

Weminuche Llama Trek, September 2009

Pine River to Emerald Lake

Guide Book Excerpts

From *A Backpacking Guide to the Weminuche Wilderness* by Dennis Gebhardt; Basin Reproduction and Printing Company; Durango, Colorado, 1976; 173 pages.

PINE RIVER TRAIL

- Trailhead Elevation – 7,910'
- Total vertical descent – 2,720'
- Ending elevation – 10,630';
- Length: 22.0 miles one way
- Maps: 7½' Vallecito Reservoir, 7½' Granite Peak, 7½' Emerald Lake, 7½' Granite Lake, 7½' Weminuche Pass, San Juan National Forest

To reach the Pine River Campground, the trailhead (J) for the Pine River Trail, you drive to the Vallecito Forest Service Work Center as described in trail No. 10. You keep right at this junction and continue for 7.2 miles to the Pine River Campground.

The Pine River (also called Los Pinos) Trail goes through the heart of the Wilderness and it meets or is the trailhead for eleven other trails. This generally wide, clear trail has few steep places which makes it a favorite with horse packers: .Although this trail receives heavy use, particularly up to Flint Creek Trail (No. 17) mile 11.75, the valley large and camping with amount of solitude is usually available, especially in the upper half. Commercial horse packers don't have a big impact until July and the lower elevations of the Pine can provide some fine snow-free hiking. The trail stays on the west side of the Pine River the entire way, avoiding what would be a pretty rough crossing from La Osa Creek on down.

The Pine River Trail ends at Weminuche Pass (10,622'), the lowest point on the Continental Divide in the Weminuche Wilderness. This fact in addition to the gentle ascent made the valley natural for the Indian-engineered trail that the first explorers found. It is also said that buffalo roamed across spacious Weminuche Pass.

The trail is on private land for the first 5.0 miles and the fences and gates are aesthetically inappropriate for the beginning of this important trail. The Forest Service plans to negotiate permanent right-of-way for this section but until that time please obey all signs and avoid actions which might encourage the Granite Peak Ranch to close the access. The trail passes through the nearly level valley with large old Ponderosa pines mixed with Douglas fir and occasional white fir trees. Watch for the beautiful tassel-eared (Abert) squirrel around the Ponderosas. At mile 1.25 you cross Indian Creek, where you can stop for a cold drink on the sometimes dusty trail. At mile 2.5 you look up over 3,000' of rockslide to Runlett Peak (11,188'), where you will probably be watched by marmots who live in this heap of lichen-covered boulders. Continuing on, the way is a wildflower enthusiast's delight. Low places along the trail are boggy which makes perfect conditions for such beauties as purple monkshood, bog orchids, larkspur, arnica, and thick bushy growths of bluebells. After about mile 3.0 you can look across the valley to Granite Peak (12,147'), but you cannot see the actual summit. You cross a bridge at Lake Creek (mile 5.75) and this is a good lunch stop where you can watch the waters coming from Emerald and Moon Lakes. In about 150 yards, Emerald Lake Trail (No. 15) goes left along with many of the people. The valley walls close in for the next 2.0 miles and the Pine River thunders through the narrow granite channel below you. If you take off your pack and work your way down into the gorge, there are marvelous cascades, chutes and falls on this wild river that can fascinate you for hours. The valley

widens briefly at mile 7.5 for a good campsite,¹ in an aspen grove and then narrows until a little past mile 8.0, at Willow Park. From Willow Park (about 8,720'), aspen becomes the tree that dominates the scenery².

The river meanders through this spacious valley and at mile 9.0 there is a large double falls on Falls Creek to the right. Porcupine Creek, which is at mile 10.5, runs quite a bit of water and may have to be forded in the early season. You begin to gain some elevation as you climb to Flint Creek and Flint Creek Trail (No. 17), mile 11.75. Before you leave the hillside turn around and look down-canyon; there is almost a textbook example of a U-shaped glacial valley laid out before you. To the east is rough Flag Mountain (12,323').

