

Weminuche Llama Trek, September 2010.

Guidebook Excerpts

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

NO. 3 - MOLAS TRAIL - (Trailhead C)

- Trailhead elevation - 10,600'
- Total vertical descent - 1,700'
- Lowest point - 8,900'
- Length - 4.0 miles one way
- Maps - 7½' Snowdon Peak, San Juan National Forest

The Molas Trail is a good way to beat the cost of a train ticket and visit the spectacular Elk Creek and Grenadier Range country.

The Molas Trail is found 1.25 miles down the north side of Molas Pass on Highway 550 between Durango and Silverton where a short gravel road leading to Molas Lake (not Little Molas Lake) turns east (trailhead C). About .1 of a mile down this gravel road the trail goes off to the right, beginning as vehicle tracks in the grass. Follow the tracks for about .25 mile until they curve around to the left and end in a small stand of timber. The timber is perched on the edge of a small bench and you walk about .25 mile down into a little, bare valley with a gully at the bottom. You should then begin seeing post-markers on the left side of the gully going away to the right (south) and the trail becoming clearer as you continue along. The trail does not show up on the U.S.G.S. 7½' quadrangle of the area. The trail switchbacks once to descend a bench and continues east through meadows until at mile 1.5 it enters a stand of aspen and conifers and shortly thereafter begins to switchback down to the Forest Service bridge on the Animas River. The more than thirty switchbacks are well constructed and the grade is moderate throughout. The walls of the Animas River canyon which the trail descends are very steep and you can see the Animas River and the Narrow Gauge tracks below you. A few aspen grow on the steep side and the columbine blossoms prefer this sunny, rocky slope.

After reaching the bottom of the canyon and crossing Molas Creek and the river bridge, pick up a trail which is cut into the mountain on the other side of the tracks. This trail gradually ascends (in .7 mile) to the top of the 280' bench at the beginning of Elk Creek Trail whereas if you walk down to Elk Park on the railroad tracks you would have to climb the bench in .2 mile.

Not only will you have an easier ascent, but you should remember that the train discourages people from walking on the tracks (see Using the Narrow Gauge Railroad). Garfield Peak (13,074') is the impressive summit that looms over the canyon about 1.5 miles downstream on the east side.

NO.4 - ELK CREEK TRAIL

Trailhead elevation - 8,920' (Animas River bridge), 8,840' (Elk Park)
Total vertical ascent - 3,760'
Highest point - 12,680'
Length - 9.0 miles one way
Maps - 7½' Snowdon Peak, 7½' Storm King Peak, San Juan National Forest

Since one of the stops of the Narrow Gauge train is at Elk Park for the Elk Creek Trail, there are prodigious amounts of people on this trail at times. Groups such as Outward Bound and Boy Scouts like to use Elk Creek for training grounds, and even though there is ample camping in the "meadows" halfway up the creek, you may find conditions

a bit too crowded for comfort. Elk Creek, like Chicago Basin, is one of those extremely beautiful and accessible places being loved to death by people in pursuit of a wilderness experience. If a large part of the satisfactory wilderness experience for you is successfully finding solitude, Elk Creek in spite of all its attractions may prove poor in this regard. September is an excellent time for Elk Creek.

Elk Creek Trail is an old freight road built during the mining days and has been reconstructed to serve as a hiking trail. You can get to the Elk Creek Trail via the Molas Trail (No. 3) or as mentioned, by train. The train lets you off near a spur that goes at a right angle to the main track for 300'. The trail begins climbing left at the end of the spur. A steep, 280' high, aspen-covered bench is climbed in the first .4 mile. From this point you can see a few peaks and the first view up-canyon. The canyon is quite narrow and at mile 1.0 you pass a pretty little waterfall that is right on the trail. At mile 1.2 you notice a campsite that is almost on the trail: most unsatisfactory and probably made and used by people who were worn out after the first bench.

The trail soon begins to climb higher on the left side of the canyon through the stands of quaking aspen. Occasionally there are some very steep places on the trail between mile 1.5 and 3.0. On your right (south) from the beaver ponds at mile 3.0 you can look into Vestal Creek and to some of the spectacular peaks of Grenadier Range. They are from left to right: Electric Peak (13,292'), Arrow Peak (13,803'), and Vestal Peak (13,664'). There is a mountaineering trail up Vestal Creek, or the "Vestal Valley" as it is called by climbers. The Grenadier Range is a seven mile long southeast-northwest line of summits, roughly parallel to Elk Creek and situated just north of the Needle Mountains. The Grenadiers were a result of some intense localized folding and faulting. In the Geological Summary of this guidebook you can read more about the geological history of Elk Creek.

