ethics are required.

Climbing: With the exception of Lizard Head Peak and the South Buttress routes on Gladstone, climbers often do not bring a rope. An ice axe and crampons are highly recommended for all routes except Lizard Head. The rock here is notoriously loose, consider wearing a helmet.

Enchaining Routes: It is common for climbers to bag multiple summits on forays in this range. Commonly linked are the Wilson El Diente Traverse, the “three fourteeners in a day”, or the “Grand Slam” (the 14ers plus Gladstone). The “Grand Slam” or “three fourteeners in a day” is best done starting from Navajo Basin. A suggested itinerary: up the North Buttress of El Diente to Mount Wilson via Wilson-El Diente Traverse, then down the North Slopes. Gain Gladstone’s summit by the Southwest Couloir. Traverse the Northwest Ridge to Wilson Peak, joining the Southwest Ridge which is followed to the summit.
First climbed by J.W. Emerson and F.B. Notestein in 1911, this challenging peak is often neglected by climbers in favor of its higher neighbors, even though it offers fine climbing.

Approaches: Use the Woods Lake Trail (406), the Kilpacker Trail (203) or the Navajo Lake Trail (635) to reach Navajo Basin or hike up the trails into Silver Pick Basin and over the Rock Of Ages saddle. The trails from Bilk Creek Basin offer a good approach the Northwest Ridge. South Buttress routes can be accessed via the Cross Mountain Trail (637) and some cross-country hiking.

Northwest Ridge, Class 4, the long ridge connecting Gladstone with Wilson Peak. The standard ascent and descent route for the peak, this is a fun outing. Slightly easier than the Wilson-El Diente Traverse but with comparable climbing. Usually climbed by gaining the ridge at the lowest saddle at the head of Navajo Basin from the south or Bilk Basin from the north.

Southwest Couloir, Class 3/Snow This couloir offers a quick and interesting way to the ridge, joining the standard route at a notch high on the ridgecrest. The rock buttress forming the west side of the couloir has some fine rock pitches (South Buttress, Class 5, 5.9). There are also several technical rock climbs on the southeast to southwest buttresses.
First recorded ascent by Carl Blaurock, Dusty Smith and Bill Ervin in 1921, but likely climbed by miners and Native Americans before that.

Approaches: up trails into Silver Pick Basin and over the Rock Of Ages Saddle. An ice axe and crampons may be needed for the slopes below the saddle. The peak is easily accessed from Navajo Basin or Bilk Creek Basin as well.

West Face, Class 3/Snow The most direct route to the summit and the best descent to Silver Pick Basin. From the basin below the west side of the mountain, head up Class 1 slopes and climb the big snowfield left of a long rock spur. Traverse left under a rock rib and into a short couloir that becomes loose Class 2 when the snows melt. Join the regular route near the top.

Southwest Ridge, Class 3, the regular route up the peak. From the Rock Of Ages saddle, follow a Class 1 trail up and around the southeast shoulder, crossing Class 2 slabs. The trail eventually gains the ridge from the east. Class 3 climbing is encountered as the route follows the ridge, moving to the west side (ice and snow can be expected). Downclimb slightly where the West Face route joins the ridge, then continue up Class 3 scrambling to the summit.

Northwest Ridge, Class 4-5 A good route, easily accessed from Silver Pick Basin. From the basin below the west face of the mountain, head north and gain the ridge (Class 2 and/or snow) at its lowest point. Follow the ridge to the summit, Class 3 and 4 (possible Class 5 moves).
Mount Wilson - 14,246’

First ascent by members of the Hayden Survey party in 1874.

“There are fifty-odd peaks in Colorado fourteen thousand feet or more in elevation, and most require only stout shoe leather and stout lungs for a successful ascent. Mount Wilson (14,250’) is not one of them. In spots you have to scramble. Moreover, it’s rotten rock tends to sheer off in great gobs at a touch.”