When you are removing your shoes and socks to cross cold Flint Creek, look up Flint Creek canyon to the unusual rock formation of Pope's Nose (11,148'). The trail crosses Flint Creek in a good place, but a third leg in the form of a sturdy stick may be helpful. You now encounter the part of the Pine River Trail that has any real steepness and about 0.5 mile past Flint Creek there is a tremendous falls on the Pine a short way down from the trail. Sierra Vandera Creek is soon seen where it joins the Pine from the east. Climbing through the thick aspen forest you cross a number of small streams including Pope Creek (mile 13.0) which is well utilized by a beaver colony³. 0.2 mile further on is where you would make a difficult crossing of the Pine to reach Sierra Vander a Trail (No. 18; also called the Pine-Piedra Driveway). After another 0.5 mile the valley opens up and levels out once more. The character of the land changes because soon the light colored aspen are left behind for the dark spruces and firs. The trail looks like it crosses the Pine here but you can stay with a trail high on the left to avoid this.

At mile 14.4 you have to cross South Canyon Creek and if the run-off is heavy you may have to make still another ford. The valley may be at its prettiest in this section with grassy benches extending out to the slow-moving river. Camping on one of these benches can reward you with sights such as a beaver making his way upriver or a red-tailed hawk keeping his country under surveillance. At mile 15.5 you pass the Granite Peak Guard Station, built in 1916 for Wilderness management. 0.3 mile further, you are across from an opening in the valley wall to the east where Divide Lakes are located and Divide Lakes Trail (No. 19) and Granite Lake Trail (No. 20) begin. You cross, and will possibly have to wade Canon Paso at mile 16.6. The trail climbs a little more now, through some muddy places. At mile 18.25 there is a cut-off that crosses the Pine to a good camping place at the mouth of Snow-slide Canyon. The Piedra Stock Driveway (No. 23), which passed the eastside of Granite Lake, is also found in these concealed meadows 0.5 mile east of the Pine River. Before Rincon La Osa you begin to hear, then see a miniature Niagara falls on the Pine River, and shortly thereafter, at mile 19.0 you come to Rincon La Osa Trail (No. 22). It will be necessary to wade La Osa Creek. Climbing 350' in the next mile, you top a hill and see the two-mile long by two-mile wide meadows of Weminuche Pass laid out before you. This has to be one of the most beautiful places in the Weminuche Wilderness with the steep mountain sides rising from vast expanse of meadow. At mile 20.8 after crossing (and probably fording) Rincon La Vaca Creek you meet the Continental Divide Trail (No. 59) as it crosses the valley to the east to ascend the North Fork of the Pine. It may be hard to see at this point. Also, from this position you should be able to get a view of the Rio Grande Pyramid and La Ventana (the Window) to the west, two important landmarks for explorers. At mile 21.1 you cross a diversion ditch⁴ and find the Continental Divide Trail going west up La Vaca

¹ There were improved campsites with table, grates and outhouses at Blue Spruce Canyon, Willow Park, Falls Creek, Flag Mountain and around Emerald Lake until they were removed in the summer of 1975 after the area received Wilderness designation.

² Records show that around the turn of the century, and just before the National Forest was organized; there were quite a few fires along the Pine River and Vallecito drainages that burned extensive acreages. Although this is the normal elevation for aspen it is probable that the way for them was cleared by these disastrous fires.

³ The beaver was nearly trapped out of existence in the Rocky Mountains by the mountain men in the 19th century. Beavers have made a remarkable comeback and the Forest Service and the Game and Fish Department even have to restrict their activities at Pope Creek in order to maintain a trail.

⁴ The Raber Lobr Ditch, taking water from Rincon La Vaca Creek, and the Fuchs Ditch, taking water from the North Fork of the Pine, were built in 1935 and ease western slope waters over gentle Weminuche Pass to the Rip Grande and arid San Luis Valley.

Creek. Continue north and at mile 22.0, you arrive at Weminuche Pass (10,622')⁵ and can take Weminuche Creek Trail (No. 53) down to Rio Grande Reservoir and Thirty- Mile Campground (BB) or the high La Vaca trail that climbs up in the old burn to the west (left).

