

Weminuche Wilderness: Vallecito Creek and Columbine Pass Trails

Guide Book Excerpts

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

VALLECITO CREEK TRAIL

- Starting Elevation – 7,916'
 - Total vertical descent – 3,604'
 - Ending elevation – 11,520'
 - Length: 17.0 miles
 - Maps: 7½' Vallecito Reservoir, 7½' Columbine Pass, 7½' Storm King Peak, San Juan National Forest
- Vallecito (Spanish: little valley) Creek Trail, one of the most scenic in the Wilderness, begins at the Vallecito Creek Campground (H). To reach Vallecito Reservoir you can go north from Highway 160 at Bayfield on the paved county road known as the Vallecito Road, or east from Durango on paved Florida Road. When you reach the dam it is another 5.0 miles to the Vallecito Forest Service Work Center, where you go left at a junction for 3.0 more miles to the trailhead at Vallecito Campground.

Vallecito Trail is one of the most heavily used trails in the Weminuche Wilderness. Many people take the Narrow Gauge Train to Needleton and climb to Columbine Pass, descend Johnson Creek to Vallecito Trail and go out to Vallecito Campground. Another popular route is to ascend Vallecito Trail to Rock Creek and from here go over the Pine River Trail (No. 14) via Rock Creek Trail (No. 11) and Flint Creek Trail (No. 17). Vallecito Trail below Johnson Creek takes on the appearance of a super highway and it is not uncommon to meet forty or more people a day in mid-summer.

0.6 mile after beginning there is a very spectacular gorge through which Vallecito Creek makes a noisy passage while the trail hangs on cliffs 400' above. This cliff area is dangerous for horses, so make all encounters as smooth as possible (see Manners on the Trail). On the granite along the trail you can see rocks smoothed by glacial action. North you should be able to view Irving Peak (13,218'), a classic-looking mountain that is framed by the valley ahead. The trail eases off the cliffs and at mile 3.0 you cross Taylor Creek and then Vallecito Creek with the first of three bridges. The little park at Taylor Creek has received quite a bit of use so get an early enough start so you won't have to stop here overnight and add your bit too. By July the vegetation along the trail is almost tropical from here up to the next two bridges. Green gentian, which grow to over six feet tall, thimbleberry bushes, solomonseal, columbine, and daisies are some of the larger, more obvious flowers. But take the time to look closer to the ground and you will see the minute violets, purple and yellow, and other tiny blossoms. Also seen along this trail is the very rare red lily. Please enjoy these flowers without picking them.

At mile 5.2 the second bridge takes the trail to the west side of the narrow valley and at mile 6.5 you cross the Soda Spring hanging bridge. The valley now changes dramatically* to meadows with aspen climbing the mountainsides. Quite a few small streams descend from the mountainsides and cross the expansive meadows on their way to Vallecito Creek. At mile 7.5 you enter a small stand of spruce and cross Irving Creek, the largest of these streams. A little ways further a strong trail goes left to an outfitter's camp but you keep right, and soon you meet Columbine Pass Trail (No. 6) where it crosses the Vallecito on a bridge at mile 8.5. West you see some of the impressive summits of the Needle Mountains with Thunder Mountain (13,108') being the most prominent. This is good country for elk, deer, black bear, and bighorn sheep, but these big game animals are shy and stay well away from the trails. As you continue up the creek the grade increases somewhat, big Vallecito Creek begins to roar and the valley seems almost arched by the summits that tower 3,000' on either side. Roell Creek, whose headwaters are in the nearly inaccessible Hidden and Lost Lakes, is extremely cold and may have to be waded. About .5 mile above Roell the U.S.G.S. map shows a crossing of the Vallecito. The trail only divides and it is not necessary to cross to

continue. When you enter the meadows across from Sunlight Creek you will notice that a scenic campsite is possible here. The mountain to the west is Vallecito Mountain (13,428'). After a section of forest the trail breaks into meadows across from Leviathan Creek at mile 12.7, not very suitable for camping. Sunlight Creek, Leviathan Creek and the yet to come Stormy Gulch (mile 15.5) have manways ascending them that have developed from countless climbing parties going into the Needles.

At the mile 14.0 you cross the reddish-colored Rock Creek** and the Rock Creek Trail (No. 11) goes right just after crossing the stream. Expect to take off shoes and socks for this one. An impressive mountain, The Guardian (13,617'), hangs over the valley to the west. Be sure to look down-canyon from the vicinity of Rock Creek because the view into the Needles is very fine. The area around Rock Creek is heavily used and you might have difficulty in finding a place to pitch your tent at certain times.