— David Lavender, One Man’s West

Approaches: Use the Woods Lake Trail (406), the Kilpacker Trail (203) or the Navajo Lake Trail (635) to reach Navajo Basin or hike up trails into Silver Pick Basin and over the Rock Of Ages saddle.

Wilson El Diente Traverse, Class 4-5 The best way to the summit is by this classic ridge traverse from El Diente, described in detail on following pages.

North Slopes, Class 4/Snow Wander up snow and scree to a notch near the top. Rockclimb up the narrow ridge (exposed Class 4) to the summit.

Descent: the North Slopes route
Approaches: Use the Woods Lake Trail (406), the Kilpacker Trail (203) or the Navajo Lake Trail (635) to reach Navajo Lake. Alternatively, reach Navajo Basin from Silver Pick over the Rock Of Ages saddle.

West Ridge, Class 4 Usually start is south of Navajo Lake and then traversing southwest, eventually gaining the ridge. Follow the loose ridge to the summit. FA: Percy Thomas and N.G. Douglas, September 2, 1890.

North Buttress, Class 4-5 A good climb and the most direct route to the top. East of Navajo Lake, climb the buttress directly to El Diente’s summit. Low 5th class moves may be encountered.

North Slopes, Class 3/snow Steep snowslopes with many possible variations, leading to Class 3 rock and mixed climbing before gaining the summit ridge. A quick way to the top but requires backtracking if you are doing the traverse to Mount Wilson.

Central Couloir, Class 3/Snow A direct variation to the North Slopes, this route meets the ridge just west of the Organ Pipes.

Descent: Head east down the Wilson-El Diente traverse. When the ridge becomes flat, head northwest down Class 3 terrain to join the North Slopes route.
Mount Wilson-El Diente Traverse

One of the all-time classics of the Colorado Rockies. Nearly a mile long at or about 14,000’, the traverse is a very fun but potentially serious outing. Many lives have been lost due to the multiple hazards of the climb.

Advice and Suggestions:
- Get an early start and try to be off the last summit before noon. Afternoon thunderstorms are very common in the summertime.
- Be prepared for stormy weather and have an exit strategy. Retreat is a difficult proposition at many points along the ridge.
- Always take an ice axe and crampons. Most likely you will need them for the climb or descent of one of the peaks. Slipping on hard snow is a common cause of accidents on this climb.
- There is a lot of loose rock here, another frequent cause of accidents. Test your holds, choose your route well and wear a helmet.
- Local mountaineers generally regard climbing the ridge from El Diente or Mount Wilson the best and most efficient way to go.
- Take care, or take a rope.
Climb El Diente by the West Ridge or North Buttress. From the summit, head east, soon encountering Class 3 downclimbing and fun scrambling. Stay south (right) of the ridge at first, then west (left). Soon, a flat section of the ridge is met, where the North Slopes of El Diente join the ridge. (This is a good exit point, down to the west.) Continue along the ridgecrest, dropping down right (south) to avoid hard climbing. Beware of loose rock in this section.

The Organ Pipes are an obvious cluster of rock towers. Stay to the left on ledges, then up cracks and chimneys (low Class 5 moves) to an exit right, south around the towers’ summit. Climbers coming the other direction from Mount Wilson often rappel this section. You can avoid the rappel by climbing down around the Organ Pipes to the west, but this can be loose and icy. The direct route is better. Continue along the ridge over exposed but easy-going Class 1 and 2. Clever route-finding required.

The summit of Mount Wilson will appear close but challenges remain. Before the ridge takes a dive, scope out a route on the wall you will soon climb. Downclimb Class 2-3 rock to a saddle (another good exit point to the west), then carefully ascend the wall above (Class 3-4).

Farther along, stay on the narrow ridgecrest (very exposed Class 4) or drop south to easier but far less interesting terrain and arrive at the notch below the summit, joining the standard North Slopes route. The final Class 4 ridge to the summit is sporty; stay to the left (east) at first, then to the right (west) of the ridge.

The standard descent is down the North Slopes of Mount Wilson.
Northwest Buttress, 5.8 Three pitches to the north summit, rap route.

