

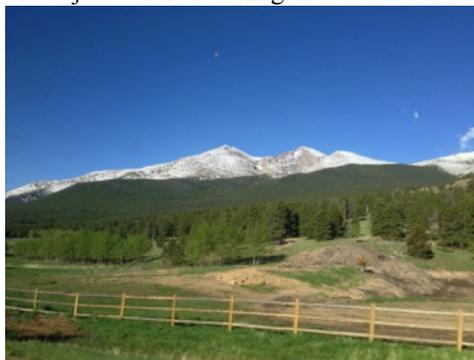
LOWER LONGS PEAK AREA (BELOW CHASM JUNCTION), TRAIL RIDGE ROAD, AND EAST PORTAL (IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK)

The plan for this day was to hike to Chasm Junction in the Longs Peak area of Rocky Mountain National Park, as we knew that Chasm Lake would have too much snow to be accessible. However, there was substantially more snow than we had expected to encounter on the trail, and once we had been walking on solid snow for quite some distance and had crossed a stream then encountered steep (and slippery) switchbacks, we decided that it would not be safe to continue. Thus we headed back down and drove up the Trail Ridge Road, stopping at the Hidden Valley, Rainbow Curve, Forest Canyon, Gore Range, and Fall River Pass Viewpoints, and then the Many Parks Curve on the way back down. This road had only been opened shortly before we drove it, thus there were large snowbanks on the side of the road and lots of water on the road. After checking out the views from this road, we decided to check out the East Portal trailhead in the remaining daylight.

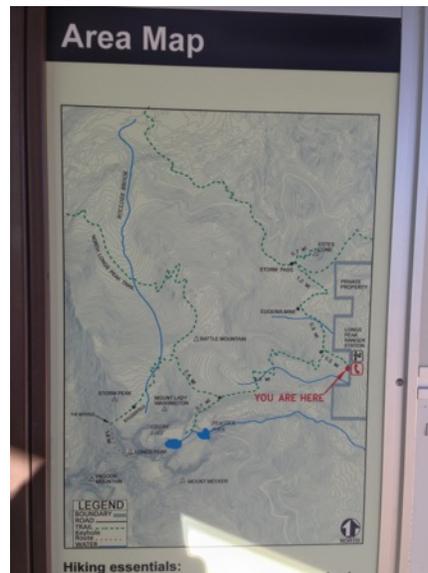
View of Mary's Lake from the Mary's Lake Road, which can be used to bypass most of Estes Park when coming from the Beaver Meadows area:



Longs Peak can be viewed from a roadside turnout just before reaching the turnoff for the Longs Peak Trailhead:



We knew that as the trail needed to gain a lot of elevation near the beginning we would quickly encounter snow; we just didn't know how bad it was or when exactly we'd need to turn around:



The trail starts off not climbing too steeply, though we know we'll need to gain a lot of elevation later:



There was a lot more wildlife on this trail than we'd expected to see; this bird hopped across the trail in front of us then flew up into a nearby tree:



Panorama of the intersection with the trail to the Eugenia Mine; I think the trail to the mine didn't have a lot of snow on it at this time, though as we didn't hike it I don't know for certain (we took the trail to the left):



This snowshoe hare scampered across the trail, then stopped in the brush just off the trail:



The trail switchbacks once, then we begin to encounter small patches of snow:



The trail passes by this nice, small waterfall:



After a couple more switchbacks, we reach this flatter area from which we can see the peaks ahead through the trees:



We pass by the Goblin's Forest camping area (I'm guessing that, since this camping area is so close to the trailhead, it probably serves during busy months as an overflow for campers who are hiking to Longs Peak the next day but couldn't get a spot in the main Longs Peak campground):



Another view through the trees of the peaks up ahead:



Here is where we encounter snow that extends until we turn around:



At first the snow was mainly on the trail and we could work around it; then, the snowpack began to extend out from the trail and there was so much more snow around it that we were walking across it. There was a trail across it but we were still post-holing in places. Then, we encountered this bridge across a nice creek:



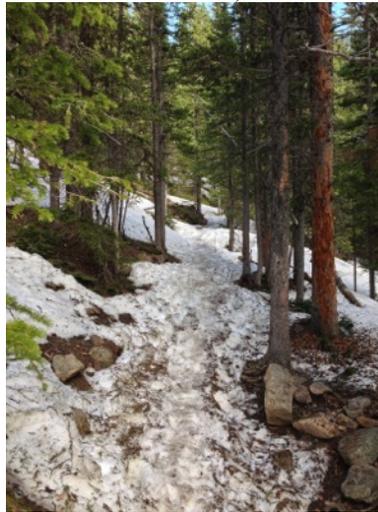
Looking down at all the water in this creek:



We continued along the trail, which switchbacked upon reaching this creek:



Further up the trail, the route began to get steep and icy. We were passed by a group carrying snowshoes, and we encountered a hiker coming down who had made it to treeline (not quite to Chasm Junction) and the snow was knee-deep postholing up there:



The lesson learned was to check trail conditions with the rangers at the trailhead, not just at the main visitors center, as with so many trails they have no way of knowing the snow conditions at each one individually, whereas the rangers at the trailhead stations are more likely to hear reports from hikers coming back down the trail. Heading back across the first section of snow we'd encountered, before the bridge on our way up:



After returning to the trailhead, we decided to drive the Trail Ridge Road, as thunderstorms were predicted for later in the afternoon so we didn't want to be out hiking, and we weren't going to have time to see much of the road on our drive into Park City while still having time to stop at Dinosaur National Monument. Our first stop was at the Hidden Valley picnic area; interestingly, the building there was built using salvaged lumber from an old ski lodge which was once here:



There is a nature trail through this area, and from what I've read there appear to be some old trails which are no longer publicized but are still hike-able that start from here:



This is the view looking across Hidden Valley towards Rainbow Curve. The nature trail/picnic area was crowded, so we continued up the road to look for more views of the park:



The first place we stopped was at the Rainbow Curve Overlook (the Many Parks Curve was too crowded to park so we decided to stop there on our way back). The Roaring River can be seen left of center in the photo; it flooded (I think) in 2013, and the Lawn Lake Trail follows it for some distance:



The overlook focuses on Horseshoe Park below:



Panorama of the amazing scenery here; there is so much hiking to do in this area:



This sign explains to visitors how to distinguish between the Upper Montane Zone, the Subalpine Zone, and the Alpine Zone:



Panorama looking over at the road switchbacking up the hillsides; I think the treeless swaths are from the old Hidden Valley ski runs:



From here, we continued along the Trail Ridge Road; looking out at some peaks from a little further up the road. Note the Old Fall River Road (currently closed, otherwise we would have driven it today too) can be seen just above the rock wall in the lower center of the photo, switchbacking near Chasm Falls:



Looking up ahead at where the road switchbacks near Sundance Mountain; somewhere near here Fern Lake can be seen, as we saw some of these road switchbacks from there:



The road was wet here from runoff caused by all the snow, and it got wetter further along:



Another view over towards Sundance Mountain; this peak looks like it would make a great hike to do sometime when there is less snow:



Looking down towards the valley which the Old Fall River Road goes up, and out towards Estes Park:



The snowbanks beside the road get taller; the road was opened shortly before we arrived in the park, and we noticed when we drove out of the park two days later that a bit of the snow around the posts marking the road had melted:



Looking across the tundra to a nearby viewpoint, past the large snowbank:



We next stopped at the Forest Canyon viewpoint, which is a lot more spectacular than it appears from the park map. Up ahead, across all that snow, is where the road continues:



The photos on this sign must have been taken much later in the year; from here one can see how there is an incredible amount of interesting hiking just in Forest Canyon. Note that the Gorge Lakes are just to the right of where the panorama on this sign ends. There aren't any maintained trails (or, to my knowledge, use trails) heading up Forest Canyon, so any hiking in this area would require excellent route finding skills and preparation for encountering bears, just to name only some of the necessities for hiking there:



Panorama from the start of this viewpoint:



Panorama from further along this viewpoint trail; we could have spent a bit of time admiring the scenery here, but unfortunately it began to snow:



Looking up Forest Canyon towards the Gore Range Viewpoint further along the Trail Ridge Road:



We are now beginning to see many snow-capped peaks here, as well as more snow beside the road and some still coming down from the sky (though not as much as when we were out on the Forest Canyon viewpoint). Note the car ahead on the road going through a passage cut in the snow:



The Gore Range Viewpoint was my favorite because of how far we could see into the mountain range from it:



This seems to be where a hiker would start if heading towards the Gorge Lakes, or perhaps at the Ute Trail near the Alpine Visitor center to avoid trampling the tundra. We got a lot of views of these lakes on the drive back along Trail Ridge Road, and from what we could see they were completely iced over at this time:



The views looking out towards Specimen Mountain and the Never Summer Mountains were also spectacular:



This photo on the informative sign, regarding the Eagles Nest Wilderness Area, must also have been taken in later months; it's interesting to see in photographs what this area looks like underneath all the snow:



Our last stop on our way out the Trail Ridge Road was the Alpine Visitors Center; from here we headed back towards Estes Park. Notice all the snow piled up between the buildings. The Old Fall River Road can be seen coming up above the red sign in this photo:



The Old Fall River Road is sometimes compared to the road to the top of Mount Evans (near Denver), but I'm not sure why (as I haven't been on either road). The road can be seen crossing the tundra in the left side of this photo; note that further down in the valley, in the center of the photo, another section of this road can be seen, which appears to be snow-covered:



This visitors center is more than two miles above sea level, and it's the highest elevation visitors center in the US NPS. It is powered by a diesel generator and goes into "hibernation" for seven months of the year:



This photo in the visitors center shows how different the area looks when there is no snow and the wildflowers are blooming:



Heading back Trail Ridge Road towards Estes Park. This is the Rock Cut:



Looking over and down towards Forest Lake, with the Gorge Lakes up and to the right of it; Hayden Lake is in the valley to the left of it. Note that Arrowhead Lake is nestled just below treeline, and Inkwell Lake can be seen to be iced over above it:



Looking down Forest Canyon towards where it intersects Spruce Canyon at The Pool (which we'd seen on our hike to Fern Lake):



Looking up the valley where Hayden Lake is located; the best access to this lake seems to be from the Continental Divide, when there is much less snow:



Our last stop on the way back down the Trail Ridge Road was the Many Parks Curve, which we hadn't been able to stop at earlier in the day; this is the view of Beaver Meadows and Moraine Park, with Deer Mountain off to the left and behind the trees:



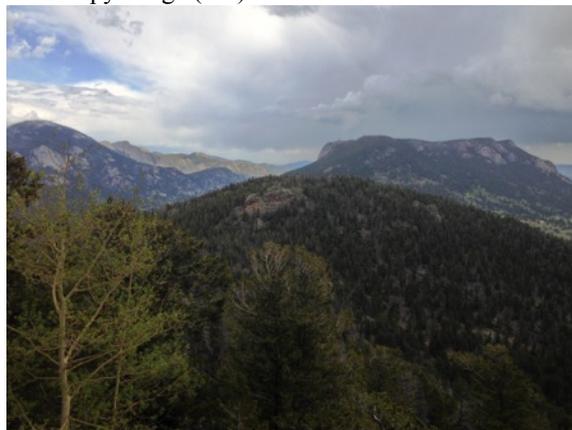
Looking over at the Alluvial Fan walk, located at the base of the Roaring River (which drains from Crystal and Lawn Lakes):



Panorama from another viewpoint at Many Parks Curve; with all the dark clouds it was a little more difficult to get good photos:



Looking over at Deer Mountain (right) and Lumpy Ridge (left):



The parks for which the viewpoint is named are the broad meadows which were natural clearings (as seen in Canyonlands National Park's Chesler Park):



We then headed back towards Estes Park; this view looking up towards the mountains behind Bear Lake was taken from the road between the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center and the Deer Mountain Trailhead:



Our last stop was the East Portal Trailhead, for a short hike in the remaining daylight (as the storm seemed to be clearing). The East Portal is where the water tunnel from the other side of the Continental Divide comes out:



Looking over at the trail towards Glacier Basin from this trailhead:



This was a very pleasant walk to do, as the trail climbed up the hillside and gave good views of the surrounding area:



There were many of these small yellow flowers through here:



The trail headed for the saddle seen left of center in this picture:



At this fork, the trail seen going off to the left is actually a shortcut of the switchbacks on the trail to the right (it appears to be used mainly by horse traffic). The trail sign seemed to have fallen down and then been propped back up but pointed out the directions unclearly (luckily we had brought a map). So, to the right (not in photo) is the route over towards the Glacier Basin campground and to Sprague Lake, and to the left (again not in photo) is the route to the Storm Pass Trail:



Looking across at what I'm guessing are Lily Mountain (left) and Estes Cone (right):



The trail connecting to the Storm Pass Trail can be seen going up the valley below; the snowy peak in the background is probably Mount Lady Washington:



The trail enters a nice stand of trees at the saddle:



It crosses a flatter area, which is very pleasant walking:



We decided to turn around when the trail began to descend towards the Glacier Basin campground:



Looking out through the trees at the hillside with all the yellow wildflowers:



One last panorama of this very nice area to walk through:

