

The Continental Divide Trail in the Weminuche Wilderness

On its 3,100-mile journey from Mexico to Canada, the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) crosses 85 miles of the Weminuche Wilderness, gaining more than 17,000 feet in elevation and dropping about 15,000 feet over its route. It's a strenuous trail that is usually easy to follow. On occasion it is difficult to find or nearly nonexistent. It stays above the tree line much of the way. Water may be scarce at times. Late-afternoon thunderstorms can threaten hikers, and snow can be deep in places, even into July.

What can you expect? I spent ten days backpacking the CDT with my then fiancé and now husband, Mike, and we discovered one stunning vista after another. Starting at Wolf Creek Pass, we enjoyed hiking at an average elevation of 12,000 feet, surveying landmarks such as the Rio Grande Pyramid and the Window when we were still miles away. We also spied herds of elk, watched a ptarmigan and her babies, and delighted in a potpourri of colorful wildflowers. Imagine our joy at reaching Stony Pass, knowing that we had hiked 85 miles and that a hot shower and Mexican food were in our near future! Though we were glad to reach our destination, we were both a bit sad to have to say good-bye to our high-elevation odyssey.

July, August, and September are the best months for hiking the CDT, though you may encounter snow any month of the year. Hike too early in the season, and you'll be postholing through thigh-deep snow. (The Forest Service claims that some hikers have hit 20-foot drifts.) Worst of all, you'll miss the lovely wildflower display. Mike and I hiked the trail during the last part of July and found little snow. We did encounter boggy sections, however, because of daily thundershowers that increased in severity as the days passed by.

We hiked the entire Weminuche section of the CDT in one long backpack, but you don't have to do the whole trail at once. For your convenience, I've divided the trail into four sections, choosing what I think are the best places to link up and leave the CDT. You can hike them as I've suggested or use your imagination and put sections together. You may want to link up with and leave the trail at other points. The choice is yours.

The hikes vary in miles but are similar in beauty. All are worthwhile. **Note:** Although I started the hiking miles at 0.0 for each segment, I also noted the accumulated CDT miles in parentheses in the Miles and Directions log. For example, the second segment (Hike 35) begins at Sawtooth Mountain; it is listed as 0.0 (12.5) under the Miles and Directions heading.

When hiking the CDT, you'll sometimes find that water is scarce. Most of it is off the trail a few hundred yards to a mile or so. Carry extra water while hiking through these areas.

34 Wolf Creek Pass to Sawtooth Mountain

If you love being up high, then the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) is for you. There are stunning views, mountain lakes, wildlife, and wildflowers.

Start: CDT trailhead at Wolf Creek Pass

Distance: 12.5 miles point to point

Hiking time: About 6 to 8 hours

Difficulty: Strenuous due to length, vertical gain of approximately 3,000 feet, and lofty elevation

Canine compatibility: Dogs must be under control.

Nearest town: South Fork

Fees and permits: Free registration (available online, at managing agency, or major trailheads) needed for both day hikers and overnight backpackers. Contact the managing agency for current information.

Maps: USGS Wolf Creek and Mount Hope; Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness;

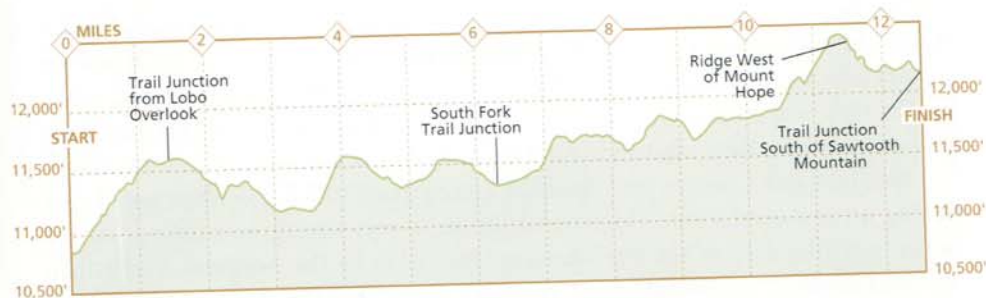
DeLorme 3D TopoQuad CD-ROM; Maptech Terrain Navigator CD-ROM

Trail contacts: San Juan National Forest, Pagosa Ranger District, Pagosa Springs; (970) 264-2268; www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan. Rio Grande National Forest, Divide Ranger District, Creede; (719) 658-2556; www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande.

Special considerations: You may not camp—or picket, hobble, tether, or graze pack or riding stock—within 200 feet of Archuleta Lake. Campfires are also prohibited. Watch for late-afternoon thunderstorms. Snow can be deep in places into July.

Finding the trailhead: The southern end of the Weminuche Wilderness portion of the CDT is at Wolf Creek Pass. To get there drive 19 miles southwest of South Fork on US 160 or 22.6 miles northeast of Pagosa Springs on US 160. The marked trailhead is across from the sign for Wolf Creek Pass, elevation 10,857 feet. Look for a path that soon disappears into the trees. *DeLorme: Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 88 A3. GPS: N37 28.998' / W106 48.109'.

If Lobo Overlook is open, you can save yourself a mile and a gain of approximately 800 feet by driving to the radio tower and overlook. About 0.1 mile east of Wolf Creek Pass, look for a turnout on the north side of the road. From here a gravel road leads to the 11,680-foot-high overlook, almost 3 miles away. Park near the radio tower to access Lobo Trail 878.





Rock Lake

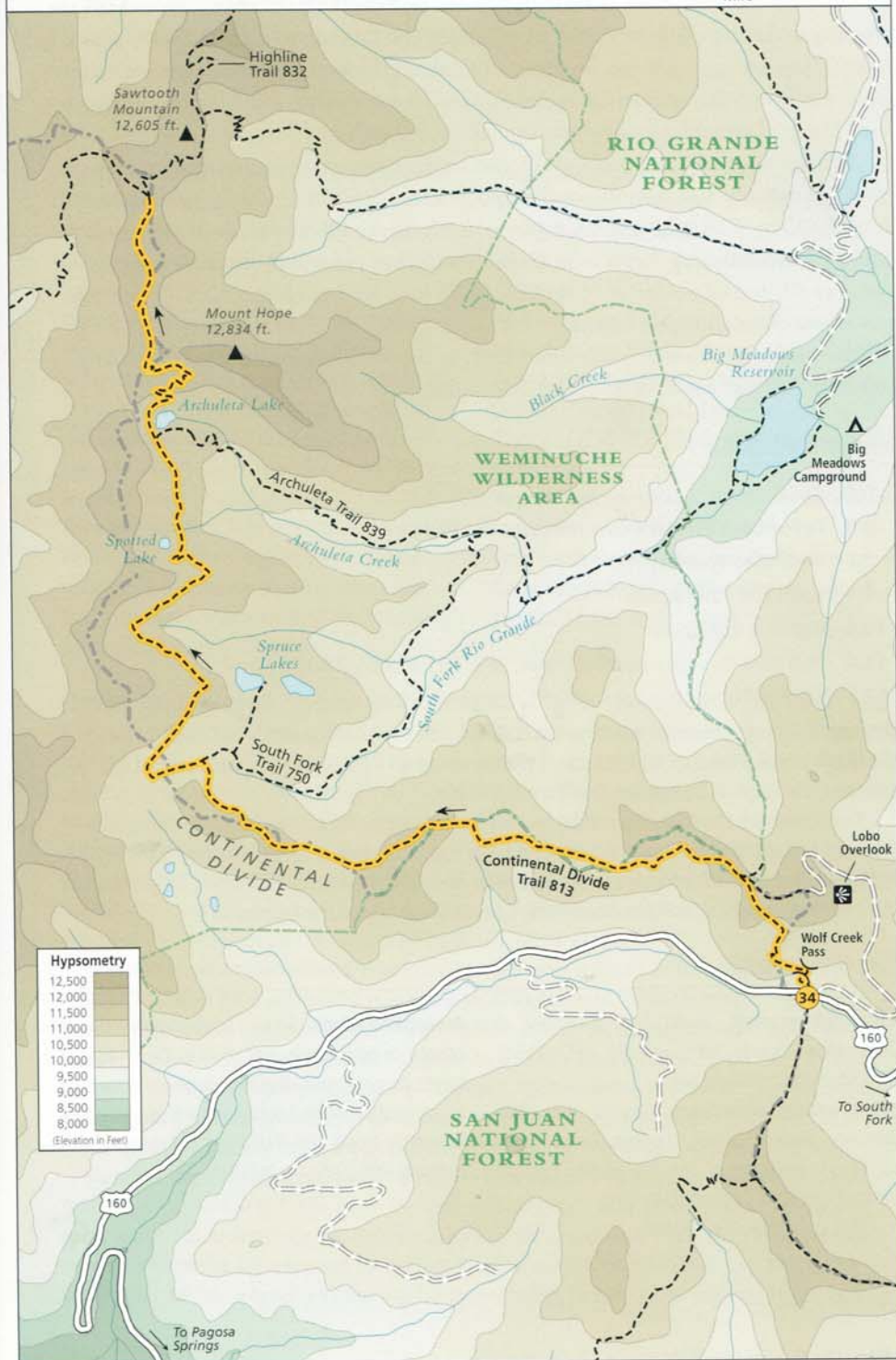
The Hike

From Wolf Creek Pass, CDT 813 begins on the north side of US 160. A trail marker shows the way, and you may also see remains of a series of small wooden steps. You'll quickly move into the trees; switchbacks help make the moderate-to-steep climb a little easier to bear. The first rise tops off at 1.1 miles, where there are some nice views. You'll descend 40 feet or so before reaching the trail from Lobo Overlook at 1.5 miles. (If you begin the hike at Lobo Overlook, you'll hike 0.5 mile from the trailhead to this point.)