After the beaver ponds at mile 3.5 you cross a large rockslide of Precambrian rocks. Notice the size and quantity of its components. The large meadows at mile 4.0 are the destination for 9 out of every 10 Elk Creek visitors, and at an elevation of 10,200' with mountains of 13,000' bounding the valley, this is an extremely scenic place. The trail enters the timber (now the dark green of spruce and fir) and at mile 5.0 it crosses the good-sized creek that comes down from Lost Lake and Verde Lakes. You can expect to take off your shoes and socks to wade this creek in all but the driest years. The valley is narrowing fairly rapidly and at mile 5.75 the trail grows very steep and rocky. The rocks, of course, are well supplied with marmots and pikas who hurl sharp invectives as you toil upward and disturb their solitude. Before reaching an old mining cabin at mile 7.3 where the terrain levels out, the trail goes through a narrow passageway, a fault that was utilized by the makers of the trail. Elk Creek's mines were part of the Bear Creek mining district (across the Divide) and did not produce any large quantities of worthwhile ore. At the cabin the trail formerly went left to reach the Continental Divide, but you should go on straight following the little stream to find 27 switchbacks that end at the Continental Divide Trail (No. 59), elevation 12,680' (mile 9.0).

***From Colorado's Thirteeners: 13,800 To 13,999 Feet, from Hikes to Climbs* by Gerry Roach and Jennifer Roach; Fulcrum Publishing; Golden Colorado, 2001; 367 pages.**

Molas Lake / Elk Park / Vestal Creek

Take the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge train from either Durango or Silverton and get off at Elk Park. Walk 100 yards east along the north side of the engine turnaround spur tracks. At the wye's eastern end, hike north up the hill on a spur of the Elk Creek Trail. Hike 0.2 mile northeast, join the main Elk Creek Trail at a sign announcing your entry into the Weminuche Wilderness and hike 100 yards east to a sign and trail register. From the trail register, hike 2.7 miles east above Elk Creek's north side to a large beaver pond just south of the trail at 9,980 feet.

Leave the comfort of the Elk Creek Trail and hike 120 yards south on some boulders around the beaver pond's east side. Hike 150 yards south on a faint trail, pass some flat campsites and reach the top of the Elk Creek gorge. Angle southeast down to Elk Creek on a rough trail and cross to Elk Creek's south side. There is no bridge here, and this crossing can be difficult in high water. It has given many parties fits over the years.

Once on the creek's south side, hike south up the steep hill and find the beginning of the Vestal Creek Trail. Vestal Creek and this use trail are not marked on the Storm King Peak Quadrangle. Vestal Creek drains the north faces of Arrow, Vestal and the Trinity Peaks, and finding the Vestal Creek Trail is not optional. There is an old trail along Vestal Creek, but it is seldom used and we do not recommend it. The correct trail is high on the slope above Vestal

Creek's east side. Hike 0.1 mile west on the beginning of the Vestal Creek Trail, which is on a small bench 100 feet above Elk Creek. Turn south and hike 1.0 mile steeply uphill on the rough trail to 11,200 feet (Class 2). Descend slightly and reach the creek where the valley turns to the southeast. Hike 0.5 mile southeast to the east end of a meadow at 11,400 feet. This is called the "lower meadow." There are several campsites near the meadow and in the trees beyond this point. Arrow and Vestal are 0.75 mile southeast and south of this meadow, and Trinity Peak is 1.5 miles to the southeast.

Continue 0.4 miles east-southeast up the Vestal Creek Trail to the western edge of a higher meadow at 11,740 feet. This is called the "upper meadow." Cross to Vestal Creek's south side and climb 0.5 mile southeast up a steep, grassy slope on a faint climbers trail to 12,300 feet. The trail dies here, but you no longer need one. Hike 0.5 mile south up open, grassy slopes, and then climb 0.1 mile southeast diagonally up a steep scree slope to the 12,860-foot Vestal—West Trinity saddle. The scree slope below this saddle supports a climber's trail and is not as difficult as the "Dues Collector" slope leading to the Arrow—Vestal saddle.

