

West Needles Climbing Routes

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Snowdon Peak

Peak Summary

Snowdon Peak is a mostly Class 2 hike with some brief Class 3 as you approach the summit, located in the expansive, West Needle and Molas Pass area. It combines easily with UN13,046 (N 2) for a day hike with easy passenger vehicle access that will get you back with plenty of time for pictures and dinner. Expect expansive views of the San Juans, especially of the central group of the Needle Mountains.

Route Description

If parked in the upper parking lot at Andrews Lake, hike down to the lake and find the trailhead at the NW corner of the lake near some vault toilets. The trail starts out paved as it goes around the west end of the lake and turns to gravel after crossing the lake outlet. This is trail #623. Once on the south side of the lake, it begins climbing uphill through forest on a series of gentle switchbacks, gaining about 400 feet in elevation. This is a well-used trail. Continue up 5 switchbacks and then start keeping watch for the trail that cuts off for Snowdon Peak. The turnoff was marked by a large cairn. These coordinates should be close to that turnoff: N37° 43' 15.82" W107° 42' 26.31". You can see this turnoff on Google Earth. This trail to Snowdon will take you past some small tarns, crossing a couple of very minor ridges and to a large, grassy meadow where the trail may fade some. Re-enter a stretch of forest at N37° 43' 10.95" W107° 42' 01.90" and hike to another smaller meadow and on the left side of that meadow, begin the real ascending for the day.

Follow a large, grassy couloir up to a saddle north of Snowdon Peak and south of UN 12,628. This involves about 1,000 feet of gain. It's never particularly difficult. At the saddle, turn southward and follow the ridge SW to another saddle. The trail stays to the left side of the ridge across ledges. As the ridge levels, slabs of rock appear. Continue following a cairn-marked trail that will lead off the main ridge and onto the east side of the mountain. This is to avoid some more difficult obstacles farther up the ridge. Contour across the east face some, losing perhaps a little elevation and then contour a little more. Begin heading up with some serious ascending, at times on some very steep terrain of combined rock and tundra that requires some 3rd class scrambling. At this point, it's easy to get off any designated route and you may miss the intended access but continue working upward. At one point, we followed a rubble-filled gully that had beautiful clumps of columbine. Either work back to the NE ridge either just below the summit or emerge onto the summit from the east side of the mountain, depending on route taken. It took us two hours from the lake to arrive at the summit and we found it to be a fairly large, flat area.

The views from this summit are impressive. The lone summit of Engineer Mtn. will certainly attract your attention, but to the east is the sea of summits that form the Needle Mountains. If you have good map reading and navigation skills, you can pick out any number of 13er summits. Once done admiring the view, either return as you came or continue on to UN13,046/N 2 to the south. We also call this South Snowdon.

North Twilight Peak

Peak Summary

North Twilight Peak is a pleasurable and scenic Class 2 summit. It is usually combined with Twilight Pk., South Twilight and for stronger climbers, West Needle Mtn. as a one-day excursion from a base camp at the beautiful Crater Lake. If using the lake as a base, there's a 5.25 mile backpack from the trailhead at Andrews Lake. Others may choose to climb the Twilight summits as a day hike from the Andrews Lake TH. That trailhead is accessible by any passenger vehicle.

North Twilight East Ridge Route Description

North Twilight Peak will be sequenced with Twilight and South Twilight for a half-day route from a base camp at Crater Lake. Some sources suggest working around to the SE side of the lake and heading SE through some willows to a small pond at 11,750 ft., and then from there, turning SW and heading up a broad NE ridge toward N. Twilight's east ridge. While that route goes easily, you can short cut it some by walking from a campsite on the west shore of the lake around to the south end, then heading directly uphill through trees for a while, emerging into an inviting, open basin of scattered low trees, grass, and rock outcrops.

A little further up the open, grassy basin, you should spot a trail that appears at about 12,200 feet and follows along the edge of a NE running ridge. The trail ascends steeply following just east of that northeast ridge. The trail will lead into a steep gully that then intersects the east ridge, well above any of the lower obstacles, at about 12,800 ft. You will now be about ¼ mile east of a prominent notch visible from below. Cross one minor notch and continue to the more prominent one. A year or two earlier, when some friends of ours had reached this notch, it was full of snow and they felt it was too exposed to continue, so they turned back. When we came to the notch, there was no snow, and it was an easy matter to just drop down some on the north side and then re-ascend on the other side of the notch. Since our climb was in early September, it would seem prudent to at least have an ice axe for tis notch, if climbing earlier in the summer.