You'll climb and descend as you make your way to the wilderness boundary at 2.7 miles. The roller coaster-like terrain continues past a couple of meadows. You'll see a small lake on the left (and another on the right) at 5.2 miles. Set in rock, the lake on the right is appropriately named Rock Lake. (A sign claims this is Lake Joyce, but it is not. Look for tiger salamanders in the grassy area at the north end of the lake.)

Beyond Rock Lake the trail climbs at a steep grade to 5.5 miles. You now begin hiking off and on the true Continental Divide, always staying near the top. At 6.1 miles you'll be able to see Big Meadows Reservoir to the northeast. You'll then descend along an eastern side slope, crossing a large talus slope before heading back into the trees. The South Fork Trail 750 junction appears at 6.4 miles.

Wolf Creek Pass to Sawtooth Mountain



Continue on the CDT, hiking across a meadow and into the trees. You'll climb at a moderate-to-steep grade. Long switchbacks, one descent, and an occasional stream crossing make the climb bearable. At 8.7 miles you'll come to a ridge above Spotted Lake. There are grand views of Mount Hope, the Hope Creek drainage, and more from this point. Traverse an open slope; it is decorated with wildflowers come summer. The trail switchbacks down to the lake at 9.2 miles.

Beyond Spotted Lake you'll climb moderately past some meadows. Look for elk. You'll eventually top out on another ridge, then descend gradually to a fork with Archuleta Trail 839 at 10 miles. Continue north on the CDT; a series of steep switchbacks follows, offering views of both the South San Juans and the wilderness. You'll come to the top of a ridge at 11.4 miles. From here Mount Hope's 12,834-foot summit seems close enough to touch.

To finish out this section, descend easily to 12.5 miles and a junction with Highline Trail 832 just south of Sawtooth Mountain.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** Wolf Creek Pass.
- 1.5** Trail junction from Lobo Overlook (Lobo Trail 878).
- 2.7** Wilderness boundary.
- 6.4** South Fork Trail junction.
- 10.0** Archuleta Trail junction.
- 11.4** High point on ridge near Mount Hope. GPS: N37 32.654' / W106 52.675'.
- 12.5** Highline Trail junction just south of Sawtooth Mountain.

Options: Sawtooth Mountain is accessible from two other trails: Hope Creek Trail (Hike 21) and the Highline Trail (Hike 24). Try the latter if you like being up high. Starting at the Hunters Lake trailhead, the Highline Trail climbs less than 1,580 feet.

Beginning with this hike, you can travel all the way to Stony Pass. Hike 35 starts where Hike 34 ends, just south of Sawtooth Mountain; it takes you 25.3 miles to Trout Lake. Hike 36 starts at Trout Lake and travels 19.5 miles to the Pine River Trail near Weminuche Pass. Hike 37 picks up at this trail and goes 27.7 miles to Stony Pass. Consult these hikes for a full itinerary.

Hike Information

Local information: South Fork Chamber of Commerce, South Fork; (719) 873-5556; www.southforkcolorado.org.

Local events/attractions: Attend the Little Britches Rodeo (June), Logger Days Festival (July), Rhythms of the Rio Music Festival (August), or Chili Cookoff (October).

Raft or fish the Rio Grande.

Accommodations: South Fork has a number of private campgrounds and motels. One national forest campground—Big Meadows—is about 13 miles southwest of South Fork, off Big Meadow Reservoir Road (FR 410). It's a fee area with drinking water and vault toilets.

35 Sawtooth Mountain to Trout Lake

The Continental Divide Trail (CDT) has spectacular views, high mountain lakes, and wonderful wildflowers. Look for wildlife, including elk.

Start: Junction of CDT and Highline Trail south of Sawtooth Mountain

Distance: 25.3 miles point to point (additional mileage to reach starting point; see Finding the Trailhead)

Hiking time: 3- to 4-day backpack (excluding hike time to starting point)

Difficulty: Strenuous due to length, vertical gain of more than 5,000 feet, and lofty elevation

Canine compatibility: Dogs must be under control.

Nearest town: South Fork

Fees and permits: Free registration (available online, at managing agency, or major trailheads) needed for both day hikers and overnight backpackers. Contact the managing agency for current information.

Maps: USGS South River Peak, Palomino Mountain, and Cimarrona Peak; Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness; DeLorme 3D TopoQuad CD-ROM; Maptech Terrain Navigator CD-ROM

Trail contacts: San Juan National Forest, Pagosa Ranger District, Pagosa Springs; (970) 264-2268; www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan. Rio Grande National Forest, Divide Ranger District, Creede; (719) 658-2556; www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande.

Special considerations: The trail is easy to follow, but it's above the tree line for some of the way; watch for late-afternoon thunderstorms. Snow can linger in places, especially around the Knife Edge; use caution.

Finding the trailhead: Sawtooth Mountain is accessible from two lovely trails: the Hope Creek Trail (Hike 21) and the Highline Trail (Hike 24). To reach the trailhead for either, drive southwest from the junction of US 160 and CO 149 in South Fork. Follow US 160 for 11.7 miles. Turn right onto Big Meadow Reservoir Road (FR 410), which is paved for 0.4 mile and then turns to gravel. After 1.4 miles you'll come to a fork. A sign says SHAW LAKE VIA FOREST ROAD 430 to the right. Take FR 430, keeping right at the next fork in 0.2 mile. From here it is 1.2 miles on FR 430 to the Hope Creek trailhead (GPS: N37 33.252' / W106 48.161') and 9.6 miles to the Hunters Lake turnoff. For the latter turn left, and you'll reach the Hunters Lake trailhead in 0.1 mile. *DeLorme: Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 78 D3. GPS: N37 36.935' / W106 50.366'.

From the Hope Creek trailhead: Hike Trail 838. You'll cross a stream at 0.6 mile and enter a meadow at 1 mile. Travel another 0.3 mile and enter the wilderness. There are more stream and meadow crossings as you proceed. The trail gets a little steeper, but occasional switchbacks (like the one at 3.7 miles) help ease the way. At 4.2 miles you'll cross a large meadow. At 4.9 miles the trail reaches a scenic basin semi-surrounded by mountains. You'll reach the tree line at 5.6 miles. The trail meets Highline Trail 832 (also known as Highland Trail) at 5.8 miles. From there it's another 0.9 mile southwest on the Highline Trail to the junction with the CDT. This hike takes approximately 3 hours.

From the Hunters Lake trailhead: This route is for those who like to be up high. Take Trail 800. You'll cross a stream at 0.2 mile, reach the north end of Hunters Lake at 0.5 mile, and reach the south end at 1 mile. Watch for tree blazes and rock cairns as you head south. You'll enter the Weminuche Wilderness at 1.2 miles and see a junction with the unsigned Lake Creek Trail. Keep going straight. You will hike into spruce trees and climb moderately. At 2 miles you'll start to switchback up

to Highline Trail 832 (also called Highland Trail). At the trail junction (mile 2.1), go left and continue through trees to the beginning of the Stairsteps (volcanic rocks). You'll climb a steep 400 feet in a little more than half a mile and reach one of the highest points on the trail at about 2.7 miles. Follow the rock cairns across the nearly level plateau to reach another trail junction at 3.2 miles. Stay on the Highline Trail, traveling south toward the Continental Divide. Continue following rock cairns to a point near Sawtooth Mountain. Switchback down to a junction with the Hope Creek Trail. From there it's another 0.9 mile southwest to the junction with the CDT. This hike takes 3 to 4 hours.

