

Reference Information Checklists, Food, Maps, and Guidebook Info

Click the blue boxes to open or close the sections below.

Equipment Checklists

- [Day Hike to Cache](#)
- [Main Hike](#)
- [Items to Cache](#)

Menus and Food Shopping Lists

Day Hike to Cache

- [Simple Menu](#)
- [Detailed Menu](#)

First Half

- [Simple Menu](#)
- [Detailed Menu](#)

Second Half

- [Simple Menu](#)
- [Detailed Menu](#)

Maps and Guidebook Info

- [CDT Weminuche](#)

Trip Report: June-July 2016

Backpacking CDT, Weminuche Wilderness



Looking East from the Pass Below Rio Grande Pyramid and the Window.

This page provides a report of a backpacking trip I did during the summer of 2016. I hiked about two-thirds of the length of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) through Weminuche Wilderness in Southwestern Colorado. Please see the [sidebar](#) for maps, guidebook excerpts, and other trip planning information.

- [Click here to see photos from this trip.](#)

The Inspiration

For many years I have been thinking about doing a long thru-hike. As a young man, I was inspired by [Colin Fletcher's](#) writings such as *The Man Who Walked Through Time* which chronicles his walk through Grand Canyon National Park entirely within the rim of the canyon in 1963. He was the first person to do this "in one go". He also wrote *The Thousand Mile Summer* which recounts his 1958 walk along the entire length of the eastern edge of California. These are both classic nature / backpacking books that I highly recommend. Many backpackers of my generation learned the intricacies of the craft from his book *The Complete Walker*. First published in 1968, it was a very influential book and has been credited with helping start the backpacking industry.

Another more obscure, but perhaps even more inspiring book, is *The Ultimate Journey: Canada to Mexico Down the Continental Divide* written by Eric Ryback. The author hiked the entire length of the

[Guidebook](#)

[Excerpts](#) (PDF file)

- [Rio Grande Pyramid Climbing Guidebook Excerpts](#) (PDF file)
- [Edited Maps](#) Covering the CDT in Weminuche Wilderness (70MB pdf)
- [Elevation Profiles](#) of the CDT in Weminuche Wilderness (4MB pdf)

US Topo Maps Covering the Area (about 30MB each)

- [Granite Lake](#)
- [Howardsville](#)
- [Little Squaw Creek](#)
- [Mount Hope](#)
- [Palomino Mountain](#)
- [Rio Grande Pyramid](#)
- [South River Peak](#)
- [Storm King Peak](#)
- [Weminuche Pass](#)
- [Wolf Creek Pass](#)

Segment Distances, Ascents, and Descents

- [My Summer 2016 Trip](#) (PDF file)
- [CDT in the](#)

Appalachian Trail in 1969 when he was only 17 years old. The next year he became the first person to thru-hike the entire Pacific Crest Trail. At age twenty he walked the length of the Continental Divide as described in the afore mentioned book. At that time, the CDT did not exist. He arranged food drops from the National Forest Service in exchange for scouting a potential CDT route. This was a truly phenomenal feat of will and physical endurance.

The Practicalities

About two years before this hike, I began to consider the possibilities of some sort of long thru-hike. I was at the point in my life where I could do something like this if I wanted.

First, I considered walking the entire CDT. It is 3,100 miles long, about 200 people attempt it each year, and it takes about 6 months to complete. I had just completed a two-month long bike tour along the southern U.S and realized that 3,100 miles and 6 months was way more than I wanted. Then I considered doing the 759-mile-long segment of the CDT in Colorado. I estimated this would take me at least three months, perhaps longer, and again was more time than what I wanted to commit to at this point. I looked at The Colorado Trail which is 486 miles.

I finally decided to hike the segment of the CDT that passes through the Weminuche Wilderness in Southwestern Colorado. With a length of 85 miles and ascent/descent of 20,447/-22,129 feet respectively, this was a much more realistic goal for me. I estimated that I could complete the trip in 12 to 16 days. Some people do it in half that time.

Some say this is one of the most spectacular hikes in the contiguous United States. I planned on hiking south bound from Stony Pass to Wolf Creek Pass. The route courses over the spine of the magnificent San Juan Mountains. The average elevation is over 12,000 feet.

Originally, I planned to go in the summer of 2015. Unfortunately, I recovered very slowly from injuries and surgery required after a vicious fall while cross country skiing. I was unable to do any backpacking that summer.

I was ready to go in the summer of 2016. I was scheduled to climb Mount Rainier with my daughter and her husband at the end of July. I thought this long backpack with a heavy pack would be an excellent

[Weminuche](#) (PDF file)

GPS info, waypoints, routes, etc.

- [Download Routes and Waypoints](#) (zipped (compressed), GPS eXchange (GPX) format file)
- [Download Goggle Earth KML File](#) (zipped (compressed))



[Mountain Waters Rafting](#) in Durango, CO does vehicle shuttle driving in the area.

Colorado Outdoor Recreation Search and Rescue (CORSAR) Card

If you have a current Colorado fishing license, hunting license, or CORSAR card it provides you

capstone for the training I had been doing for that climb. I wanted to start in mid-June to avoid the daily afternoon thunderstorms and attendant danger of lightening that comes with the monsoon weather pattern that usually develops in early July.

I began checking with the National Forest Service Offices in the area for information about the snowpack beginning early in June. Unfortunately, there was a lot of snow late in the season this year and most of my proposed route was still covered in snow. After repeatedly checking through the middle and end of June, I decided that it was not practical to attempt this walk until the beginning of July.

For most of the route, access to trailheads and civilization are a long way away. Weminuche Pass is about one-third of the way along the route I was planning. This point is accessible by a day hike starting at Thirty Mile campground by Rio Grande Reservoir. I decided to cache one-half of my consumable supplies such as food there before starting the main trek.

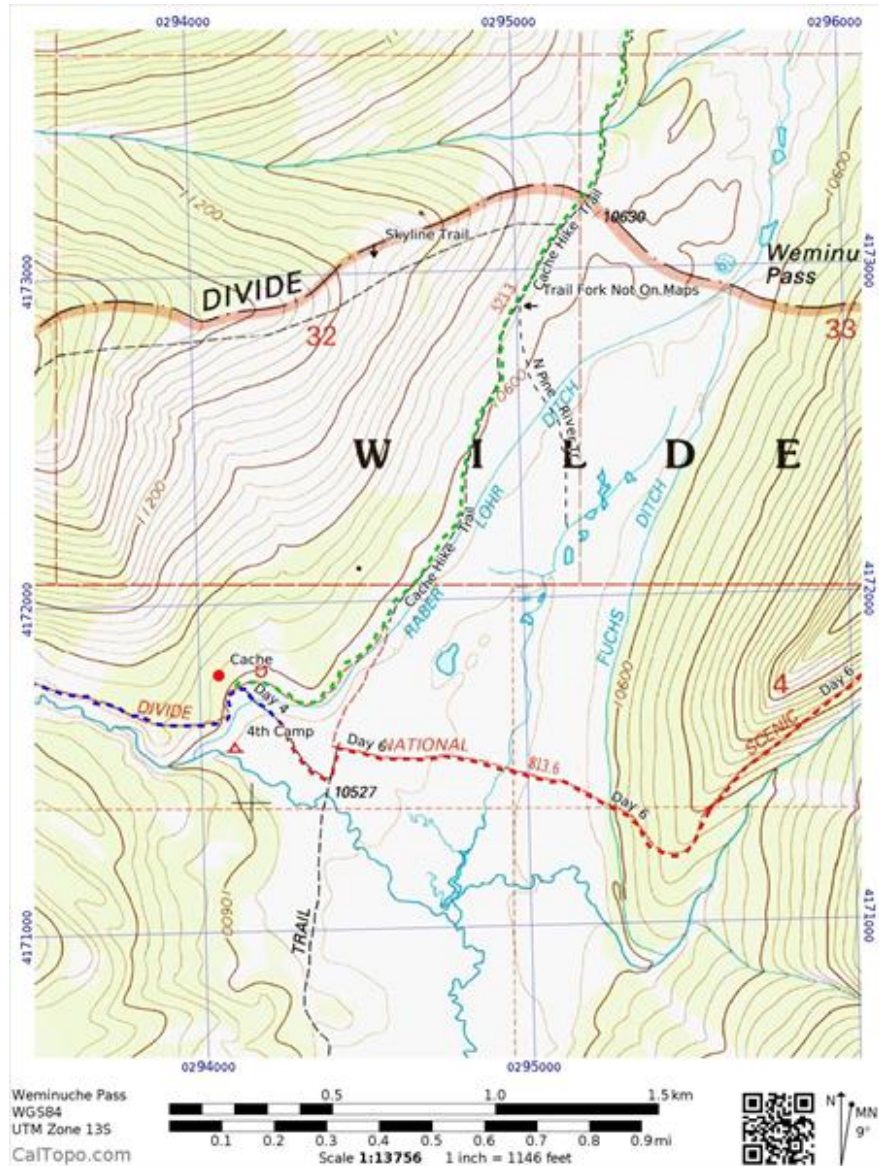
Rio Grande Pyramid is one of the Colorado's centennial peaks. Its summit is not far from the Continental Divide Trail near Rincon La Vaca and Weminuche Pass. Adding this summit to the trek would be easy to do requiring only an additional round trip distance of 2.7 miles and an ascent and descent of 1,968 feet. I did not try it because I was told that the loose talus on the ridge might be difficult for my dog to negotiate.

