

Weminuche Backpacking Trip, September 2012

Pine River to Needleton

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.

NO. 16 - HALF MOON TRAIL (Manway)

From Gebhardt, Dennis. A Backpacking Guide to the Weminuche Wilderness.
Durango, Colorado: Basin Reproduction and Printing Company, 1976, pp. 63-65

Trailhead elevation - 11,841'

Total vertical ascent - 639'

Highest point - 12,480'

Total vertical descent - 860'

Highest point - 8,800'

Length - 2.0 miles one way

Maps -7 1/2' Emerald Lake, San Juan National Forest

This manway, which connects Rock Creek Trail (No. 11) and Emerald Lake Trail (No. 15) has developed from the cross-country route between Rock and Moon Lakes. Since it is narrow and rocky, you have to pick your way carefully because this would be a poor place to get a sprained ankle.

From Rock Lake you walk around the east side, climb the low hills and locate a steep gully of grass and rock. This gully leads to a small valley that runs east under the face of an unnamed 13,120' peak. As you work up the gully you begin seeing small cairns consisting of two or three rocks and soon the trail becomes evident. The gully levels out and you turn right before reaching a little rock-bound lake. Be sure you locate the cairns that mark the trail as you begin the steep ascent to the saddle that lies ahead. As you climb through the sliderock it appears that rocks have been rolled aside in the worst places to improve the trail. When you reach the saddle at mile .75 you must immediately turn right and climb another 80' of elevation. This bypasses some dangerous cliffs you would encounter if you begin traversing from the low point of the saddle.

You are in a world of mostly rock, angling steeply skyward. The view down to Moon Lake and the mountains around it is breathtaking. This would be a likely place to observe ptarmigan. The route circles left to a small grassy basin and the obvious trail that descends to Half Moon Lake (12,200') at mile 1.0. There is no satisfactory camping at Half Moon Lake. The trail begins to descend from Half Moon's basin and crosses to the left side of the stream. The way is rocky and slow-going until it levels out some-what. You then go right (the cairns are now scarce) and the stream is recrossed just before the final steepness above Moon Lake's basin. Walking along the north shoreline you cross the lake's outlet and find Emerald Lake Trail (No. 15).

If you want to go from Moon Lake to Rock Lake be sure that summer is far enough along so that the snow is at a minimum. You could easily ascend the sunny south slopes from Moon and Half Moon Lakes and then have difficulties with snow on the north faces above Rock Lake. Generally, this route is not practical for the average backpacker until the middle of July.

NO. 11 - ROCK CREEK TRAIL

From Gebhardt, Dennis. A Backpacking Guide to the Weminuche Wilderness.
Durango, Colorado: Basin Reproduction and Printing Company, 1976, pp. 63-65

Trailhead elevation - 10,133'

Total vertical ascent - 3,187'

Highest point - 12,000'

Total vertical descent - 400'

Length - 7.5 miles one way

Maps – 7 ½ Storm King Peak
7 ½' Emerald Lake
7 ½' Rio Grande Pyramid
San Juan National Forest

Rock Creek Trail begins at mile 14.0 on Vallecito Creek Trail (No. 10). The lakes on the hydrological divide between Flint and Rock Creeks, as well as the accessibility of the Ute Lakes country just over the Continental Divide, are primary reasons for the heavy **From where the mineralized springs seep into Rock Creek to about 1.0 mile down the Vallecito there are no fish. For drinking, the water seems fine but for extended use it might be better to be on the safe side and take water from the Vallecito above Rock Creek. use this area receives. Also, Rock Creek Trail and Flint Creek Trail connect the Vallecito and Pine River Trails and this is a popular way of crossing from one drainage to the other.

The first 1.5 miles of trail climb a little over 1000' to where the large meadows begin. The meadows make good pictures but poor camping because of bogs and springs and the better camping is at the upper end of these meadows around mile 3.0. After the meadows, when you start to climb and ford Rock Creek at mile 3.5, a trail takes off left. This is one of the many non-Forest Service trails in the vicinity you will find to bewilder you. Generally these trails cause erosion because they are poorly situated and are the result of an outfitter's repeated use of a time saving cut-off, practical only for one direction of travel. You stay right and again wade Rock Creek at mile 3.75. Just before crossing Rock Creek at this point a .2 mile trail ascends the creek on the right to 11,841' Rock Lake. If you plan on camping at this good-sized lake (31 acres) tucked away in a glacial cirque, make sure you have the kind of equipment necessary to weather storms and cook above timberline. Behind and to the right of Rock Lake is Peters Peak (13,122'), and standing watch over Rock Creek is the hump-backed Buffalo Peak (12,728'). Around the lake to the east a manway (No. 16) begins and climbs over the mountains to Half Moon and Moon Lakes.