The Hike

From the junction of CDT 813 and Highline Trail 832 south of Sawtooth Mountain, head northwest at a gradual descent. At 0.6 mile you'll see post-markers off to the left (south) that lead to Elk Creek, Beaver Meadow, and eventually Beaver Creek. To the right (north) you will see the Goose Creek drainage.

You'll climb and descend at an easy-to-moderate grade. You'll walk past wildflowers if you're there in midsummer. From 1.1 miles the trail is fairly level and open, allowing for grand views. You'll reach the junction for the Sawtooth Trail (to the north) at 1.6 miles. It drops to Goose Creek Trail 827 in nearly 3 miles and 2,000 vertical feet.

Stay on the CDT. After 2 miles you'll begin a moderately steep descent, reaching a mostly tree-covered saddle at 2.5 miles. In another 0.2 mile you'll see the remains of an old cabin (including a stove) on the left, just off the trail. Proceed through the trees from the saddle, climbing back into the open at the 3-mile point. Cross another saddle, then climb up a steep grade. At 4 miles you'll cross yet another saddle.

Next you'll descend at a moderate-to-easy grade, reaching a low point on a saddle at 4.6 miles. From here the trail follows the contour lines. You'll skirt a bench where there is a small creek. You'll then begin a series of switchbacks to the top of a saddle at 6.5 miles and 12,860 feet above sea level. You'll have fantastic views of the wilderness and beyond from this point, the highest place along the Weminuche portion of the CDT. You'll see the Rio Grande Pyramid, the Grenadiers, and the Needles.

It's a short, steep descent to 6.7 miles and another saddle. After 7.1 miles you'll come to a junction with Goose Creek Trail 827, which goes off to the right (see Hike 26 for more information). This trail leads past the 13,149-foot summit of South River Peak, about 0.5 mile north.



The CDT stays to the left (west) at the junction. You'll descend, cross a stream at 8.6 miles, and enter the trees just afterward. At 9.4 miles you'll reach a junction with the Rainbow Trail—aka West Fork San Juan Trail 561—which leads left to the West Fork trailhead, 12 miles south (see Hike 19 for more information). The junction is Piedra Pass, and it has abundant water and lovely views.

From Piedra Pass the CDT climbs easily to 9.6 miles and a junction with Turkey Creek Trail 580, which heads into the drainage to the south/southwest. (It is 20.1 miles back to the Turkey Creek trailhead; see Hike 18 for more information.) You'll see a sign for the East Fork Piedra River. Post-markers will help you stay on the CDT, which runs parallel to the Turkey Creek Trail but at a higher elevation.

You'll gradually climb to 9.7 miles and cross a stream. It's a moderate uphill to the 10-mile mark, where the CDT curves west. You'll hike mostly in the trees, crossing occasional meadows. At 10.7 miles you'll cross an immense talus slope and emerge into the open. From this point the trail alternately climbs and descends, sometimes steeply, to the 13-mile point and the East Fork Trout Creek Trail junction. Look for the CDT just up the hill.

Next you'll climb to meet the Middle Fork Trail atop a plateau. At 14 miles the trail descends slightly through a boggy area. Follow post-markers to the edge of the basin, where you'll descend an easy-to-moderate grade. At 14.4 miles you'll begin a short, steep ascent to the top. The route continues across side slopes—some open, some covered with trees—throughout most of your journey to Trout Lake.

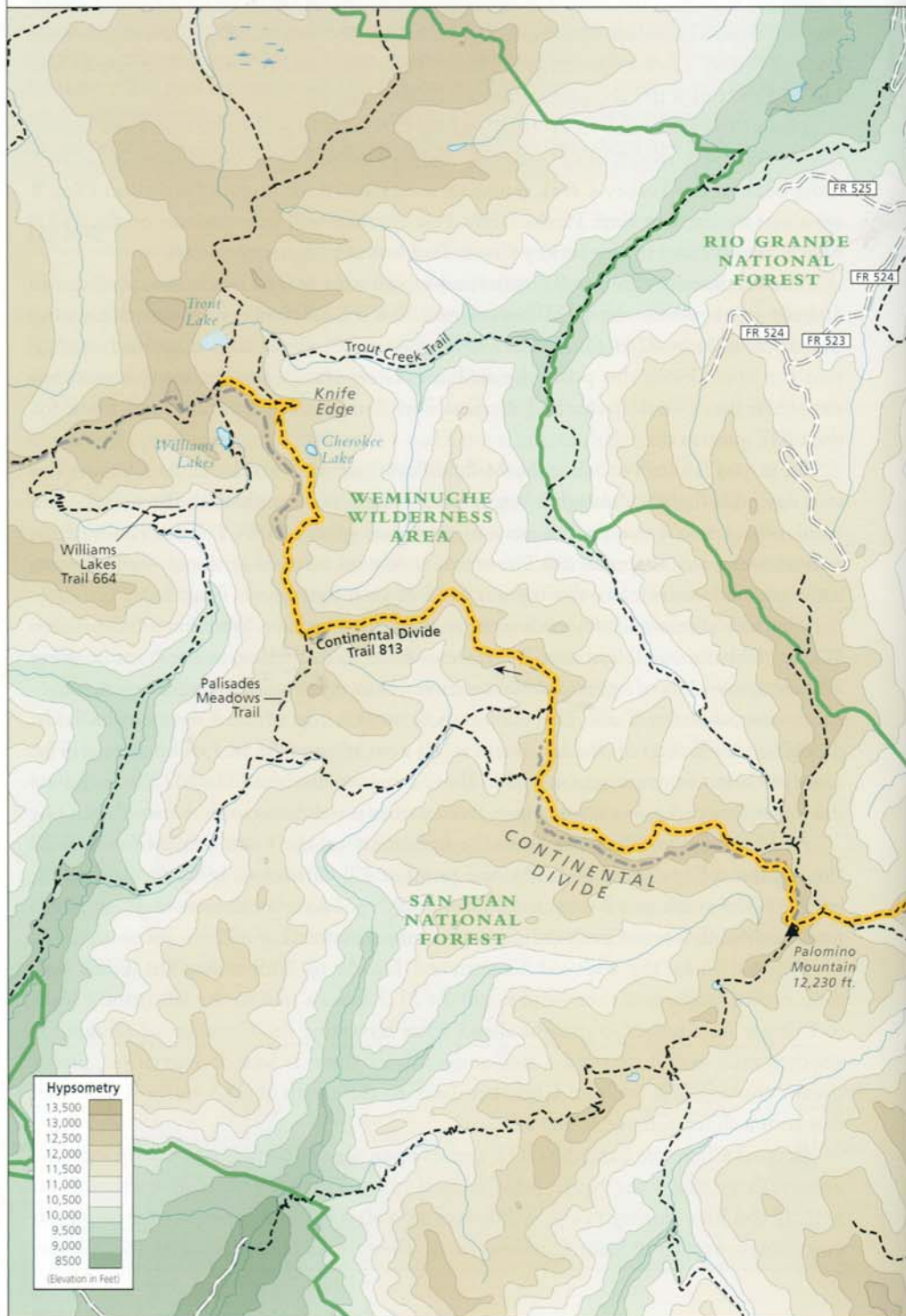
The trail climbs and descends in turn, reaching a picturesque basin at 15.6 miles. Within the basin you'll find small tarns. Descend to 16 miles, then begin the same thing all over again—lots of ups and downs, sometimes in the woods, sometimes not, sometimes steep, sometimes not. The trail tends to stay on top of the Continental Divide, though you will drop on the north and south sides at times. At 18.1 miles there will be a body of water on your right; it's a 300-foot descent to this lake. (The Middle Fork Piedra River Trail picks up somewhere in this area, but it is difficult to find from the CDT.)