A

with search and rescue insurance. If you do not have one, consider buying one. The cost for a CORSAR card is only \$3.00 for one year or \$12.00 for five years. Check the 10th Mountain Hut Association website for [more CORSAR card information](#) .



[Get Adobe Acrobat Reader DC](#) for PDF files.



Word About the Maps

I believe there is an official route for the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail through the Weminuche Wilderness. At times while hiking this route, signage was minimal and route finding was not always easy. I made several wrong turns along the way. I strongly suggest taking a GPS device with you if you do this trek.

I put [Jonathon Ley's](#) version of the CDT track through the Weminuche Wilderness on my phone after obtaining it from [The Whole track for the CDT \(Continental Divide Trail\) on my GPS](#). On my hike, there were many places where his version of the track was different than what I found on the USGS topographic maps, [The Trails Illustrated Weminuche Wilderness Map](#), and the paths and signage on the ground. I encountered trail junctions that were not on the maps. After

the trip, I used CalTopo to create and edit maps ([see the sidebar on this page](#)) that show the path I walked as accurately as I could reconstruct it.

Here is an example of the type of route finding problems I encountered. While walking up the Weminuche Creek Trail to cache food, I encountered a trail junction not on any of my maps. Referring to the image below, on the Cache Hike (Weminuche Creek) Trail (green dashed line) near the top of the pass one sees the Skyline Trail junction. This was marked with a barely legible sign saying, "Skyline Trail". Just southeast of that junction I encountered a fork in the trail. The right fork had no sign. The left fork had a sign reading "N Pine River Trail". This junction is not on any of the maps I have seen. I drew it in here with a black dashed line. After walking down the wrong path for a couple of minutes I realized that I was walking across the broad meadow rather than hugging forested area on the western edge. I checked my GPS, confirmed by mistake, backtracked, headed down the right path, and lost only a couple of minutes.

The Trip - Day by Day

Day -2, Tuesday, June 28

- Drove from Amarillo to South Fork (6 h 14 min, 482 miles).
- Stayed at the Allington Inn & Suites in South Fork.

Day -1, Wednesday, June 29

- Drove from South Fork to the Weminuche Creek trailhead at Thirty Mile Campground by Rio Grande Reservoir (1 h 26 min, 52.5 miles).
- Hiked to Weminuche Pass and back, carrying about a 40-pound pack and cached human food, dog food, fuel, and a few other consumable items. (round trip 7 h, 12.9 miles, ascent/descent 2,162 feet). I went really hard on this day when I should have gone at a more moderate pace in anticipation of the long hike planned for the next two weeks. This was one of my first mistakes on this trip.
- Drove from the trailhead at Thirty Mile Campground at Rio Grande Reservoir back to South Fork.
- Stayed at the Allington Inn & Suites in South Fork again.

Day 0, Thursday, June 30

- Drove from South Fork to Durango (2 h 3 min, 103 miles).
- Did some last minute shopping and gear preparation.
- Stayed at the Travelodge in Durango.

Day 1, Friday, July 1



CDT between Stony Pass and Beartown Road.

- A driver from [Mountain Waters Rafting](#) drove me from Durango to Stony Pass northeast of Silverton (1 h 49 min, 58.5 miles). It began raining as we started in Durango. Later they were to take my car to Wolf Creek Pass and leave it there.
- My dog, Jäger, and I hiked from Stony Pass to Beartown Road (9.0 miles, ascent 1,722 feet, descent -2,589 feet). It was a cold rainy day, but there was no thunder or lightening. I got my first taste of the difficult conditions on this trail. There were some patches of compacted hard snow that were easy to cross without postholing. Most of the trails were small creeks and if they did not have running water, they were very muddy.
- I had difficulty finding a good campsite and settled on a small semi-flat spot next to the mine. That night my dog was wet, cold, and shivering. I was able to warm him up by wrapping him in my fleece jacket and pack cover. I wrapped my body, encased in my sleeping bag and bivy sack, around him and he would stop shivering. Unfortunately, about every hour he would hear or smell something out there in the darkness, insist on standing at alert for 15 or 30 minutes, my jacket and pack cover falling off, getting

cold and shivering again. When he relaxed and lied down again, I would repeat the process of covering him up, wrapping myself around him, and warming him enough to stop his shivering. We practiced this a number of times that night.