Original Route, 5.7-5.8 Climb a shattered crack system on the southwest corner to a fixed anchor at the big terrace. Scramble up loose funk to the base of the summit block. The first ascent party climbed the wide zig-zag crack right of the standard route.

South Face 5.7-5.8 Climb the obvious shattered crack to the big terrace.

Arete Route, 5.9R Reach the notch on the South Crack route from the southeast.

Descent: Rap straight down the original finish on the summit block (100’). Scramble down to the notch on the standard route and do one 100’ rap to the ground.
South Crack, 5.8 The standard, recommended route up the big left-facing corner in the middle of the south face.

Pitch 1, 5.6 Climb loose chimney to a small ledge with a fixed anchor.
Pitch 2, 5.7 Continue past some old fixed gear, chimney to a steep hand-crack, ending at a rappel anchor in a notch. The first two pitches are often combined into one 100' pitch.
Pitch 3, Class 3 Up and left to below steep wide crack on the west face of the summit block. Beware of loose rock.
Pitch 4, 5.8 Climb the steep fist crack/OW (often wet and icy) to an easier chimney.
Pitch 5 A short, loose Class 2 scramble to the top.

Gear: One 60m rope, 2 sets of cams to 4 inches, 1 set of nuts, several long runners, helmet and foul weather clothing.
Dallas Peak and the South Ridge of Mount Sneffels fall within the boundary of the Mount Sneffels Wilderness.

SPECIAL RULES APPLY HERE:
- mechanized equipment is forbidden; this includes bikes and power drills
- campfires are banned in the Blue Lakes area and the northwest side of Mount Sneffels
- camping is not allowed within 100’ of lakes and streams
- cutting switchbacks and caching gear are prohibited

Approaches: Although Mount Sneffels and Teakettle are only 5 miles from Telluride, they are usually approached from Ouray. South of Ouray on Highway 550, take a right turn to Camp Bird Mine (CR 361). Just before the mine, take a right on USFS Road 853 to Yankee Boy Basin. A high-clearance vehicle recommended. Alternatively, both Yankee Boy and Blaine Basin can be approached from the north via the East Dallas Creek Road. Dallas Peak and Mount Emma are right outside of Telluride and can be approached from town.

Camping: Dallas Peak and Mount Emma are normally done as daytrips from Telluride. There are campsites below Dallas after entering the Mount Sneffels Wilderness. Yankee Boy Basin is very heavily used in summer, camping here is not recommended and may be restricted.

Climbing: A short approach to very beautiful peaks makes this area very popular. As always in the San Juans, an ice axe and crampons should be carried.
Mount Sneffels Range - Peaks and Approaches

Dallas Peak
Mount Emma
Teakettle Mountain

High Country Climbs
One of the more difficult summits in Colorado. Trailhead is just west of Telluride and follows the Mill Creek Trail north. Go west (left) on the Deep Creek Trail (418), then head north on the Sneffels Highline Trail (434) crossing into the Mount Sneffels Wilderness. Continue north and east on the trail until below the southeast face of Dallas Peak.

Southeast Face, Class 5 This classic route involves a lot of Class 2 and 3 scrambling to the summit block, which is overcome with some Class 5 climbing. Leave the Sneffels Highline Trail and hike up through meadows, heading for the large cliff band that is the distinguishing feature of the south face. Class 2 and 3 scrambling through cliff bands and screeslopes leads up and right underneath this cliff band (which has been climbed directly, 5.8 in 3 pitches). Continue climbing northeast until reaching the east face. From here, the route stays to the south of the east ridge and involves Class 2 - 4 climbing south and west towards the summit. Snowfilled gullies are common as the easiest route then moves north below the summit block. Finish up with a low Class 5 pitch or do harder variations (up to 5.7) to the southeast.

Descent: Downclimb or one 80’ rappel to the northeast, then climb down the route.
Another good day trip from Telluride, the route described here traverses the mountain.