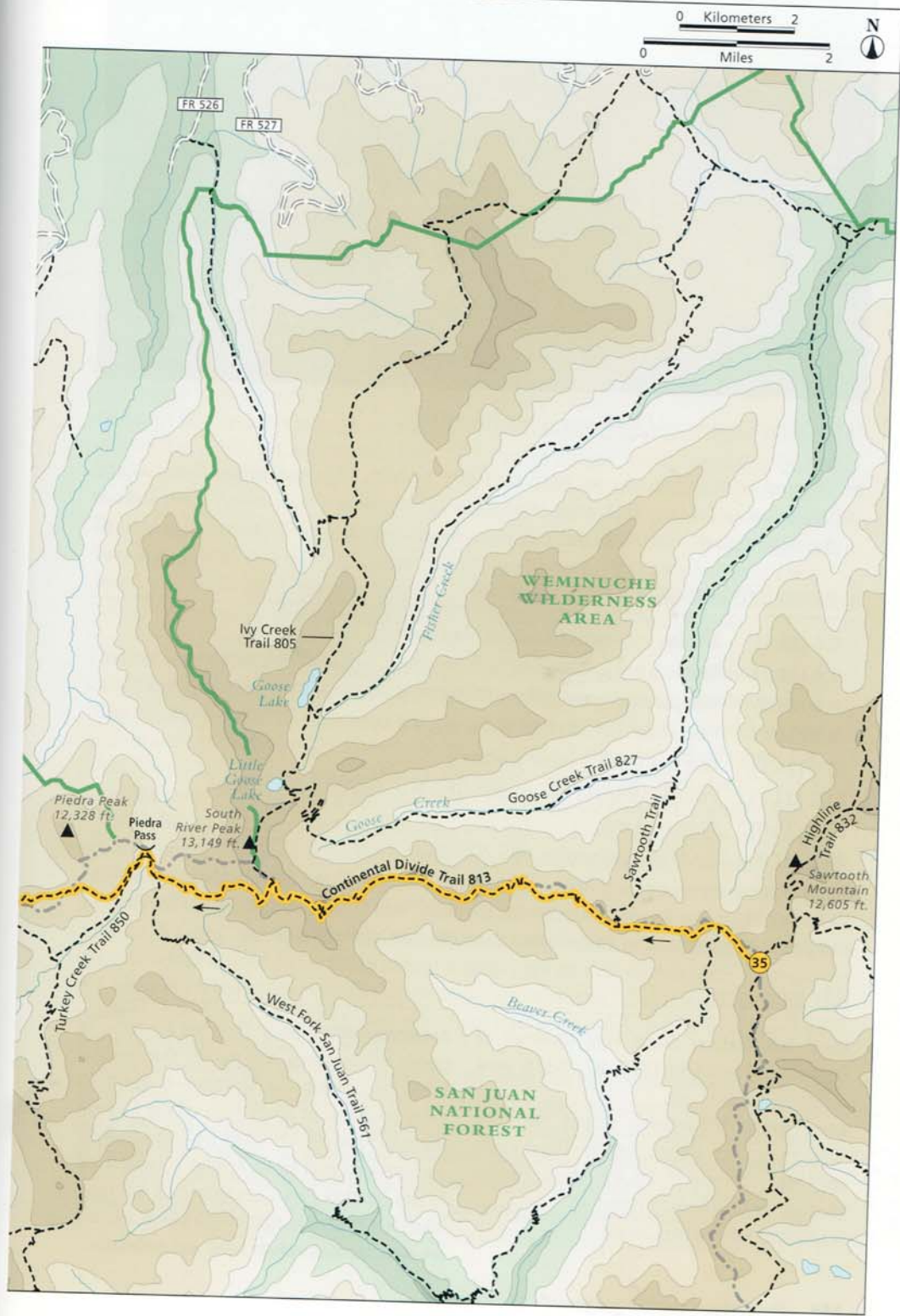
At 18.8 miles you'll emerge into the open. Stay on the Continental Divide, continuing the roller-coaster walk. At one point you'll climb to 11,950 feet above sea level. At 20.1 miles you'll cross a saddle and have good views all around. Look north into the Middle Trout Creek drainage; you may see a herd of elk.

Proceed along the exposed Continental Divide to 20.9 miles. The CDT will drop onto a saddle and then head north. At 21.2 miles a trail to the left (south) leads to Palisade Meadows. Go straight ahead. After traversing the Continental Divide for another mile, you'll descend a side slope where there is lots of vegetation, plus a stream crossing. You will see Cherokee Lake to the north at 23.5 miles. A side trail descends a short distance to the lake.

Beyond Cherokee Lake the CDT crosses open tundra, climbing to the rock promontory/sliver called the Knife Edge at 24.4 miles. There are incredible views from here. If you hike during prime wildflower season, you'll see an impressive display as you continue to Trout Lake. Continue west, hiking across the Knife Edge, which can

Sawtooth Mountain to Trout Lake







Hiker on the Continental Divide near South River Peak

be covered with slippery snow until mid-July or later. Descend to the Trout Lake/Williams Lakes Trails at 25.3 miles. The lakes are less than a mile away; Trout Lake is to the right (north), and Williams Lakes are to the left (south).

Miles and Directions (accumulated CDT miles)

- 0.0 (12.5)** Junction just south of Sawtooth Mountain.
- 1.6 (14.1)** Sawtooth Trail junction.
- 6.5 (19.0)** High point along CDT. GPS: N37 33.825' / W106 58.106'.
- 9.4 (21.9)** Piedra Pass. GPS: N37 34.251' / W107 0.053'.
- 13.0 (25.5)** East Fork Trout Creek Trail junction.
- 21.2 (33.7)** Palisade Meadows Trail junction. GPS: N37 36.094' / W107 8.304'.
- 23.5 (36.0)** Cherokee Lake.
- 25.3 (37.8)** Trout Lake Trail junction. GPS: N37 38.247' / W107 9.352'.

Option: You can continue hiking all the way to Stony Pass. Hike 36 starts at Trout Lake and travels 19.5 miles to the Pine River Trail near Weminuche Pass. Hike 37 picks up at the Pine River Trail and goes 27.7 miles to Stony Pass. Consult these hikes for a full itinerary.

Hike Information

Local information: South Fork Chamber of Commerce, South Fork; (719) 873-5556; www.southforkcolorado.org.

Local events/attractions: Attend the Little Britches Rodeo (June), Logger Days Festival (July), Rhythms of the Rio Music Festival (August), or Chili Cookoff (October).

Raft or fish the Rio Grande.

Accommodations: South Fork has a number of private campgrounds and motels. One national forest campground—Big Meadows—is about 13 miles southwest of South Fork, off Big Meadow Reservoir Road (FR 410). It's a fee area with drinking water and vault toilets. Another national forest facility, Marshall Park Campground, is 6.5 miles southwest of Creede, right off CO 149. It, too, is a fee area; facilities include water and outhouses.

36 Trout Lake to Weminuche Pass

Hike this section of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT), and you'll see that it continues to provide stunning views, high mountain lakes, abundant wildflowers, and wildlife that includes bighorn sheep near Hossick Peak.

Start: Junction of CDT and Trout Lake Trail south of Trout Lake

Distance: 19.5 miles point to point (additional mileage to reach starting point; see Finding the Trailhead)

Hiking time: 2- to 3-day backpack (excluding hike time to starting point)

Difficulty: Strenuous due to length, vertical gain of more than 3,000 feet, and lofty elevation

Canine compatibility: Dogs must be under control.

Nearest town: Creede

Fees and permits: Free registration (available online, at managing agency, or major trailheads) needed for both day hikers and

overnight backpackers. Contact the managing agency for current information.

Maps: USGS Little Squaw Creek, Granite Lake, Cimarrona Peak, and Weminuche Pass; Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness; DeLorme 3D TopoQuad CD-ROM; Maptech Terrain Navigator CD-ROM

Trail contacts: San Juan National Forest, Pagosa Ranger District, Pagosa Springs; (970) 264-2268; www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan. San Juan National Forest, Columbine Ranger District, Bayfield; (970) 884-2512; www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan. Rio Grande National Forest, Divide Ranger District, Creede; (719) 658-2556; www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande.

Finding the trailhead: If you have completed Hike 35, you are already at the starting point for this hike. Otherwise you can access the CDT south of Trout Lake from the Fern Creek trailhead (Hike 27). This will add 11.7 miles and 6 to 8 hours of hiking time to the trip. To reach the Fern Creek trailhead from Creede, go southwest on CO 149 for 16.3 miles. Turn left onto gravel Fern Creek Road, also known as FR 522. After 1.5 miles turn right at the sign for the Fern Creek trailhead. *DeLorme: Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 78 B1. GPS: N37 44.291' / W107 06.097'.

Begin hiking Fern Creek Trail 815 through the burn area. At 1 mile the grade will steepen as you head up the Fern Creek drainage. You'll hike near the creek at times; at other times you'll hike above or away from it. After 2.6 miles you'll travel along the west side of a rock slide. The rock switches to meadow as you continue to a junction at 3.8 miles. Unmaintained Texas Creek Trail 816 is to the right. Look ahead to see Little Ruby Lake, and continue across the flat meadow on the east side of it. Head back into the trees at 4 miles. You'll climb at a steep grade, topping off at 4.3 miles, where you will see Fuchs Reservoir on the left. In another 0.3 mile you'll come to a trail junction. At the fork go left (south); you'll reach Ruby Lake at 4.8 miles. The trail forks here. Texas Creek Trail 816 is once again to the right.

