WEST NEEDLE MOUNTAINS

The West Needle Mountains are a small cluster of peaks separated from the Needles and Grenadiers by the four to five thousand-foot deep gorge created by the Animas River. The group is comprised of Snowdon Peak to the north and North Twilight Peak, Twilight Peak, South Twilight Peak, and West Needle Mountain to the south. A day climb of Snowdon Peak is one of the more delightful climbs in the San Juan Range. Snowdon is easily accessible and offers a choice of exciting routes. The view from the large, roomy summit gives the full panorama of the Needle and Grenadier ranges.

In contrast to Snowdon Peak, the Twilights and West Needle Mountain are more remote and are best climbed in conjunction with an overnight backpack into Crater Lake. All three of the Twilights and West Needle Mountain offer challenging and at times exposed climbing. While the Twilights can be reached after a pleasurable backpack, there is simply no reasonable way to get to West Needle Mountain. Climbing West Needle Mountain from Crater Lake makes for a long but rewarding day. The other options are far less pleasant. The long steep bushwhacks

west from Needleton or east from Lime Creek Road would be difficult at best.

CLIMBING HISTORY

The first recorded ascent of Snowdon Peak was made by the Hayden Survey in September 1874. From the top of Snowdon, Rhoda reported that the Hayden team "obtained the most striking view of the quartzite mountains."[1] Rhoda also remarked that the summit of Snowdon was poised "on the brink of the great Animas Canyon, which here is over 4,000 feet in depth; a few miles further down it is still deeper."[2] Snowdon Peak is named for Francis M. Snowden (note different spelling) who built the first cabin in Silverton the same year that the Hayden party made the first ascent of the peak.

Other than the first ascent of Snowdon, reports on climbs in the West Needles are sparse. In the *SJM Guide*, Carleton Long reported that "the West Needle Mountains are, even today, relatively unexplored. There are no recorded ascents of any of the peaks except Snowdon, which was climbed by the Hayden Survey and, while it is possible that most or all of the peaks have been climbed by prospectors or other peregrinating individuals, there still remains for the mountain climber a wealth of unexplored routes."[3]

Notes

1. Rhoda, *Summits to Reach*, p. 85.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *SJM Guide*, p. 131.

ACCESS AND HIKING

Crater Lake Trail

The Crater Lake trail starts at Andrews Lake, near Molas Pass. The turnoff to Andrews Lake is eight miles south of Silverton and forty-two miles north of Durango on U.S. 550. A well-maintained gravel road turns off 550 three-quarters of a mile south of Molas Pass. From 550, it is only one-third of a mile to Andrews Lake and ample parking.

From Andrews Lake the five-mile trail starts at 10,744 feet and ends at an elevation of 11,600 feet. From Andrews Lake the trail climbs a little over 400 vertical feet to the south. After topping out, you lose, regain, and lose again, 200 feet of elevation before slowly gaining elevation to reach Crater Lake. The total distance from Andrews Lake to Crater Lake is five miles. There are several excellent camping spots at Crater Lake.

From Crater Lake, a rounded saddle which overlooks Watertank Canyon and the Animas River lies several hundred yards and 150 vertical feet to the southwest. Don't be tempted to use Watertank Canyon as an access to the Animas River and Needleton. Those who have tried it do not recommend it.

CLIMBING ROUTES

Snowdon Peak (13,077 feet)

NORTHEAST RIDGE — Where the Crater Lake trail briefly tops out one-half mile south of Andrews Lake, leave the trail and head southeast for three-quarters of a mile. From that point, aim to climb east to the 12,340-foot saddle between Snowdon and

Peak 12,628 or Snowdon's northeast ridge south of the saddle. Once on the ridge, follow it directly toward the summit. Near the top it is best to leave the ridge where it narrows at the top of the prominent northwest couloir and contour left across the east face to gain the southeast ridge. The southeast ridge takes you to the summit. The traverse of the east face involves delicate and somewhat exposed climbing.

WEST BUTTRESS — The 800-foot west buttress descends directly from the summit. When viewed head on from U.S. 550, the buttress look overwhelming. In reality, it is a difficult but very enjoyable climb. The lower section of the buttress is a scramble over large broken sections. The climbing becomes more difficult and exposed higher on the buttress. Although many strong parties climb the route third class in good weather, it would be advisable to take a rope and several pieces of protection.

