

Vestal Peak, Wham Ridge Route Guidebook Excerpts

From Roach, J., & Roach, J. (2001). *Colorado's Thirteeners, 13,800 to 13,999 Feet* (1st ed.). Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Pub. and Rosenbrough, R. F. (1986). *San Juan Mountains a Climbing and Hiking Guide* (1st ed.). Boulder, Colorado: Johnson Pr.

Approach: Molus Lake / Elk Park / Vestal Creek

Roach and Roach Description

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.

29.A1V - Variation

This popular alternative adds 6.6 miles and 1,680 feet of elevation gain to your journey, but it avoids the train's cost and crowds. Start at the Molas Trailhead and hike 1.8 miles south then east on the Molas Trail, which soon joins the Colorado Trail. Descend gently across meadows to a viewpoint at 10,100 feet. From here you can look southeast across the Animas Canyon into Elk Creek, and beyond to the peaks of the Vestal Group. To reach them, you have to cross the canyon.

Descend 1.0 mile southeast down a series of switchbacks, cross Molas Creek, then cross the Animas River on a solid footbridge at 8,900 feet. Hike 0.1 mile south along the railroad tracks, then hike 0.7 mile southeast on the beginning of the Elk Creek Trail as it climbs above the tracks. Join the Lower Elk Creek Approach at the Weminuche Wilderness boundary.

Rosenbrough Description

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.

Climbs: From Roach and Roach

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 fts	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 sub summit 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.

29. Vestal peak, 13,864 feet

While Arrow aims for the stars, Vestal tends Earth's hearth. The Grenadiers' highest peak, Vestal anchors the

range well. The clean sweep of rock on Vestal's north side that is called Wham Ridge is unrivaled in the San Juans. You can get a fleeting view of Vestal from near Molas Pass on U.S. 550, but, as always, the best views are reserved for the wilderness traveler.

The 1964 Storm King Peak Quadrangle originally had a significant error at Vestal's summit. The elevation was incorrectly given as 13,664 feet instead of the correct elevation of 13,864 feet. Worse, 200 feet of contour lines were missing. The mistakes were corrected in the 1975 edition of the map. The elevation now reads 13,864 feet, and the missing contour lines are crammed on top of Vestal. Even with the addition of the missing contour lines, the map still does not accurately represent Vestal's summit topography. The map suggests a wavy approach to Vestal's summit, but the reality is that the approach to Vestal's summit is uniform in steepness. Also, other maps based on the USGS maps still carry the incorrect elevation of 13,664 feet. In particular, the Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness Map number 140 has the incorrect elevation for Vestal.

ROUTES: 29.3 - Vestal Peak - South Face

From Elk Park TH at 8,860 ft	375 RP	12.8 mi	5,244 ft	Class 2+
From Molas TH at 10,620 ft	475 RP	19.4 mi	6,924 ft	Class 2+
From Beartown TH at 11,700 ft	493 RP	19.8 mi	7,684 ft	Class 2+
From 9,980 ft in Elk Creek	290 RP	6.8 mi	3,964 ft	Class 2+
From 11,400 ft in Vestal Creek	155 RP	3.0 mi	2,464 ft	Class 2+

This is the easiest route on Vestal. This route is easier but looser than Arrow's Northeast Face Route. Although Vestal's north face is mostly solid, the south face is surprisingly loose, and a casual misstep can quickly launch a fatal missile. This only makes a difference if there is someone below you, but the difference is enormous. Tread lightly.

Use one of the approaches to the lower meadow at 11,400 feet in Vestal Creek. You can just see Vestal's summit 0.8 mile south of 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. Hike 0.2 mile south-southwest and, when convenient, get onto a small, red, rock glacier in the middle of the basin between Arrow and Vestal. Hike 0.4 mile south southwest on top of this rock rib to 12,500 feet. The introduction is over.

Scramble 0.1 mile south-southwest up a steep scree slope to the 12,860-foot Arrow-Vestal saddle (Class 2+). We call this slope the "Dues Collector," as it will extract the rest of your wilderness entrance fee. From the saddle, hike 0.1 mile east-southeast on a ridge to 13,000 feet at the base of Vestal's western ramparts (Class 2). Hike 0.2 mile east-southeast to 13,200 feet on a climbers' trail that does an ascending traverse underneath the cliffs of Vestal's southwest face (Class 2). Avoid any temptation to get too high during this ascending traverse. Your goal is to get around to the east side of Vestal's south ridge, which is the right skyline ahead of you during the traverse.

From 13,200 feet on the east side of Vestal's south ridge, you can see a huge gully heading north toward the summit. This is the weakness in Vestal's defenses that you have circled the peak to find. The route does not ascend the gully directly but, rather, it is on the ledges west (left) of the gully. From 13,200 feet, scamper 100 yards east up a steeper ascending traverse to within 100 feet of the gully (Class 2+). Climb 200 yards directly north up broken ledges to 13,600 feet at a point 30 feet below Vestal's upper southeast ridge (Class 2+). This is

the section where loose rock lurks. If you want, take time to go to the ridge and peer down Vestal's steep, convoluted northeast face.