Back on Rock Creek Trail, you curve left under an 800' cliff with icy cold springs at the base and climb a few switchbacks. At mile 4.4 you will meet a short trail which climbs 320' to the Continental Divide, which at this point is a grass covered slope. The Continental Divide Trail (No. 59) is .8 mile away and Twin Lakes (on the Ute Creek drainage) are 1.5 miles distant. You keep right and lose a little elevation as you pass some of the small lakes of the Flint Lakes group. You will also notice some very rough country to the south (right) with many unnamed peaks deeply gouged with glacial cirques that contain quite a few lakes and no trails.

At mile 5.5 Flint Creek Trail (No. 17) is met coming in from the right and Rock Creek Trail turns left and passes by the big Flint Lake (11,620'), about 300' away. This attractive lake has a shoreline with boulders and trees right to the water's edge and looks as though it could have come from the north woods of Minnesota. After meandering through some glacially well-polished bedrock country the trail comes to a little valley at mile 6.8 which you ascend until you meet the Continental Divide Trail (No. 59) at mile 7.5.

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

VALLECITO CREEK TRAIL

- Starting Elevation – 7,916'
 - Total vertical descent – 3,604'
 - Ending elevation – 11,520'
 - Length: 17.0 miles
 - Maps: 7½' Vallecito Reservoir, 7½' Columbine Pass, 7½' Storm King Peak , San Juan National Forest
- Vallecito (Spanish: little valley) Creek Trail, one of the most scenic in the Wilderness, begins at the Vallecito Creek Campground (H). To reach Vallecito Reservoir you can go north from Highway 160 at Bayfield on the paved county road known as the Vallecito Road, or east from Durango on paved Florida Road. When you reach the dam it is another 5.0 miles to the Vallecito Forest Service Work Center, where you go left at a junction for 3.0 more miles to the trailhead at Vallecito Campground.

Vallecito Trail is one of the most heavily used trails in the Weminuche Wilderness. Many people take the Narrow Gauge Train to Needleton and climb to Columbine Pass, descend Johnson Creek to Vallecito Trail and go out to Vallecito Campground. Another popular route is to ascend Vallecito Trail to Rock Creek and .from here go over the Pine River Trail (No. 14) via Rock Creek Trail (No. 11) and Flint Creek Trail (No. 17). Vallecito Trail below Johnson Creek takes on the appearance of a super highway and it is not uncommon to meet forty or more people a day in mid-summer.

0.6 mile after beginning there is a very spectacular gorge through which Vallecito Creek makes a noisy passage while the trail hangs on cliffs 400' above. This cliff area is dangerous for horses, so make all encounters as smooth as possible (see Manners on the Trail). On the granite along the trail you can see rocks smoothed by glacial action. North you should be able to view Irving Peak (13,218'), a classic-looking mountain that is framed by the valley ahead. The trail eases off the cliffs and at mile 3.0 you cross Taylor Creek and then Vallecito Creek with the first of three bridges. The little park at Taylor Creek has received quite a bit of use so get an early enough start so you won't have to stop here overnight and add your bit too. By July the vegetation along the trail is almost tropical from here up to the next two bridges. Green gentian, which grow to over six feet tall, thimbleberry bushes, solomonsel, columbine, and daisies are some of the larger, more obvious flowers. But take the time to look closer to the ground and you will see the minute violets, purple and yellow, and other tiny blossoms. Also seen along this trail is the very rare red lily. Please enjoy these flowers without picking them.

At mile 5.2 the second bridge takes the trail to the west side of the narrow valley and at mile 6.5 you cross the Soda Spring hanging bridge. The valley now changes dramatically* to meadows with aspen climbing the mountainsides. Quite a few small streams descend from the mountainsides and cross the expansive meadows on their way to Vallecito Creek. At mile 7.5 you enter a small stand of spruce and cross Irving Creek, the largest of these streams. A little ways further a strong trail goes left to an outfitter's camp but you keep right, and soon you meet Columbine Pass Trail (No. 6) where it crosses the Vallecito on a bridge at mile 8.5. West you see some of the impressive summits of the Needle Mountains with Thunder Mountain (13,108') being the most prominent. This is good country for elk, deer, black bear, and bighorn sheep, but these big game animals are shy and stay well away from the trails. As you continue up the creek the grade increases somewhat, big Vallecito Creek begins to roar and the valley seems almost arched by the summits that tower 3,000' on either side. Roell Creek, whose headwaters are in the nearly inaccessible Hidden and Lost Lakes, is extremely cold and may have to be waded. About .5 mile above Roell the U.S.G.S. map shows a crossing of the Vallecito. The trail only divides and it is not necessary to cross to continue. When you enter the meadows across from Sunlight Creek you will notice that a scenic campsite is possible here. The mountain to the west is Vallecito Mountain (13,428'). After a section of forest the trail breaks into meadows across from Leviathan Creek at mile 12.7, not very suitable for camping. Sunlight Creek, Leviathan Creek and the yet to come Stormy Gulch (mile 15.5) have manways ascending them that have developed from countless climbing parties going into the Needles.