North Twilight Peak (13,075 feet)

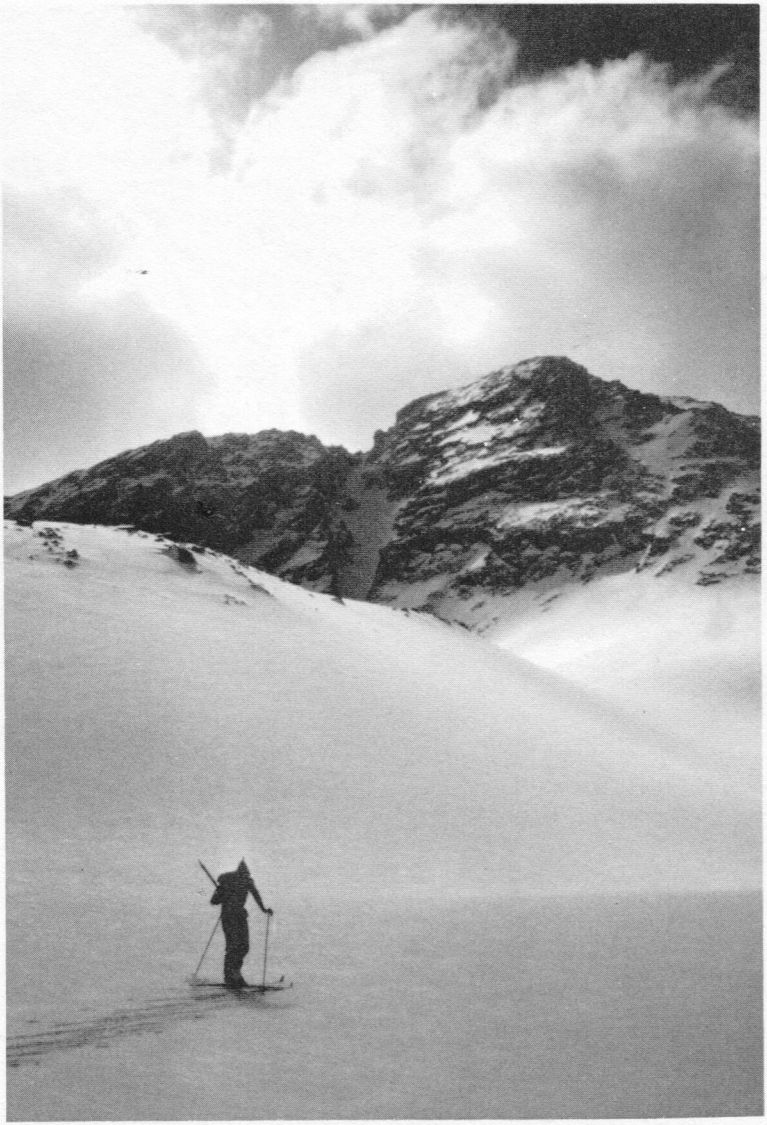
NORTHEAST SHOULDER / EAST RIDGE — A trail of sorts climbs the northeast shoulder above Crater Lake. The trail leads to the long east ridge which runs out to the summit.

SOUTH FACE — From the saddle between North Twilight and Twilight Peak, the south face is a walk up.

NORTH COULOIR — From Crater Lake, traverse west across the north face to gain the prominent snow chute. This is a steep climb and care must be taken because of loose rock, particularly late in the year. Because of the problem with loose rock, this route should not be attempted by large parties.

Twilight Peak (13,158 feet)

NORTH RIDGE — The summit is roughly 400 vertical feet above the saddle between North Twilight and Twilight. The



Ike Weaver approaching Snowdon Peak in March 1983. *Photo by Robert F. Rosebrough.*

Snowdon Peak's northeast ridge. Note climber on lower left portion of ridge. *Photo by Robert F. Rosebrough.*

north ridge connecting the saddle and the summit is tricky in a couple of spots and has turned back a novice or two.

South Twilight (13,100 feet approx.)

NORTHWEST RIDGE — When South Twilight is climbed in conjunction with Twilight Peak, downclimb the south ridge of Twilight Peak and from the saddle connecting the two peaks, the summit of South Twilight Peak is only 200 vertical feet above.

EAST FACE — When climbed alone from Crater Lake, climb toward North Twilight Peak's east ridge and then contour around the large basin which drains the eastern flanks of the

Twilight Peaks. Once on the east face of South Twilight Peak, it is a third class scramble up the well-broken face. Those discouraged by the east face can continue the traverse south to gain the southeast ridge which can be followed to the summit.

West Needle Mountain (13,045 feet)

West Needle Mountain can be combined with the Twilights in a long day from Crater Lake. After downclimbing South Twilight, traverse west of peaks 12,800 and 12,932 and then climb to gain the notch at the base of the northeast ridge. Climb the broken face to gain a ridge which leads to a broad double-humped summit. The climb involves some third-class scrambling and perhaps even a spot or two of fourth-class climbing. The slanderous statements about this peak in prior editions of this guide are hereby retracted. As it turns out, this is a fun climb which is worth the awkward approach.