While the lower climb out of the basin is mostly on tundra, you will now be on a tundra-rock mix. Continue hiking directly along the ridge after the notch toward the now rocky, and fairly flat summit. This is an elongated summit of smaller to medium rubble. The highest point will be toward the western end. Soak in the magnificent view, especially of Engineer Mountain to the west, then plot your route over to Twilight Peak.

Twilight Peak and South Twilight Peak

Peak Summary

Twilight Peak by its adjoining north ridge with North Twilight has a brief Class 3 scramble section that makes obtaining this summit a little more enjoyable. We have sequenced the three Twilight summits together, so the one-way mileage and elevation gain for Twilight Peak are measured from the summit of North Twilight Peak. Our route assumes a base camp at Crater Lake, so a 5.25 mile one-way backpack is needed to get to the beautiful Crater Lake. The Andrews Lake trailhead is accessible by any passenger vehicle.

Twilight Peak North Ridge Route Description

The main problem with Twilight Peak comes, according to some sources, along the north ridge and near the summit. Studying the peak from North Twilight you can see another “notch” problem but cannot really tell what the best way to negotiate it. So, descend about 300 feet down to the connecting saddle, passing a large cairn made of white quartz, and begin the ascent up Twilight's north ridge, for a brief while on tundra and small scree. Hike up the easy lower ridge section and progress to within 100 or 150 feet of the prominent notch. Watch carefully for a faint path leading off the ridge and contouring to the right, off the main ridge (about where the tundra plays out). Follow the path (or make your own contour path) over to an outcrop overlooking the deep gash that comes down from the notch above. The path descends about 75 feet into the gash. The descent is a little dicey. Once in the steep and narrow couloir, there is really only one immediate exit possibility. A very steep and narrow, secondary couloir heads toward the summit, climbing out of the main couloir. Going up it involves some 3rd class climbing on mostly solid rock with some small tundra benches interspersed. (See photo gallery) It was a little exposed, but we never felt too uncomfortable, so we scrambled on up at least 150 vertical feet. Near the top, we chose a right fork in the couloir, and this brought us out on a much easier slope for a stroll to the summit. The left fork probably goes just as easily. All in all, this was easier than we expected. It took us 45 minutes from the North summit.

Once you're done with the mesmerizing view of the Needle Mountains to the west and a rest break, it's time to head back. From here, you could retrace your route back toward North Twilight, down its east ridge and back to Crater Lake. But we decided to press on to the southeast, descending Twilight Peak and heading toward South Twilight, which is unranked. The traverse is easy and takes only about 10 minutes. There is about a 260 foot gain to the summit where you can spend some additional time studying how to ascend West Needle, either this day or the next. If not going on to West Needle Mtn. at this time, then much of the return route we describe here will become your approach to West Needle the next day.

So, head south off South Twilight toward a saddle. The descent is quite steep. We stayed on slopes or a moderate gully just south of the main ridge. It was high class 2 work, with even very brief class 3 at times, but kind of entertaining in some places. Once at the saddle and looking back up, it appears rather difficult. The saddle is marked by a standout gendarme. From the saddle, descend north, at first down a steep, grassy slope that eventually gives way to more rocky terrain. We did all we could to avoid the rock fields and utilized all the tundra we could find, but at times had to resort to some rock hopping. Descend to below 11,800 ft. and then follow a bench area over past the small, unnamed lake and northeastward for a short distance. Work your way down a steep gully that deposits you on the west side of the flowing stream (but still above it) that drains the small lake, but the stream does not show on the map. Watch carefully from above to spot a faint trail that leads across the slope below the east ridge of North Twilight. Do not decide to keep elevation and contour northeast and upward toward the saddle southeast of Crater Lake. This will be a time-wasting mistake, turning into an interminably long and rugged traverse across loose rock slopes.

If you find the trail we mention here, follow it NE as it contours across the open slope toward Watertank Canyon. Much of this game path crosses through tall grass. As you approach the canyon and some trees, begin heading up the slope and into the open trees, staying on the SW side of Watertank Canyon. When

the canyon is in view, you'll see a place where it dramatically steepens as it heads down to the Animas. You want to get above that drop. Once you do, stroll NNW through the remaining trees and then lower willows to the small pond at the crest of the canyon where Crater Lake comes back into view. There is a fairly easy trail to follow in this section. Chart your preferred route back to your campsite, but keep in mind that there are cliffs above the south end of the lake that force you up and then back down, if trying to go that way for the western shore.