From 13,600 feet, climb 200 feet west on a ledge on the ridge's south side, then ascend 100 feet west up a small gully to a small notch (Class 2+). From here you can look down the top part of Vestal's southwest face. Stay south of any difficulties, climb 200 feet northwest on scree, then scamper 100 feet north to Vestal's highest point (Class 2+).

VARIATIONS

29.3VI - Southwest Face, Class 4

At 13,100 feet, leave the ascending traverse and climb northeast directly up Vestal's southwest face (Class 4). This is a steeper, harder version of the south face ascent. Seen from below, the ascent is easier than it looks, as there are many ledges. The Class 4 moves are on the short rock walls between the ledges. As with the south face, the ledges are littered with loose blocks.

29.3V2 - Southeast Face, Class 2+

You can approach Vestal's South Face Route from the east. Climb to the 12,860-foot Vestal-West Trinity saddle as described with Trinity Peak's Southeast Face Route. Hike 0.5 mile west on an easy ridge and skirt Point 13,220 on its north side (Class 2). At the base of Vestal's southeast ramparts, descend to the south, then contour 0.1 mile west on a climbers' trail to 13,000 feet at the bottom of the huge gully on Vestal's south face.

A direct ascent up the gully is possible and requires passing three Class 3 chockstones en route. We do not recommend this route, as any rock bounding down from on high is likely to end up in this gully. An easier and safer alternative is to cross to the gully's west side and climb north up broken ledges to join the South Face Route at 13,300 feet (Class 2+).

29.4 - Vestal Peak - Wham Ridge *Classic*

From Elk Park TH at 8,860 ft	562 RP	12.0 mi	5,244 ft	Class 5.4
From Molas TH at 10,620 ft	661 RP	18.6 mi	6,924 ft	Class 5.4
From Beartown TH at 11,700 ft	680 RP	19.0 mi	7,684 ft	Class 5.4
From 9,980 ft in Elk Creek	477 RP	6.0 mi	3,964 ft	Class 5.4
From 11,400 ft in Vestal Creek	342 RP	2.2 mi	2,464 ft	Class 5.4
With descent of South Face	342 RP	2.6 mi	2,464 ft	Class 5.4

Solid rock, a beautiful line and a wilderness setting combine to make Wham Ridge one of Colorado's best mountaineering routes. The name Wham Ridge refers to Vestal's entire north face, so "Ridge" here is a misnomer. However, the route we describe follows the east edge of the face, which is a well-defined ridge. This is the easiest way to climb Wham Ridge.

Use one of the approaches to the lower meadow at 11,400 feet in Vestal Creek. 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. Depending on your disposition, Wham Ridge will be either appallingly or appealingly apparent from here. Hike 0.2 mile south to 12,200 feet on a grassy slope at the

bottom of Wham Ridge. The combination of solid rock above and grass below makes this a very unique place. Don't engage the rock yet, but hike 0.1 mile southeast up the grass under Wham's rock to an open area at 12,300 feet, where you can look down on Vestal Lake to the east. The introduction is over.

Engage Wham Ridge and climb west up a grass ramp (Class 2+). Initially, stay near the east (left) edge of the face and climb up to the highest grass ramp on the lower face (Class 2+). Once on the highest ramp, climb an ascending traverse to the west all the way across Wham Ridge to 12,600 feet on the west (right) edge of the face (Class 2+). You may feel smug that you have gained so much elevation so easily.

Climb the west edge of the face as the angle steepens relentlessly. The difficulty steadily increases from Class 2+ to Class 4. Near the top of the smooth slabs, the difficulty takes another upward turn. Step east (left) and climb 100 feet up a clean, beautiful slab with a crack in it to the bottom of Wham's more broken upper face (Class 5.4). This pitch is the route's crux.

Stay near the upper face's west edge and climb another 300 feet (Class 4). Near the top of the face, traverse into the center of the face and climb a long, Class 4 pitch to Vestal's northern sub summit. From here you are perched above the technical difficulties and can see the main summit 100 yards to the south. Climb south over the sub summit and climb a scree gully up to the main summit (Class 2+). Ascending Wham Ridge and descending the South Face Route makes a tidy Tour de Vestal.

VARIATIONS

29.4VI - Direct Start, Class 5.3 (?)

Start at Wham Ridge's low point and climb 300 feet up elegant, fractured but still solid rock to reach the grass ramps.

29.4V2 - Center Shift, Class 5.6-5.7

The center of Wham Ridge provides harder climbing. If you follow the path of least resistance, you can keep the difficulty at Class 5.6. If you take a direct line up the center of the smooth face, you can climb some delectable and protectable Class 5.7 pitches.