EMERALD LAKE TRAIL

- Trailhead Elevation – 8,360'
- Total vertical descent – 3,260'
- Highest Point – 11,620'
- Length: 8.75 miles one way
- Maps -- 7½' Emerald Lake, San Juan National Forest

The destination of many visitors to the Pine River country of the Weminuche Wilderness is magnificent Emerald Lake. Emerald Lake is 4.0 miles up Emerald Lake Trail and is noted for its size (second largest natural lake in Colorado at 279 acres), its scenic beauty and good fishing. This mile and a half long by ½ mile wide, 248' deep, landslide-created lake has fairly adequate camping along the east side and usually not high numbers of people around the middle of the week. Beware of the hordes around the 4th of July, though. Even in times of heavy use you can usually find a secluded campsite a mile or so above the lake. Dry, warm winters have seen Emerald Lake (10,033') open by Memorial Day, but the average date is closer to the middle of June.

Emerald Lake Trail begins on the Pine River Trail (No. 14) at mile 5.75. The well-marked trail ascends steeply at first through aspen and conifers with vociferous Lake Creek not far away. The walls of Lake Creek's canyon tower 3,000' above you. At mile 1.5 the trail levels off into a meadow called the "cabbage patch" which is full of miner's candles. If you have walked from the Pine River Campground you may be eyeing this area as a campsite. It is not too satisfactory and there are a few small sites closer to Lake Creek a little further on. You may be asked to move by the Forest Service anyway. Another small meadow and at mile 2.0 you are right by Lake Creek where Hell Canyon Manway (No. 13) crosses. The U.S.G.S. map shows your trail briefly crossing here but you don't have to worry; it doesn't. You soon begin the steep climb that will take you over the landslide that formed Emerald Lake⁶. At mile 3.0 you reach an area where the trees thin out to some small and twisted aspen. This is a snow slide path which runs over the old landslide and is a very good place for wildflowers. Scattered among the rocks you find flowers that prefer a sunny well-drained slope: showy daisies, purple and yellow, Indian paintbrush, and harebells, to name a few.

Entering a stand of dark timber which often contains snow into July, you slowly climb over the crest of the landslide and descend to Little Emerald Lake. The trail picks its way through gigantic boulders and at mile 4.0 you come to a junction in the trail. Left takes you between Big and Little Emerald Lakes and to some breezy campsites. Right, you continue along the east shoreline of Big Emerald, to the meadows in the valley above and eventually to Moon Lake. When you reach Emerald Lake you will notice a noisy falls on the opposite side of the lake. The water comes down from Dollar Lake and usually tapers off by midsummer. The route around Emerald is almost continually climbing or descending small amounts and the paths of several snow slides that go right into the lake are crossed. The snow slides leave the slopes clear for beautiful flower gardens. In July you may be able to identify 15 - 20 different kinds of flowers growing in these spots. At mile 5.5 at the end of the lake a small stream is crossed and after another 0.2 mile you will have to ford Lake Creek, a very full stream until late summer.

Climbing moderately on the west side of Lake Creek through the upper valley, you will find many meadows along the capricious stream. Spectacular falls plunge down from hidden cirques and the grandeur of the setting is enhanced by the fine unnamed peaks at the head of the valley. At mile 7.0 you cross Lake Creek again and shortly thereafter the way grows steep. The canyon curves left and as you climb past many cold streams that beg to be sampled, you

⁵ James Pattie was probably the first white to cross Weminuche Pass. Directed up the Pine River by Utes who were camped in the vicinity of the present site of Bayfield, the passage took six days, in early May 1827, and his personal narrative speaks of bare peaks and compact snow drifts higher than a man on a horse.

⁶ Geologists believe that the landslide of Precambrian granite tumbled into the valley from the east side. The depth and sheerness of the walls created by intense glaciation were the conditions that helped bring about this massive slide.

will soon see a big falls on Lake Creek and also one on a tributary of Lake Creek to the left. After more hard climbing, the trail levels into the area below the most spectacular falls on Lake Creek's drainage. At mile 8.5 you cross Lake Creek again and climb the remaining 0.25 miles to Moon Lake (11,620'). This fair-sized lake with a highly curved shoreline has a Manway (No. 16) around the north side (right) that ascends to Half Moon Lake and over the mountains to Rock Lake. Mt. Oso (13,684') is the large dominating summit to the west.