West Needle Mountain

Peak Summary

West Needle Mountain is a difficult Class 2+, cross-country ascent that we have combined as part of a two-night backpack trip to Crater Lake and the Twilight Peak summits. The Andrews Lake trailhead where the backpack begins is accessible by any passenger car.

NOTE: NE summit contour found higher by Garratt and Martin. Elevation is interpolation of spot 13045 and next higher contour.

West Needle NW Couloir Route Description

West Needle Mountain is a lengthy enough day as it is, so we did it as a stand-alone route from a base camp at Crater Lake. Circle around the north end of the lake and pick up the trail through the willows to the small tarn at 11,750 ft., southeast of Crater Lake. From the tarn, head southeast, down the beginning of Watertank Canyon, utilizing some trail for a while. Stay mainly in the middle of the drainage, initially. There are some willows, but they are low and easy to deal with. After losing about 400 feet in elevation, the trail fades away and you will come to a place in the drainage where it plunges away steeply. This is probably around 11,400 ft. At the headwall, direct yourself to the right, skirting above the headwall and walking through the forest for a way. You may pick up a faint trail that will lead you out to an open meadow area with sparse trees. The grass here is tall as you continue downward. Towards the lower end of this meadow, we found a cairn that marked where a trail headed off to the southwest contouring across the open, grassy slope. Hopefully that cairn is still there. This trail is easy to follow once located and leads right to the creek that drains the small, unnamed lake, east of and well below the Twilight Peak summit.

At the creek, (which does not show on the USGS map), wander around through the trees and willows, staying on the west side. This will lead to a split in the drainage. Exit the watercourse and head up a dry, grass & tundra filled gully to the left. Make your way up toward the saddle south of South Twilight, that is easy to identify with a large, pointed gendarme. The climb/hike up to the saddle is across familiar territory now, if you descended off South Twilight Peak this way.

Pause at the saddle to discuss your options for climbing West Needle and to take some photos. Some may want to abandon our suggested route here. One option discussed in some sources leads over to the south end of the saddle between West Needle and an unnamed twelver at 12,932 ft. From here, it is reportedly a 3rd and 4th class scramble to the summit. From our perspective, it appeared steep and questionable. Another option is to head toward the great couloir that divides the northwest face of West Needle, highly visible from this saddle and Twilight Peak.

For that option, descend the couloir in front of you, heading down toward the unnamed lake below the northwest face of West Needle, that sits at the head of Twilight Creek. It was easiest to descend on the left side of the couloir for a while and we utilized that knowledge on our return. At the lake, take a break and empty your boots of pebbles and dirt from the descent. From near the lake, head toward the great couloir, but don't head directly into it yet. Save yourself some grief and utilize some tundra on the left side of the talus cone at the base of the couloir and ascend along the edge of the rocks to the top of the cone where there are some cliffs. Cut along the base of the cliffs at the head of the talus cone and then drop into the main couloir. Follow the great couloir all the way to the summit, a task much easier said than done. While it was fairly steep and always filled with rocks & rubble, the going was never too difficult, so just keep with it and struggle on. We should add that earlier in the season, this couloir would undoubtedly be filled with snow and would make an excellent snow ascent – not too steep or difficult. Ice axe and at least micro-spikes advised. The couloir tops out between two flat summits. We visited both with strong winds and partly cloudy skies. The map shows the south summit as the highest, with an elevation of 13,045 ft., but we found a cairn and summit register on the north. Apparently, G&M felt the north summit was higher and gave it an interpolated elevation of 13,062 ft. That elevation has since been used. The register had been in place since 2001 and only about 4 or 5 people a year had signed it. It had taken us a little under 4 hours to arrive here from the Crater Lake campsite.

To return to camp, go back down the same couloir you ascended in. There is unfortunately no scree that you can plunge-step down so you must take it more slowly. Nevertheless, I think we were down in about 45 minutes and then headed back up to the gendarme saddle south of S. Twilight. Going back up the 700 feet was not all that bad. We started back up, not in the couloir but to the right on tundra slopes and followed those slopes for a good distance up before dropping into the couloir. Then we held to the right side where footing seemed best and there was a rock wall to grab for an assist. At the saddle, hike down the tundra and then the rock and pick up the trail you followed in in the morning. Retrace your route back to Crater Lake.

Bonus Points: There is a high-ranked twelver just north of West Needle. UN12,932 ranks as #693 and is a fairly easy, Class 2 ascent from the gendarme saddle by contouring SE from that saddle over to another saddle, then ascending the NW ridge of the peak.