The main route heads left (east) to a sign for Red Lakes Trail 889, on the lake's northeast side. At 5.4 miles you'll enter the wilderness. The moderate-to-steep climb tapers off at 5.7 miles. You'll reach an unsigned junction with the Jumper Lake Trail at 7 miles. Post-markers head southeast toward Jumper Lake and southwest toward the Red Lakes; follow the southwest route. You'll cross a few streams and gradually climb to a small, unnamed lake on the left at 9.1 miles. The closest of the Red Lakes is on the right (west) at 9.2 miles. Proceed to the unsigned junction with Texas

Creek Trail 816 at 9.7 miles. To continue to CDT 813, descend to the south. You'll cross a couple of small streams before you reach West Trout Creek at 10.8 miles and an unsigned junction with the West Trout Creek Trail at 10.9 miles. You will see spur trails that lead to Trout Lake (though you're still too low to see the lake itself). The trail will take you around the east side of the lake and climb steeply to the CDT at 11.7 miles (and an elevation of 12,000 feet).

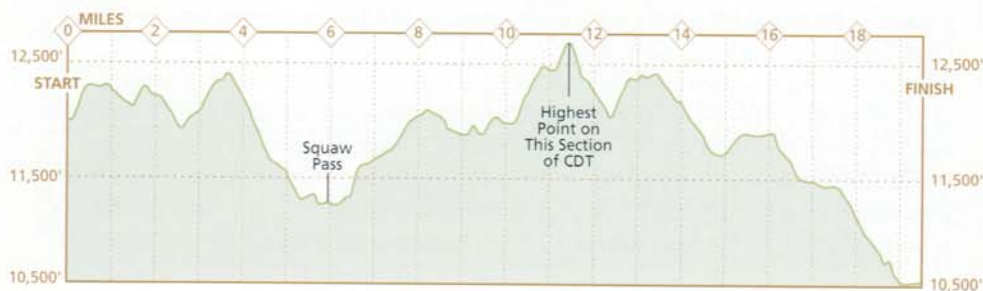
The Hike

At its junction with the Trout Lake Trail, go west on the CDT, following post-markers across the tundra. Look for ptarmigan and wildflowers in the area. You'll reach the top of a ridge at 0.7 mile and descend to a narrow saddle at 1.3 miles. From here there are excellent views into the Little Squaw Creek drainage. The trail climbs for the next 0.5 mile, staying near the top of the Continental Divide (mostly on the north side); it then descends to 2.5 miles and the Williams Creek Trail, which leads to the west fork of the creek. There are a couple of small lakes here.

The CDT climbs again to 3.6 miles and the top of a ridge just south of Chief Mountain. From here you can see west to the Needles, the Rio Grande Pyramid, and the Window. Descend into the Squaw Creek drainage; you will drop at a generally moderate (but sometimes steep) grade and reach the trees at 4.7 miles. After 5 miles the trail parallels a pretty stream, crossing it at 5.1 miles. The unsigned Squaw Creek Trail merges from the right at 5.6 miles (see Hike 29 for more information on this route).

Continue left (south) along a talus slope. You'll reach the meadowy realm of Squaw Pass at 5.9 miles. Beyond the pass the CDT begins a short, steep climb to a bench to the west. You'll hike in the trees, then switchback up at 6.1 miles. The trail exits the trees at 6.6 miles, where there's a stream. The grade becomes more gradual here. At 7.3 miles there is a lake on the right.

Hike another 0.5 mile, then begin a steep descent to another basin at 8.5 miles. The trail passes a number of small lakes before crossing a stream at 9.1 miles. From there you'll climb a moderate-to-steep grade to 10.7 miles and a ridge that hosts wildflowers and offers beautiful views. Continue climbing to 10.9 miles, where you will see Squaw Lake on the right. At 11.4 miles you'll reach the highest point on this section of the CDT, 12,780 feet above sea level.

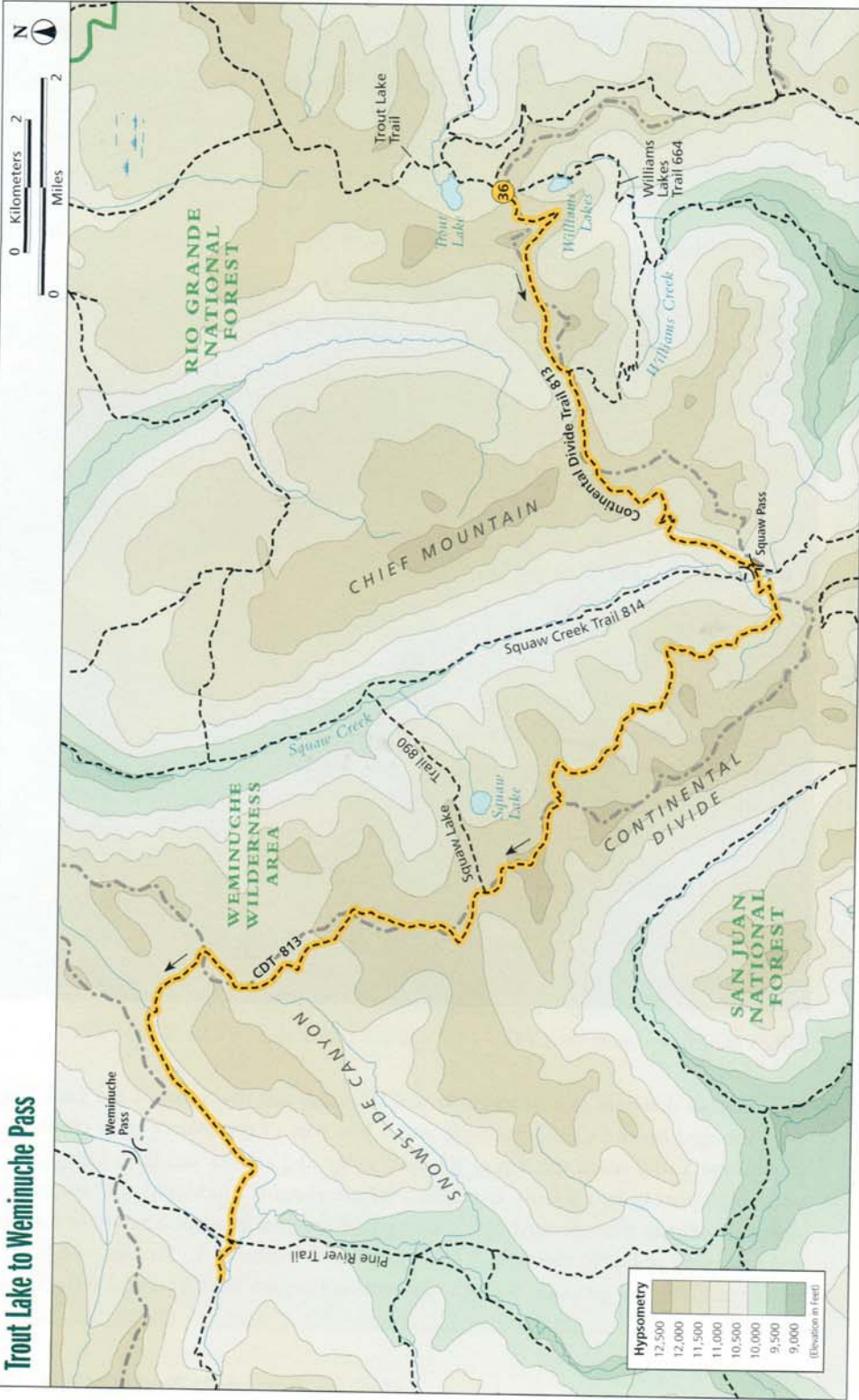




Mike Vining backpacking the CDT

The trail descends at a steep grade to 11.8 miles and the Squaw Lake Trail junction. Proceed on the CDT, dropping into a low part of the basin before climbing a steep slope. You'll reach the top of the next ridge at 13 miles and then hike across a wide, high plateau that is fairly level. The trail then begins a moderate (but sometimes steep) descent in the open. At 14.9 miles you'll pass the head of Snowslide Canyon and see many ponds in the area. A moderate climb begins at 15.2 miles, and at 15.5 miles you'll reach a junction with the Snowslide Canyon Trail. This is also the top of the ridge.

Trout Lake to Weminuche Pass



Look closely when you're in the alpine or tundra region, and you will see miniature wildflowers. For instance, mountain bluebells, also known as tall chiming bells, may grow to 4 feet at a lower elevation, but they are mere inches high in the alpine area.

The trail descends steeply at first, then moderately, into the trees at 15.7 miles. Along the way you'll emerge for more views of the Window, the Rio Grande Pyramid, and other formations. At 16.5 miles you'll cross the North Fork Pine River. Look for lots of wildflowers in season. You'll cross the river again soon after.