At the mile 14.0 you cross the reddish-colored Rock Creek** and the Rock Creek Trail (No. 11) goes right just after crossing the stream. Expect to take off shoes and socks for this one. An impressive mountain, The Guardian (13,617'), hangs over the valley to the west. Be sure to look down-canyon from the vicinity of Rock Creek because the view into the Needles is very fine. The area around Rock Creek is heavily used and you might have difficulty in finding a place to pitch your tent at certain times.

Continuing on, the valley narrows down and at mile 15.5 you look up Stormy Gulch to Mt. Silex (13,628'), north of The Guardian, and Storm King Peak (13,752'), to the right of Mt. Silex. The trail has some muddy places as you go through the timber after the Stormy Gulch vista and you may have to ford still another creek. Nebo Creek is really a delight to watch, though, as it cascades over rocks and away from the trail. After crossing an unnamed tributary of Nebo Creek that comes from Hunchback Pass, you meet the Continental Divide Trail (No. 59) at mile 17.0, 1.5 miles from Nebo Pass and 1.5 miles from Hunchback Pass.

**From where the mineralized springs seep into Rock Creek to about 1.0 mile down the Vallecito there are no fish. For drinking, the water seems fine but for extended use, it might be better to be on the safe side and take water from the Vallecito above Rock Creek.

NO.6 - COLUMBINE PASS TRAIL

From Gebhardt, Dennis. A Backpacking Guide to the Weminuche Wilderness.
Durango, Colorado: Basin Reproduction and Printing Company, 1976, pp. 63-65

Trailhead elevation - 8,280'

Total vertical ascent - 4,400'

Highest point - 12,680'

Total vertical descent - 3,560'

Length - 14.25 miles one way

Maps - 7½' Mountain View Crest, 7½' Columbine Pass, San Juan National Forest

The Columbine Pass Trail which climbs Needle Creek to the 12,680' Columbine Pass and then descends Johnson Creek to Vallecito Creek Trail (No. 10) goes through the southern end of the Needle Mountains and within a mile of the Weminuche Wilderness' three largest peaks. I would like to remind potential users that this is a heavy use area for two reasons: 1) the easy access by riding the train to Needleton, and 2) the grand scenery in Chicago Basin capped by the three 14,000' peaks. Over the 4th of July I have seen as many as 50 or 60 people in the Basin and the number of hikers increases every year. If you are planning a trip to the Chicago Basin-Columbine Pass area you will have to share your wilderness experience with quite a few other people, especially if the time available for travel is weekends and holidays.

The trailhead for the Columbine Pass Trail is at Needle Creek, 11.0 miles from Highway 550 via Purgatory Creek Trail (No. 5) and trailhead (D). Or, you may ride the Narrow Gauge Railroad to Needleton and walk .9 mile to Needle Creek and where the trail begins.* The trail to Columbine Pass formerly went up the creek bottom but due to the unusually violent flood of 1971, the trail has been permanently rerouted to climb the north side of Needle Creek's canyon for 1.5 miles before descending to the creek again. Many times high waters have visited Needle Creek and the Animas River, resulting in the jumble of boulders and trees that you see along the stream beds. The trail up Needle Creek offers only a few places where camping is convenient until the lower basin begins at about mile 4.0. A good many people in poor physical condition attempt this trail via the train because it is well-known and a favorite in the area, and consequently you will find a lot of fire-rings perched in various cramped and narrow places on the way up. Be prepared for a continuous and fairly steep climb (2,920' in the first 6.0 miles, and 1,480' in the last 2.0 miles), and although the late start from the train ride makes this a more difficult proposition it is still reasonably possible to make the Basin that same day if you get on with it.

At mile 2.0 or about 250 yards before you cross New York Creek, if you cross to the other side of Needle Creek, a good-sized water wheel and other interesting remnants of the mining days can be found. This is also where you find the difficult and unmaintained manway that climbs up to Webb, Pearl, Emerald, and Ruby Lakes. New York Creek, an attractive cascading stream, makes a refreshing cold drink and is crossed on a small bridge. The trail continues with the same steady climb until at mile 4.0 where it begins easing into the first meadow of the lower Basin under Mount Kennedy (13,125') on your right. Camping becomes increasingly better as you go on from this point. As the trail levels off you begin to see the peaks that form a semi-circle at the head of Chicago Basin. On the left is the bare, wind-swept Mount Eolus (14,083') and continuing around clockwise are Glacier Point (13,704'), Twin Thumbs, Peak 11, Needle Ridge, Sunlight Peak (14,059'), Windom Peak (14,082'), and Jupiter Mountain (13,830'). It is interesting to see the west face of Jupiter Mountain in the morning before any direct sunlight has fallen on it. This mountain, named after the supreme god of Roman mythology, has massive godlike eyes, a nose, and a mouth from which one half expects a couple of hearty chuckles to roll across the Basin like thunder. This face is best seen not directly in front of Jupiter but from a half mile or so down the trail. Mount Eolus, across the Basin from Jupiter Mountain, is derived from mythology as well; the Homeric legends have Aeolus as appointed ruler of the winds.

The mining activity of years ago is pretty obvious to the visitor to Chicago Basin and prospects can be seen from right beside the trail to high on the side of the mountains. The "rush" was during the 80's and 90's and production from the Needles district had amounted to \$200,000 by 1905. The "rush" was all but over by this time.

Walking through the meadow surrounded by the magnificent summits the trail crosses Needle Creek at mile 6.0 and begins to climb to the upper Basin and Columbine Pass. The 1,480' of climb in 2.0 miles is modified by switchbacks and after attaining the upper Basin and continuing on to the Pass (12,680') the view is very rewarding. Columbine Pass is at the head of one of the 8 to 10 glacial cirques in Chicago Basin, and a look into Johnson Creek to the east reveals an equally well-glaciated drainage. Looking straight down Johnson Creek, the obvious peaks are Organ Mountain (13,032'), with many pinnacles and spires, and Amherst Mountain (13,165'). Prominent on the left side of Johnson Creek are McCauly Peak (13,554'), and Echo Mountain (13,303'), and along the right, Florida Mountain (13,076'), and Mount Valois (13,185').

A little below Columbine Pass a rough trail goes left to reach Hazel Lake's basin (12,435') in about 1.0 miles. You will also notice a rocky trail going right and contouring along the head of the basin. This is Endlich Mesa Trail (No. 9) which reaches the 12,840' Trimble Pass in 1.6 miles. At mile 8.25 the trail levels out briefly by Columbine Lake (12,320') and traverses some very barren and scoured ground until mile 8.75 when the steep descent is resumed. After passing a few mining prospects the trail levels off at mile 10.0 where timberline is reached and good camping is possible. Johnson Creek usually doesn't have the numbers of people that are found on Needle Creek. Also, Johnson Creek averages an 11% grade, about 1% steeper than Needle Creek. At mile 10.5 the trail begins a series of switchbacks and descends steeply. Another small campsite is possible at mile 11.5. After more descent, the

good-sized creek from Grizzly Gulch is crossed at mile 13.0 and .75 later, Johnson Creek which will probably have to be waded. At mile 14.25 there is a bridge over Vallecito Creek and Vallecito Creek Trail (No. 10) is met.

Purgatory Creek Trail (No. 5), Columbine Pass Trail, and Vallecito Creek Trail from mile 8.5 down to the Vallecito Campground (trailhead H) hiked in one continuous trip (33.35 miles) take you through a great variety of scenery and elevation changes.

*people who have ridden the train should add the .9 mile to the mileages given in the trail description.

Sept 2012 - Trip Segment Distances and Elevation Changes

Start	Destination	Distance (miles)	Elevation (feet)	
			Gain	Loss
Pine River Trailhead	Confluence Pine River & Lake Creek	5.61	479	-220
Confluence Pine River & Lake Creek	North of Emerald Lake	6.35	2,176	-288
North of Emerald Lake	Rock Creek Drainage	6.24	2416	-1177
Rock Creek Drainage	Confluence Vallecito & Johnson Creeks	8.66	86	-2206
Confluence Vallecito & Johnson Creeks	Chicago Basin	7.03	3,567	1,071
Chicago Basin	Sunlight Peak (round trip)	4.94	3,337	-3,337
Chicago Basin	Needleton	6.75	116	3,571