29. Arrow peak – 13,803 feet

Anchoring the Vestal Group's west end, Arrow Peak is well named. Sharp as an arrow, the peak is aimed at the sky as if poised for a launch to return to the world from which it came. From the beaver pond and as you approach up Vestal Creek, it is Arrow that first draws your attention. This siren peak I points at a way for others to follow. Arrow is Colorado's extant peak. Arrow draws many and rejects some. Approach with respect.

ROUTES: 29.1 - Arrow Peak - Northeast Face *Classic*

From Elk Park TH at 8,860 ft	409 RP	11.8 mi	5,183 ft	Class 3
From Molas TH at 10,620 ft	507 RP	18.4 mi	6,863 ft	Class 3
From Beartown TH at 11,700 ft	526 RP	18.8 mi	7,623 ft	Class 3
From 9,980 ft in Elk Creek	324 RP	5.8mi	3,903 ft	Class 3
From 11,400 ft in Vestal Creek	190 RP	2.0mi	2,403 ft	Class 3

This is the easiest route on Arrow Peak. If you take care to follow the route as described here, the difficulty will not exceed Class 3. There is a lot of Class 2+ and Class 3 climbing on this route, and much harder climbing always lurks nearby. Even Arrow's easiest route is steep and flirts with loose rock. This is a bad route to be on in a storm.

Use one of the approaches to the lower meadow at 11,400 feet in Vestal Creek. The route is partially obscured from here. Leave the Vestal Creek Trail 150 yards west of the lower meadow's east end, hike south on a faint trail into the meadow and cross to Vestal Creek's south side. Hike 0.3 mile south up a steep slope on a strong climbers trail to 12,000 feet at the north end of the basin between Arrow and Vestal. You can see the route from here.

The salient feature of Arrow's northeast face is a huge, north-facing ramp that sweeps up from 12,200 feet to a saddle just north of the summit. This ramp harbors the route. There are near-vertical, east-facing cliffs above and below the ramp. There are two smaller ramps below and east of the huge ramp that are definitely not the route.

From 12,000 feet, hike 0.2 mile southwest across grass and talus to 12,200 feet at the east end of a grassy ledge system 200 feet above the bottom of the huge ramp. The grassy ledges allow you to avoid some smooth slabs that dominate the bottom of the huge ramp. Climb 150 feet west up grassy ledges and reach the outer, east edge of the huge ramp above the initial smooth slabs. At no point in the ascent do you actually climb in the gully between the ramp and the cliffs above the ramp. Climb 200 yards south up the ramp's eastern edge on solid rocks and grass steps (Class 2+). Hike 400 yards up gentler slabs and scree near the ramp's eastern edge (Class 2). As you climb, examine the upper part of the route.

The upper part of the huge ramp is broken into two ramps as it steepens and sweeps up to the southwest to end at a small saddle between Arrow's main summit and a subsummit 200 yards to the north. Don't make the mistake of staying on the huge ramp's extreme eastern edge when the ramp splits, as this will leave you on the eastern ramp higher up. Angle across scree in the middle of the huge ramp and get onto the western or higher ramp near its bottom, where egress from the lower ramp is still easy (Class 2). Before you become embroiled in Arrow's upper difficulties, take a moment to savor the view to the east of Vestal's Wham Ridge. This is one of Colorado's most unique mountain profiles.

Once you are on the western, upper ramp, climb 150 yards up its southeastern edge (Class 2+). This is the rib between the two upper ramps. Once again, do not climb in the gully between the upper ramp and the near vertical cliffs above it. When the rib steepens and blocks simple passage, cross to the rib's southeast (left) side and climb 100 feet up blocks and ledges (Class 3). This is your only excursion on the upper rib's left side. When it's easy, traverse back to the rib and ascend it for 200 feet (Class 3)

Fifty feet before you reach Arrow's north ridge, climb 100 feet south up a chimney system (Class 3). Your ascent of the huge ramp is over. All that remains is the summit tower. Climb 250 feet south up broken ledges that are east of Arrow's upper north ridge (Class 3). This is the upper portion of Arrow's northeast face. Yodel. You are on the summit. Take a moment to look toward the sky.



From *The San Juan Mountains, A Climbing and Hiking Guide* by Robert F. Rosebrough; Johnson Books; Boulder, Colorado, 1986; 257 pages.