The route descends moderately to the trees at 18.3 miles, then continues to Fuchs Diversion Ditch at 18.7 miles. You'll reach the meadow near Weminuche Pass just beyond the ditch. The CDT crosses the meadow (look for post-markers) and jumps a canal at 19.1 miles. It meets the Pine River (Los Pinos) Trail, which is unsigned, at 19.5 miles. Follow post-markers to take the CDT west from here. At an elevation of 10,565 feet, this is the lowest part of the CDT in the Weminuche.

Miles and Directions (accumulated CDT miles)

- 0.0 (37.8)** Junction Trout Lake Trail and CDT.
- 2.5 (40.3)** Williams Creek Trail junction.
- 3.6 (41.4)** Top of ridge.
- 5.9 (43.7)** Squaw Pass. GPS: N37 36.125' / W107 12.995'.
- 11.4 (49.2)** Highest point of this CDT section.
- 15.5 (53.3)** Snowslide Canyon Trail junction.
- 19.5 (57.3)** Pine River Trail near Weminuche Pass. GPS: N37 40.096' / W107 19.844'.

Option: You can continue hiking to Stony Pass from here. Hike 37 picks up at the Pine River Trail and goes 27.7 miles to the pass. Consult that hike for a full itinerary.

Hike Information

Local information: Creede & Mineral County Chamber of Commerce, Creede; (800) 327-2102; www.creede.com.

Local events/attractions: Creede Repertory Theater in Creede is open every summer and is a big hit with locals and visitors alike; (866) 658-2540; www.creederep.org.

The Underground Mining Museum in Creede is a fascinating place and well worth a visit; (719) 658-0811; www.undergroundminingmuseum.com.

Raft or fish the Rio Grande.

One of the best burger joints around is at Freeman's General Store. Open in summer, you'll find it 2.1 miles east of the CO 149/FR 520 junction on CO 149.

Accommodations: Creede offers motels, cabins, and bed-and-breakfast inns. One national forest campground—Marshall Park—is located off the road as you drive to the trailhead at Fern Creek. Another, Thirtymile Campground, is located at the trailhead to Weminuche Pass. Both are fee areas with water and vault toilets.

37 Weminuche Pass to Stony Pass

If you've hiked from Wolf Creek Pass to this point, you've seen some of the most wonderful parts of the Weminuche Wilderness. Continue hiking to Stony Pass, and you'll witness spectacular scenes, see-forever views, high mountain lakes, wildlife, and wildflowers.

Start: Junction of Continental Divide Trail (CDT) and Pine River Trail near Weminuche Pass

Distance: 27.7 miles point to point (additional mileage to reach starting point; see Finding the Trailhead)

Hiking time: 3- to 4-day backpack (excluding hike time to starting point)

Difficulty: Strenuous due to length, vertical gain of more than 6,000 feet, and lofty elevation

Canine compatibility: Dogs must be under control.

Nearest town: Silverton

Fees and permits: Free registration (available online, at managing agency, or major trailheads) needed for both day hikers and overnight backpackers. Contact the managing agency for current information.

Maps: USGS Weminuche Pass, Rio Grande Pyramid, Storm King Peak, and Howardsville; Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness; DeLorme 3D TopoQuad CD-ROM; Maptech Terrain Navigator CD-ROM

Trail contacts: San Juan National Forest, Columbine Ranger District, Bayfield; (970) 884-2512; www.fs.usda.gov/sanjuan. Rio Grande National Forest, Divide Ranger District, Creede; (719) 658-2556; www.fs.usda.gov/riogrande.

Special considerations: Hikers must camp at least 200 feet from West Ute Lake; campfires are not permitted. In addition, livestock must be kept 200 feet away from the lake. The trail is easy to follow in most places, but difficult to follow in other places. The CDT is above the tree line much of the way, so watch for late-afternoon thunderstorms. Snow can be deep in places as late as July.

Finding the trailhead: If you have completed Hike 36, you are already at the starting point for this hike. Otherwise you can hike 6.2 miles from Thirtymile Campground to Weminuche Pass (Hike 30); this will add 2 to 4 hours to the trip. To reach the campground trailhead from Creede, drive southwest on CO 149 for 20 miles. Turn left onto Rio Grande Reservoir Road, also known as FR 520. It is paved but turns to maintained gravel after 0.3 mile. Drive another 11.1 miles, and turn left at the signed junction for Thirtymile Campground and the Weminuche and Squaw Creek trailheads. Keep right upon entering the area; you will reach a parking area in 0.2 mile. *DeLorme: Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 77 C7. GPS: N37 43.398' / W107 15.543'.

From the parking area follow the signs south about 200 yards to a wilderness sign and trail register. After signing in at the register, which provides access to the Squaw Creek Trail as well (see Hike 29), hike west on Weminuche Trail 818, hiking toward the Rio Grande Reservoir. You'll pass old cabin remains after 0.3 mile and then the dam and spillway. You'll enter the wilderness at 0.8 mile. The trail grade stays fairly level (with gentle ups and downs) until mile 1.3. Here the grade becomes moderate, with short, steep ascents through a mix of trees. After 1.5 miles you'll turn south, heading up the Weminuche Creek drainage. Cross a bridge over the creek at 1.8 miles. At 2 miles the trail eases up; you will climb through meadows and cross a few streams as you proceed.

At 4 miles you'll have to ford an unnamed stream that flows from Simpson Mountain, to the west. Continue another 0.8 mile, and you'll cross Weminuche Creek. (You may have to get your feet wet here early in the season.) Just after crossing the creek, you'll come to a junction with the Skyline Trail. Stay on Trail 818 to the Weminuche Pass area and continue to the Pine River Trail/CDT junction, which is south another 1.4 miles.

The Hike

From the junction of Pine River (Los Pinos) Trail 523 and the CDT near Weminuche Pass, follow the CDT post-markers to where you ford the Rincon La Vaca. Just beyond this river the CDT begins a steep climb through the trees. After 0.5 mile you'll enter a meadow and hike parallel to Rincon La Vaca. There are good views of the Window and the Rio Grande Pyramid here.

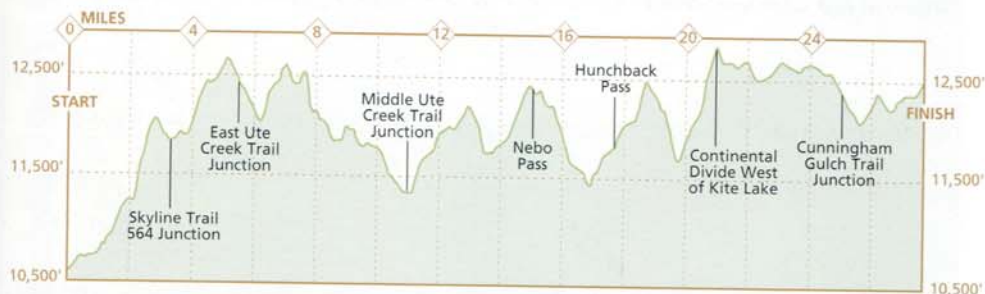
The trail crosses several small streams as you hike to the west end of the meadow, where you'll begin a steep climb. At 1.1 miles you'll enter the trees; there is a pond on the left just beyond. At 1.6 miles you'll descend a bit, switching between meadow and trees as you parallel a stream. A very steep slope begins at 2.1 miles. The trail skirts a talus slope, with a pretty waterfall off to the side at 2.3 miles.

At 2.5 miles you'll come to a fork: One trail heads southwest, the other northwest. Go left (southwest) and continue the steep climb. At 2.9 miles the trail eases, climbing more gradually. The Window and the Rio Grande Pyramid will remain visible as you ascend through willows.