Approach: At the top of Aspen Street in Telluride, find the Jub Weibe Trail and head up and west of town. When the trail turns back east, take the Sneffels Highline Trail (434) northeast into Pack Basin.

Southwest Ridge, Class 3 Leave the trail and head up really loose scree to gain the saddle between Mount Emma and 12,490. Follow the southwest ridge to the summit; fun Class 2 and 3 scrambling.

Descent: From the summit, head down the South Ridge (Class 2-3) towards Greenback Mountain. Head southeast down slopes and meadows to the abandoned Liberty Bell Mine. Pick up the old mining road here and head south towards Telluride. Join the Jub Weibe Trail and continue south, arriving in town at the top of Oak Street.
Approach: Use the trailhead in Yankee Boy Basin to access the Southeast Couloir and South Ridge routes. Take the Blaine Basin Trail or climb to the Lavender Col and descend into Blaine Basin to reach the North Buttress.

Southeast Couloir, Class 3/Snow This is the standard route and quite popular in the summertime. From the highest parking area on the road, contour northwest until below the Lavender Col between Sneffels and Kismet (13,694’). Climb scree or snow directly to this col at13,500'. Climb northwest into the obvious southeast couloir. Near the top of the couloir, make a Class 3 exit left (west) and scramble (Class 2) to the top.

South Ridge, Class 3 or 5 A fine route, one of the best alpine climbs in the area. From Blue Lakes Pass head north up the ridge past a series of towers on the ridgecrest, low Class 5. The difficulties of this section can be avoided by climbing to the west of the ridge, Class 3. From the notch in the ridge above the towers, climb a loose southfacing gulley to gain the upper ridge, which is enjoyable Class 3. The upper ridge can also be reached by climbing snow couloirs and rock slabs (Class 3) on the Southeast Face.

North Buttress, Class 5/Snow A classic route on good rock, this takes the central buttress above Blaine Basin. From the top of the large snowfield and left of the Snake Couloir, gain the buttress by traversing from the right. The initial 400’ provide the greatest challenges. Where the buttress joins the Snake Couloir near the top, follow that route left (east) to join the final section of the southeast ridge (Class 2) a bit west of the normal route or climb the original finish to the summit, directly up a short rock buttress (low Class 5). FA: Dwight Lavender, Mel Griffiths, Lewis Giesecke, Mary and Frank McLintock, August 1933.

Descent: Down the Southeast Couloir to Lavender Col; from there, down northeast to Blaine Basin or down the normal route to Yankee Boy Basin.

FA: Members of the Hayden Survey, September 10, 1874
Teakettle Mountain - 13,819’

Approach: From the normal trailhead in Yankee Boy Basin, hike or 4 wheel drive to the higher parking area at 11,300’.

Southeast Face Class 5: A long, circuitous route but fairly safe and fun. From the road, head north then northeast, aiming for the big tower known as the Coffeepot (13,568). From the southwest base of the tower drop down westward, then do a rising traverse northwest to a loose couloir, Class 3. From the top of the couloir exit left and continue north-west through cliff-bands (Class 2) to a notch at the northeast corner, near the summit. Go left (east) and arrive at the final pitch, a 5.3 chimney.

Descent: Downclimb or rappel the summit pitch (40’). Descend the route, but rather than traversing and climbing back up to the Coffeepot, descend a long loose gulley directly to meadows above the parking area.

FA: Charles Rolfe and Alonzo Hartman, August 1929
The peaks of Silverton West are among the most accessible and moderate in the region.

Approaches: These peaks can be approached from either the west or the east. From the west, take the Trout Lake Road (FS 628) through the private Trout Lake subdivision and up a rough road (high clearance vehicle recommended) to the Lake Hope trailhead. From the east, take the South Mineral Creek Road (FS 535) to the South Mineral campground and Ice Lake trailhead.

Camping: On the east side, there is a USFS campground at the Ice Lake trailhead, opened seasonally. Camping is popular up in Ice lake Basin below the peaks; please camp at least 100′ from any lake or stream. On the west side, there are some USFS campgrounds nearby (refer to the introduction of the book). From the west, the peaks are usually done as daytrips, although camping near Lake Hope and Poverty Gulch are options.