Molas Lake / Elk Park / Vestal Creek

This is the most popular means of access to the Grenadiers. The initial object of this route is to reach Elk Park on the Animas River. Elk Park is a regular stop for the narrow gauge train between Durango and Silverton. The train reaches Elk Park at 11:20a.m. and returns on its way back to Durango at 2:20p.m. To flag it down, stand on the siding (east) side of the tracks. Information on reservations and general policies of the railroad can be found under the access heading for the Needles.

For those not interested in riding the train, the best way to reach Elk Park is by the Molas Trail, which starts one and one-quarter miles north of Molas Pass between Durango and Silverton on U.S. 550 (six miles south of Silverton).

The trailhead starts from a gravel road just south of Molas Lake. From the trailhead, the trail (which at first is a dirt road) takes off south and then traverses east through several large meadows as you begin the descent to the Animas River. Although it is only about two or two and one-half miles as the crow flies, there are over thirty switchbacks in the trail, which make the total walking distance, more like four miles.

The trail starts at 10,600 feet elevation and drops 1,700 feet to 8,900 feet at Elk Park. After you cross the bridge across the Animas and the railroad track, a trail angles off to the left where, after three-quarters of a mile, it meets the Elk Creek Trail coming from Elk Park. It is also possible to walk the tracks down to Elk Park and then follow the Elk Creek Trail from its start, but this is not recommended since it is necessary to climb the steep bench to the east of Elk Park over a shorter distance.

Once on the Elk Creek Trail, follow it east for three miles to a group of beaver ponds. Immediately after passing the beaver ponds, turn right and follow a faint trail, which makes a U-turn around the beaver ponds and heads south to cross Elk Creek and leads to the Vestal Creek drainage. The crossing of Elk Creek is made by down climbing into the steep gorge and walking across a couple of logs at the bottom. This un-maintained trail climbs left (east) of Vestal Creek before meeting it about a mile up the drainage. It is worthwhile to take your time in finding the trail because the climb up Vestal Creek without it is miserable.

About a mile and a half up Vestal Creek you will reach some marshy meadows below Arrow Peak at 11,400 feet. A wooded bench on the northern fringe of the meadows offers camping as do the woods on the east end of the meadows at the foot of the steep bench. A campsite in this area is probably the best point of beginning for both Arrow and Vestal peaks. It is also possible to continue up the trail for another quarter-mile up a steep bench to some wooded campsites below Vestal at 11,600 feet. The approach by Vestal Creek is the best access for Arrow Peak and Vestal Peak. It is also a good means of access for the Trinity Peaks. Graystone Peak, Electric Peak, Point Pun, and Mount Garfield can be reached from Vestal Creek by climbing up into the drainage between Arrow and Electric peaks. Peaks Two and Three can also be climbed from a campsite in Vestal Creek.

From Vestal Creek it is possible to reach the Tenmile Creek drainage and Balsam Lake by the 12,860-foot pass between Vestal and West Trinity. It is also possible to connect with Trinity Creek and Stormy Gulch by continuing east up Vestal Creek to the 12,980-foot pass at the head of the drainage. This pass looks very difficult from low in the drainage but actually is not that bad. When coming up from Vestal Creek, it is best to attack the pass from the left.

Gains/Losses

Location	Distance (miles)	Elevation	Gain	Loss
		(feet)		
Molas Pass		10,613		
Elk Park	3.92	9,101	765	2,277
2 nd Meadow above beaver ponds	3.57	10,232	1240	-111
Mine / Turnoff to Lake 12,192	3.01	11,980	1747	0
Turnoff to Lake 12,192	0.64	12,192	272	-41
Turnoff to Continental Divide	1.44	12,701	1249	-546
Continental Divide to Eldorado Lake	0.62	12,504	158	-347
2 nd Meadow to Beaver Ponds	0.98	9,785	0	-245
Beaver Ponds to Vestal Lower Meadow	1.85	11,403	1,697	-269

Train Schedule

Durango to Silverton (Read down)		May 17 - Oct 10		Silverton to Durango (Read up)	
463	461	Station	Milepost	462	464
9:00 AM	8:15 AM	Durango	451.52	5:30 PM	6:15 PM
11:32 AM	----	Needleton	484.00	----	3:45 PM

----	11:18 AM	Elk Park	490.67	2:27 PM	----
12:30 PM	11:45 PM	Silverton	496.70	2:00 PM	2:45 PM