Continuing on, the valley narrows down and at mile 15.5 you look up Stormy Gulch to Mt. Silex (13,628'), north of The Guardian, and Storm King Peak (13,752'), to the right of Mt. Silex. The trail has some muddy places as you go through the timber after the Stormy Gulch vista and you may have to ford still another creek. Nebo Creek is really a delight to watch, though, as it cascades over rocks and away from the trail. After crossing an unnamed tributary of Nebo Creek that comes from Hunchback Pass, you meet the Continental Divide Trail (No. 59) at mile 17.0, 1.5 miles from Nebo Pass and 1.5 miles from Hunchback Pass.

**From where the mineralized springs seep into Rock Creek to about 1.0 mile down the Vallecito there are no fish. For drinking, the water seems fine but for extended use, it might be better to be on the safe side and take water from the Vallecito above Rock Creek.

NO.6 - COLUMBINE PASS TRAIL

- Trailhead elevation - 8,280'
- Total vertical ascent - 4,400'
- Highest point - 12,680'
- Total vertical descent - 3,560'
- Length - 14.25 miles one way
- Maps - 7½' Mountain View Crest, 7½' Columbine Pass, San Juan National Forest

(Guide book description of trail for Needleton to Columbine pass removed from here.)

Walking through the meadow surrounded by the magnificent summits the trail crosses Needle Creek at mile 6.0 and begins to climb to the upper Basin and Columbine Pass. The 1,480' of climb in 2.0 miles is modified by switchbacks and after attaining the upper Basin and continuing on to the Pass (12,680') the view is very rewarding. Columbine Pass is at the head of one of the 8 to 10 glacial cirques in Chicago Basin, and a look into Johnson Creek to the east reveals an equally well-glaciated drainage. Looking straight down Johnson Creek, the obvious peaks are Organ Mountain (13,032'), with many pinnacles and spires, and Amherst Mountain (13,165'). Prominent on the left side of Johnson Creek are McCauly Peak (13,554'), and Echo Mountain (13,303'), and along the right, Florida Mountain (13,076'), and Mount Valois (13,185').

A little below Columbine Pass a rough trail goes left to reach Hazel Lake's basin (12,435') in about 1.0 miles. You will also notice a rocky trail going right and contouring along the head of the basin. This is Endlich Mesa Trail (No. 9) which reaches the 12,840' Trimble Pass in 1.6 miles. At mile 8.25 the trail levels out briefly by Columbine Lake (12,320') and traverses some very barren and scoured ground until mile 8.75 when the steep descent is resumed. After passing a few mining prospects the trail levels off at mile 10.0 where timberline is reached and good camping is possible. Johnson Creek usually doesn't have the numbers of people that are found on Needle Creek. Also, Johnson Creek averages an 11% grade, about 1% steeper than Needle Creek. At mile 10.5 the trail begins a series of switchbacks and descends steeply. Another small campsite is possible at mile 11.5. After more descent, the good-sized creek from Grizzly Gulch is crossed at mile 13.0 and .75 later, Johnson Creek which will probably have to be waded. At mile 14.25 there is a bridge over Vallecito Creek and Vallecito Creek Trail (No. 10) is met.

Purgatory Creek Trail (No. 5), Columbine Pass Trail, and Vallecito Creek Trail from mile 8.5 down to the Vallecito Campground (trailhead H) hiked in one continuous trip (33.35 miles) take you through a great variety of scenery and elevation changes.

*people who have ridden the train should add the .9 mile to the mileages given in the trail description.

Trail Legs

| Leg | Distance (miles) | Elevation | Gain | Loss |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|------|------|
| | | (feet) | | |
| Vallecito Campground | 0.00 | 7,912 | - | - |
| Taylor Creek | 2.53 | 8,364 | 440 | 0 |
| Dead Horse Creek | 3.59 | 8,868 | 602 | 82 |
| Johnson Creek | 2.10 | 9,120 | 249 | 1 |
| Sunlight Creek | 3.39 | 9,626 | 505 | 0 |
| Rock Creek | 2.03 | 10,137 | 519 | 8 |
| Stormy Gulch | 1.71 | 12,648 | 1942 | 54 |
| *Johnson Creek to Columbine Pass | 6.31 | 9,120 - 12,648 | 3557 | 30 |

*side trip, not in sequence with other legs