Climbing: The climbs in this range tend to involve moderate approaches, often on snow, to steep summit pitches up loose rock. A rope and small rack is recommended for most of these climbs.
Peaks and Approaches

Vermillion Peak & Golden Horn from HWY 145

South Lookout
Ulysses S. Grant
Pilot Knob
Poverty Gulch

Vermillion Peak
Fuller Peak
Beattie Peak

Lake Hope Trail (410)
San Miguel Peak

Trout Lake

Lizard Head Pass
to Durango
Silverton

Easy 4x4 road
Tough 4x4 road

Ophir Pass Road FS 630
Ophir Pass Road FS 679
Ice Lake Trail (505)
South Mineral Creek Road FS 535

map not to scale

High Country Climbs
Vermillion Peak - 13,894’

Summits from left to right as seen from San Miguel Peak: Pilot Knob, Golden Horn, Vermillion Peak, Fuller Peak, Beattie Mountain. Route marked: Southeast Ridge of Vermillion Peak as climbed from the west.

Approach: Often approached from Ice Lake Basin. Use the Hope Lake Trail or Poverty Gulch (cross-country, snow likely) to climb the peak from the west.

Southeast Ridge, Class 3/Snow From Ice Lake Basin, climb slopes to the saddle between Vermillion Peak and Fuller Peak. This saddle can be also be reached from the west: From the Hope Lake Trail, climb to the saddle between Fuller Peak and Beattie Peak to the south. Climb northeast to the summit of Fuller Peak then descend to the Vermillion-Fuller saddle. Follow the ridge to the summit (Class 3). Stay to the south of the ridge (left) to avoid difficult sections.

Northeast Ridge, Class 3/Snow A more challenging route than the standard Southeast Ridge. Reach the saddle between Vermillion Peak and Golden Horn from the east (Ice Lake Basin) or west (Poverty Gulch). Climb the ridge (Class 3), avoiding a tower by moving right (west). Higher up, skirt a steep wall by traversing left (east). Climb a couloir to a notch, then Class 3 to the top.

Descent: Down the Southeast Ridge

FA: members of the Hayden Survey, 1874

Golden Horn - 13,780’

Approach: Reach the Vermillion-Golden Horn saddle from Ice Lake Basin or Poverty Gulch.

Southern Route, Class 2-3 Climb the southwest ridge, then move right (east) onto the southeast face which is followed to the top. Descend the route.

FA: Jones, Spencer, Speer and Baer, 1932
Pilot Knob - 13,738’
Approach: Best from Poverty Gulch, but can be done from Ice Lake Basin.

North Summit, Class 4 Climb a gulley on the west face to the notch between the north and central summits, Class 3. From the notch, climb the west side of the exposed ridge (Class 4) past a foresummit to the top.

Descent: Downclimb the route or do a long rappel down the west face from the foresummit.

FA: Chase, reputedly in the late 1920s.

Ulysses S. Grant - 13,767’
Approach: From lower Ice Lake Basin, head northwest to Island Lake, below the southeast face of the peak.

Southwest Ridge, Class 4-5 From the lake, climb to the saddle on the ridge to the west. Climb the ridge to a ledge system that traverses right (east) to the south face, which is then climbed to the summit. Descend the route.

FA: Mike Walters and Colorado Mountain Club team, 1932

South Lookout Peak - 13,380’
Approach: Drive or Hike to Clear Lake, southeast of the mountain.

Southeast Route, Class 4 From the lake, climb the southeast face to the south ridge and on to the south summit (Class 2). Traverse northeast on poor rock to the true summit. Descend the route.

FA: T.T. Ranney and Jess Wood, August 1931

San Miguel Peak - 13,752’
Approach: Take the Hope Lake Trail Just before arriving at the lake, contour west to the mountain.

Northeast Ridge, Class 2 or 3 Follow the eastern flank of the ridge to the top, descend the same route.