Day 2, Saturday, July 2

- We hiked from Beartown Road, over Hunchback Pass, up the Nebo Creek drainage, over the pass northeast of Mount Nebo to West Ute Lake (6.3 miles, ascent 2,352 feet, descent -2192 feet). It rained off and on all morning, but by mid-afternoon, the rain stopped. We spent a lot of the day busting through willows while following the sometimes 18-inch-deep trench of a trail filled with mud and water. I wore gaiters and my Gore-Tex pants and jacket with the hood over my head all day. Even when the rain stopped, walking through the willows kept me dripping wet. Many miles of this trip were spent pushing through the willow groves. Sometimes Jäger would get stuck and needed my help. The willows ripped by pack cover in two places and shredded Jäger's.
- We found a nice spot to camp overlooking the very scenic, West Ute Lake. I was able to get my camp set up before the rain started again. My dog had another cold night. There was a heavy frost the next morning.



West Ute Lake.



Jäger at our camp by West Ute Lake.

Day 3, Sunday, July 3

- We hiked from West Ute Lake, past Middle Ute Lake and Twin Lakes, and climbed up to the plateau at 11,850 feet immediately southeast of (East) Ute Lake (5.1 miles, ascent 1,309 feet, descent -1,214). There was more wet willow busting this day as well.
- There was no rain in the morning. I decided to stop walking in the early afternoon. I was tired from the previous days' efforts carrying a 60-pound pack, angry clouds suggested a big thunderstorm was approaching, and the next section of the trail involved a steep climb and high traverse exposed to lightening with no good places to stop and camp.
- I was glad we stopped early and setup camp as the rain soon returned. I heard thunder and saw lightening in the distance.
- That night we awoke to the yips, barks, and howls of a pack of coyotes. Jäger did not like this at all. It took quite a while before he settled down and went back to sleep.
- Later that night I awoke sensing something moving under my shirt. Still half asleep, I lied down again briefly only to become fully awake when I definitely felt something alive moving under my shirt. I sat up quickly, shook out my shirt, and grabbed my headlamp. Shining my light into my sleeping bag, I saw a mouse or vole-like animal staring back. Surprisingly, he did not try to scurry off and sat there motionless looking at me. My guard dog also sat there motionless staring at the intruder and offered no help at all. I grabbed him by the tail and sent him on his way by

flinging him well out of our shelter.



Campsite at the plateau above and southeast of (East) Ute Lake.

Day 4, Monday July 4

- Continued from the plateau above (East) Ute Lake to Weminuche Pass (8.7 miles, ascent 1,516 feet, descent -2,864).
- This portion of the trail had spectacular views. The wildflowers were beginning to populate the high meadows above timberline. The CDT climbs from above (East) Ute Lake next to a ridge at the head of the Rincon La Osa Valley. I saw a large herd of elk in the area below. From there,



it does a curving traverse and Jäger on the saddle south of Rio Grande Pyramid and The Window. Grande Pyramid that contains The Window. A portion of that ridge is a volcanic dike. The Window is a large notch in that dike. This landmark is visible from many miles away. The view from the high point where the CDT crosses a saddle of this ridge at 12,617 feet was awe-inspiring ([see the panoramic photo at the top of this page](#) , click it to see it

full size). From there, the CDT descends the Rincon La Vaca Valley, running concurrently with the Rincon La Vaca Trail.



Rio Grande Pyramid and the Window.

- We camped near the junction of the Weminuche Creek Trail and the CDT/Rincon La Vaca Trails. Here, I picked up the supplies that I had cached earlier.
- Despite threatening clouds and thunder in the afternoon, it did not rain on this day.
- That evening I discovered that I could put my fleece sweater and nylon shell anorak on Jäger. I cinched the waist band around his belly holding everything in place. Although I think he looked a bit silly, this solved the problem of his insulation and wind blocker falling off every time he got up at night to investigate whatever he smelled or heard out there in blackness of the night. I think he stayed a lot warmer after this although even at this lower elevation of 10,560 feet, we had frost in the morning as we did every morning while we were out on the trail.



Jäger looking silly.



But staying warm.

Day 5, Tuesday, July 5

- Took a rest day camped near Weminuche Pass.
- I needed a day off to wash the mud off of and dry out my boots and other clothing after days of hiking the very wet trail. I also needed a day of rest for my body. I think I went too hard on the cache hike day and the first few days on the CDT. My body was

not recovering well with just the overnight rests. After adding the cached 8-day supply of food and other supplies to the remaining 3-days of supplies with which I had started, my pack weighed in the range of 60 to 70 pounds.