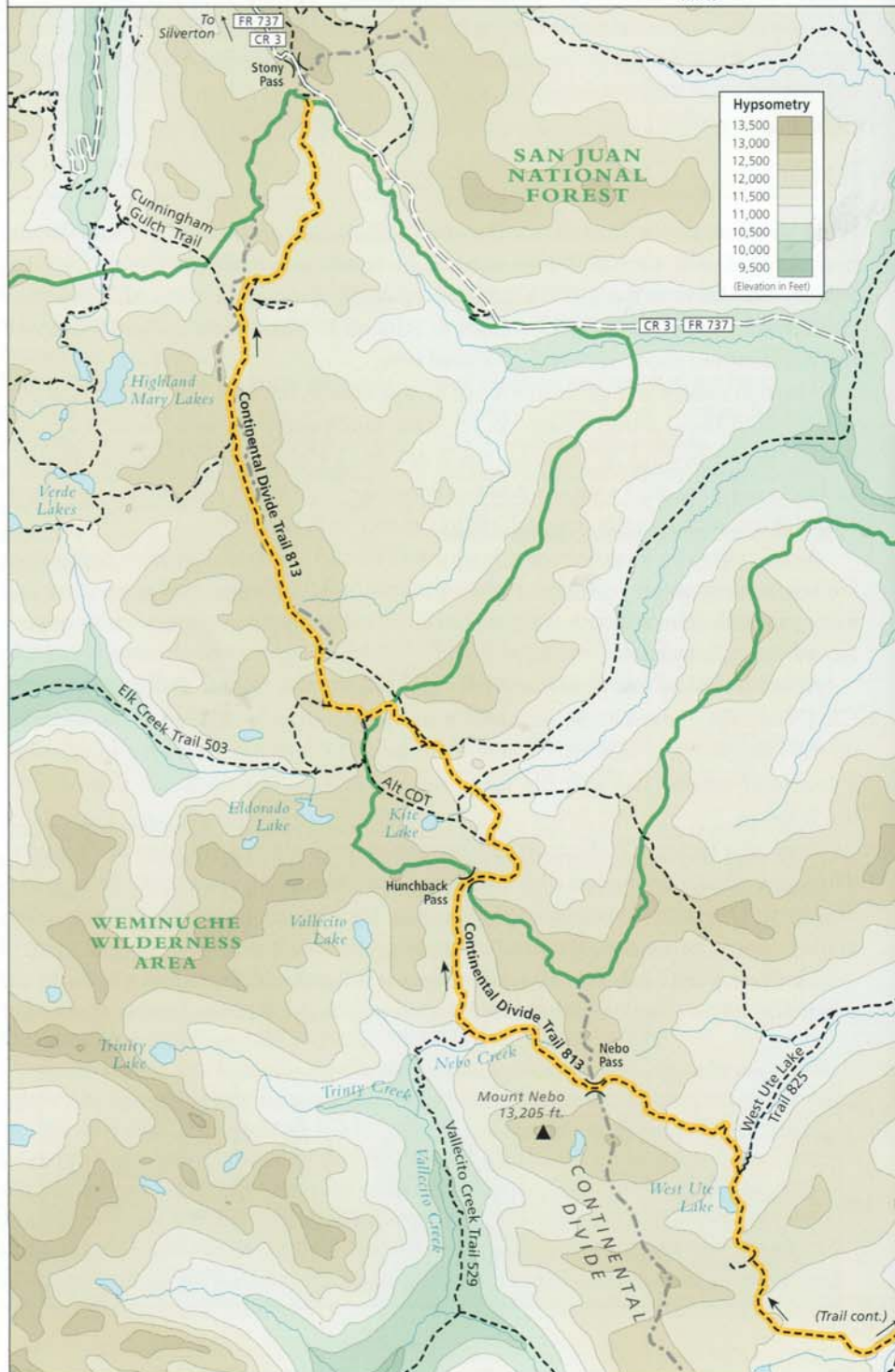
At 3.2 miles the trail crosses a stream, and at 3.3 miles Skyline Trail 564 joins the CDT from the right. The Skyline trail is unsigned, but post-markers point the way up the ridge to the northeast. Continue on the CDT, crossing nearly flat terrain and a couple of streams. Just after the last crossing, you'll reach a small lake that mirrors the Window.

From this lake you'll climb an easy-to-moderate grade to a ridgetop at 4.6 miles. There is a good view into the Ute drainages from here, with an abundance of wildflowers to keep you occupied on the descent. The drop is a moderate one, but the grade steepens as you near the head of the East Ute Creek drainage.

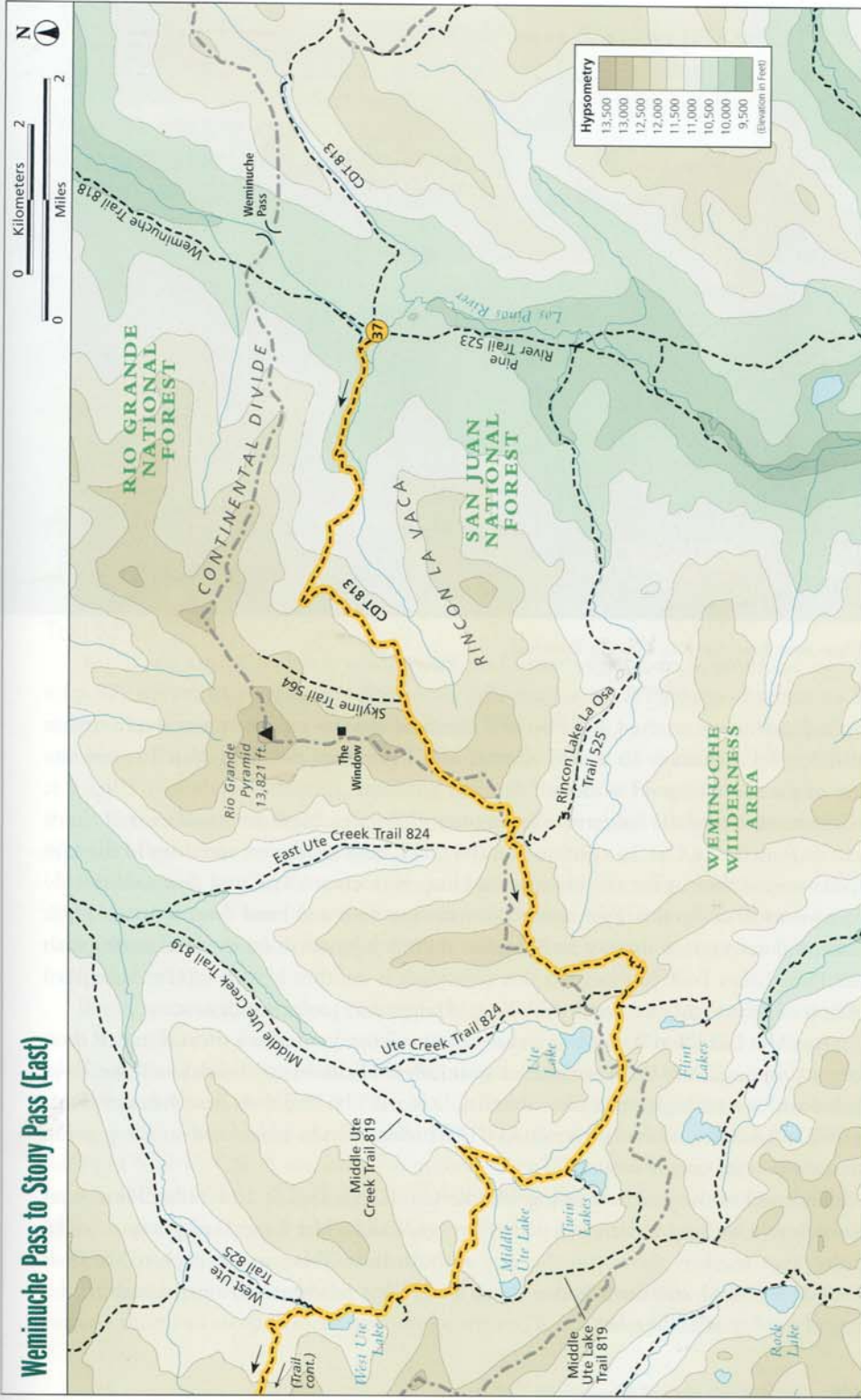
The East Ute Creek Trail 824 junction is at 5.6 miles. Follow the rock cairns to a junction where a spur trail heads left (southeast) to the Rincon La Osa. Continue



Weminuche Pass to Stony Pass (West)



Weminuche Pass to Stony Pass (East)





View west from the Rio Grande Pyramid

right (northwest) on the CDT. You will climb an easy-to-moderate grade to a stream at 6.3 miles. Continue to a nice view of Ute Lake from the ridge. You'll regain the top of the Continental Divide at 7.5 miles.

Proceed along the ridge to a junction at 7.7 miles. Here yet another trail heads east to Rincon La Osa. To continue on the CDT, hike southwest and drop to the Ute Lakes area. (Once again, the topographic map is in error.) The trail descends steeply to a junction at 8 miles. Take the left (northwest) fork and head directly toward Ute Lake, still descending sharply. At 8.2 miles there is a junction on the left (south) with the Flint Lakes Trail. Just beyond this crossroads is another branch of Ute Lake Trail 905; it's to the right and northwest. Keep straight and to the southwest.

Pass Ute Lake. You'll climb at an easy-to-moderate grade for a short distance, then begin dropping. At 8.7 miles there's a good view of the basin ahead; you'll see Twin Lakes and several high peaks after the 9-mile mark. The trail then descends steeply to a fork at 9.5 miles, where the rerouted CDT breaks from its older version. Keep going straight (north) on the new CDT.

Descend to the junction of the Middle Ute Creek Trail at 10.6 miles. Head west from here, climbing a fairly steep trail to the Middle Ute Lake Trail junction at 12 miles. Post-markers show you the way to both trails. You can see back to the Rio Grande Pyramid and the Window from here. It's a moderate-to-steep climb to the top of a ridge at 12.5 miles.

Descend the ridge. You'll pass a small lake, reach West Ute Lake at 13.1 miles, and find a junction at 13.8 miles. Here West Ute Trail 825 continues north. Stay on the CDT, which goes left (northwest). Just beyond the junction you'll cross a stream. (**Note:** The CDT over Nebo Pass is not shown on topographic maps.) The trail stays in the trees at first, then emerges into the open, where there is an abundance of wildflowers.

The trail ascends at an easy-to-moderate grade to 13.9 miles, where you'll cross a creek. It then climbs at a steep—sometimes very steep—grade, crossing the most northerly of two creeks at 14.6 miles. Pass a little lake on the left. At 14.9 miles you'll cross another creek and then reach the top of Nebo Pass at 12,450 feet above sea level. There are wonderful views of the Grenadiers from here. Descend just a bit for a fantastic view of Nebo Lake with the peaks in the background.

From Nebo Pass descend moderately to 15.7 miles, where you'll cross yet another stream. A steep switchback leads down to 15.8 miles and Nebo Creek. Almost immediately after crossing the creek, you'll cross again and hike along its south side.

After 16 miles the trail eases, but it soon becomes difficult to find. It follows Nebo Creek (actually using the creek bed as a trail) for 100 yards or so, then crosses to the north side of the creek and heads into the trees. At 16.4 miles it moves away from Nebo Creek, descending moderately to an unsigned junction with Vallecito Creek Trail 529.

You'll see lots of willows, wildflowers, and other vegetation as you hike north up a side stream that eventually flows into Vallecito Creek. It's a steep climb to 16.9 miles, where you cross the stream. You will cross several more side streams before climbing a steep grade to the top of Hunchback Pass at 17.8 miles. This pass sits at 12,493 feet above sea level, reaching into the heavens. From here you can see south to the Guardian, the most prominent peak in view, and farther south into the Needle Mountains.

At this point you'll pass out of the wilderness and descend a moderate-to-steep slope. You will cross several streams and pass old mining remains en route to a junction with a four-wheel-drive road at 19.4 miles. There's a trail register here; be sure to sign in or out.

If you want to stay on the primary CDT, see Hike 4 (page 29) for more information. If you want to continue this hike, which follows an alternate CDT, go left (west) up the four-wheel-drive road. (The two trails merge in about 2 miles.) It's a steep climb up to Kite Lake at 19.9 miles. You'll find an old mining cabin and a couple of mine shafts. Just before reaching the lake, look for a rock cairn marking a trail to the right (north). Climb the steep (sometimes very steep) grade, crossing a stream en route to 12,800 feet at 20.9 miles. You are standing on the Continental Divide. Take in the impressive view of Eldorado Lake, with Peak Two behind it. You can also see the Elk Creek drainage and lakes north of it.

Turn right (north) onto the trail. You'll reach a high point of 12,840 feet, then begin a short but steep descent over rocky terrain. You'll meet Elk Creek Trail 503 at

21.3 miles (see Hike 4 for more information). Hike 0.3 mile to another junction at 21.6 miles. Here the Colorado Trail and the primary CDT take off to the right (east); you go left (northwest) on the CDT.

Follow post-markers to 21.7 miles, then stay north past a few pretty lakes. Rock cairns lead the way as you roll up and down to the 23.5-mile point. Look for two rock cairns here, one to the west and the other to the east. Follow the trail that passes between the two. At 23.9 miles you'll reach an unsigned junction with the trail to Verde Lakes; pass it. The terrain still rolls as you continue to a small lake on the left at 24.3 miles. Descend steeply to a small lake on the right. At 25.1 miles look for a sign pointing the way to the CDT. You'll also see an unmarked, well-defined trail heading to the northwest. It leads down into Cunningham Gulch (see Option 2).

The last portion of the CDT used to be tough to follow, but the Forest Service rerouted the trail a few years ago and it's now in good shape. From this point the trail heads to the northeast and climbs and descends, roller coaster fashion, with some switchbacks along the way. It pretty much travels north, eventually winding around the east side of Stony Pass Peak. You will arrive at the Stony Pass trailhead at 27.7 miles. If you've hiked the whole CDT route in the Weminuche, you've come 85 miles!

Miles and Directions (accumulated CDT miles)

0.0 (57.3)	Pine River Trail near Weminuche Pass.
3.3 (61.0)	Skyline Trail 564 junction.
5.6 (62.9)	East Ute Creek Trail junction.
7.7 (65.0)	Junction atop ridge.
9.5 (66.8)	Rock Lake Trail junction.
12.0 (69.3)	Middle Ute Lake Trail junction.
13.8 (71.1)	West Ute Lake Trail junction.
14.9 (72.2)	Nebo Pass.
17.8 (75.1)	Hunchback Pass. GPS: N37 42.284' / W107 31.206'.
21.3 (78.6)	Elk Creek Trail junction.
25.1 (82.4)	Cunningham Gulch Trail junction. GPS: N37 45.229' / W107 33.385'.
27.7 (85.0)	Stony Pass. GPS: 37 47.686' / W107 32.844'.

Option 1: Mile 9.5 marks the junction of the old and new (rerouted) CDT. The trip described above continues on the new trail. If you'd like to hike the old CDT—which stays true to the Continental Divide—go west past the north end of Twin Lakes, then climb the moderate-to-steep slope to the Rock Lake Trail junction. From there head north on the Middle Ute Lake Trail, traversing a side slope bursting with summer wildflowers. Once the trail was difficult to find because of thick willows, but it was cleared in summer 1998 and is now a pleasure to hike. After 2.2 miles you'll reach the 12-mile junction mentioned in the main text.

Option 2: If you don't have four-wheel drive, you can't get to Stony Pass. But you can hike an alternate route, ending this section by hiking the Cunningham Gulch Trail. The unsigned but defined route you passed at mile 25.1 is a nice trail. It descends 1,380 feet and ends 2.1 miles later at the Highland Mary Lakes trailhead (see Hike 1 for more details).

THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL

The CDT is a National Scenic Trail and a link between the Weminuche and South San Juan Wilderness Areas. Hiking the trail through both areas is an experience you don't want to miss—it's all about amazing views, wildflowers, alpine tundra, and other natural beauties. The 3,100-mile trail is still in the making (it's about 72 percent complete), but it is traveled by a select few who through-hike it each year. The CDT started as a dream in the 1960s, when it was identified as a way to traverse the backbone of our country. When it is complete, the trail will pass through twenty-five national forests, twenty wilderness areas, three national parks, and one national monument. Certainly the trail is one of the most awesome and spectacular pathways in the country. Spanning Mexico and Canada, it travels through New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. Hike the CDT in the Weminuche and South San Juan Wilderness Areas, and you'll see one of the most gorgeous parts of the trail.

Option 3: If you want to do a day hike, I recommend starting at Stony Pass and traveling south as far as you desire. You could also choose to hike the full trail in reverse, from Stony Pass to Weminuche Pass. Stony Pass is accessible from Silverton. From the junction of US 550 and CO 110 at the southwest end of town, drive northeast on CO 110 (Greene Street). After 1 mile go right (east) on San Juan CR 2. The road is paved for the first 2 miles, then it turns to maintained gravel. After another 2.1 miles turn right (south) onto San Juan CR 4 toward Stony Pass. After an additional 1.7 miles, the road forks again. Keep left on San Juan CR 3 (FR 737) for 4.1 miles to the top of Stony Pass (elevation 12,588 feet). The four-wheel-drive road is rough and very narrow in some places. The trailhead is a couple hundred yards east of the pass, near the remains of an old cabin on the right side of the road. *DeLorme: Colorado Atlas & Gazetteer*: Page 77 B5. GPS: 37 47.686° / W107 32.844°.

Hike Information

Local information: Silverton Chamber of Commerce, Silverton; (970) 387-5654 or (800) 752-4494; www.silvertoncolorado.com.

Local events/attractions: Ride the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, Durango; (970) 247-2733 or (877) 872-4607; www.durangotrain.com.

Walk around historic downtown Silverton.

Accommodations: Silverton offers a variety of private campgrounds and motels. If you're starting the hike from Weminuche Pass, you'll find a campground at the trailhead. Thirtymile Campground is a national forest facility. It's a fee area; facilities include water and vault toilets.