- Met a fisherman who had been catching 15-inch cutthroat trout in the upper part of the Los Pinos River nearby.
- Built a fire and relaxed. Jäger liked watching the fire.
- Throughout the trip, I was accompanied by mosquitos and other flying insects. At this campsite located in a riparian area at 10,500 feet, 1 to 2 thousand feet lower than my other campsites, the flying hordes were particularly intense. At the Winter 2016 Wilderness Medicine Society meeting in Park City, UT, I learned about treating clothing with the insecticide, acaricide, and insect repellent Permethrin. Prior to this trip I treated my long sleeve shirt, my pants, a pair of socks, and a buff with Sawyer Military-Style Permethrin Soak. Happily, I can report that it is highly effective. It is currently difficult to find in online stores. Other than an occasional bite on the exposed skin on the back of my hand, I received almost no mosquito bites, even without the addition of DEET, despite thousands of the blood suckers swarming around me. The permethrin soak is said to keep its effectiveness for 6 weeks and through 6 washings. Permethrin is also available as a [spray on treatment](#), but the experts in the U.S. Army that have studied mosquito repellents extensively believe the clothing-soak method is the most effective.



Jäger watching the fire at Weminuche Pass.

Day 6, Wednesday, July 6

- Hiked out of the Weminuche Pass area, up the North Fork of the Los Pinos River to a broad basin at the head of Snowslide Canyon. I missed the left turn to stay on the CDT and instead descended the Snowslide Canyon Trail for 1.3 miles, descending 561 feet, before realizing my mistake and backtracking (4.5+2.6 miles, ascent 1,601+561, descent -(413+561).
- I found a semi-flat place to camp in a clearing amongst the willows and stopped walking in the early afternoon. The next section of the trail had a difficult climb with what looked like few places to get water and / or stop to camp.

Day 7, Thursday, July 7

- Hiked up to the saddle by Peak 12,821 overlooking Squaw Lake reaching the high point of my trip at 12,782 feet, then continued southeast down the valley with many glacial cirque lakes to Squaw Pass (8.4 miles, ascent 2,146 feet, descent -2,687).
- I was so tired on this day I became clumsy. I fell several times, fortunately never injuring myself. At this point I was worn out. The terrain and my 60+ pound pack had taken their toll. I had traveled almost 60 miles, ascended 13,369 feet, and descended -14,682 feet.
- Camped at Squaw Pass

Day 8, Friday, July 8

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- I thought my body was not recovering enough to continue hiking the CDT to Wolf Creek Pass. I was worried that continuing on would not be very safe. I was also worried that if I pushed myself further, I might not have time to recover sufficiently for our climb of Mt Rainier or perhaps even sustain an injury.
- I decided to exit CDT via the Cimarrona Creek Trail the next day.

Day 9, Saturday, July 9

- Hiked out from Squaw Pass to the Cimarrona Creek trailhead near Williams Reservoir (6.8 miles, ascent 1,220, descent -3,870)
- I had hiked 64.2 miles, ascended 14,589 feet, and descended 18,552 feet. This mileage was obtained by tracing the trails on the topographic maps. These maps do not show the many short

Day 9, Saturday, July 9

- Hiked out from Squaw Pass to the Cimarrona Creek trailhead near Williams Reservoir (6.8 miles, ascent 1,220, descent -3,870)
- I had hiked 64.2 miles, ascended 14,589 feet, and descended 18,552 feet. This mileage was obtained by tracing the trails on the topographic maps. These maps do not show the many short twists, turns, and switchbacks on the trails. I might have walked as much as 50% more than the distance I estimated from the maps.
- At the Cimarrona Creek trailhead, I was still 15 miles or more by road before getting cell phone service. Fortunately, a man from Arvada drove by after I had been there only a couple of minutes. He was heading back to Arvada via the road to Wolf Creek Pass kindly offered to take me there.
- To my surprise, my car was not at Wolf Creek Pass as I expected and there was no mobile phone service at the pass. We continued down to the entrance to Wolf Creek Ski Area. I did have mobile phone reception there, so I thanked my driver and Jäger and I got out.
- I called Mountain Waters Rafting to find out about my car. They had a communication breakdown and had not transported my car to Wolf Creek Pass. It was still in Durango. They were very nice and apologetic. They immediately made the 1½-hour drive from Durango to Wolf Creek Ski Area and delivered my car. I used the time waiting to read some more of the first volume of [Edmund Morris' biography of Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*](#).
- I drove home to Amarillo that night (6 h 27 min, 401 miles).