

LOWER ICE LAKES (IN THE OURAY AREA)

There are lots of scenic lakes in the Ice Lakes Basin, but unfortunately when we were in Ouray a big storm had come through the weekend before we arrived and thus the basin was snowed in. To access the trailhead to these lakes, from Ouray we drove the (very scenic) main road to the turnoff for the South Mineral Campground (just before reaching Silverton), and headed up this nicely graded road to the campground, across from which is the parking area and trailhead for the Ice Lakes Basin. On the way we passed the turnoff to Clear Lake, which appeared to have snow further up. The lower Ice Lakes are located 1.8 miles from the trailhead (and more lakes are in the Upper Ice Lakes Basin and the surrounding area), but note that the trail is steep and this is a relatively difficult 1.8 miles. We were warned by the camp host that a moose had been in the area, so we were on the lookout for it as we were hiking. We actually did encounter the moose on the hike up, shortly after we crossed the lower part of a nice meadow and switchbacked back into the trees. We spotted it up ahead on the trail, and it stood up when it heard us coming, but it then relaxed after it saw us backtracking down the trail. We managed to cut across part of the meadow and pick up the trail by shortcutting a switchback, and successfully bypassed the moose, until another hiker who seemed oblivious to the moose came up the trail while we were crossing the meadow and scared the moose out towards us (which made for getting some good photos of the moose). From there, we continued on up the trail across the upper part of the meadow, until just below the cliff which was between us and the lower Ice Lake. The trail entered the trees and switchbacked up the cliff, and there was way more snow than we wanted to cross at that point, so instead we decided to head to the right and follow a grassy area with a stream to get some views (which turned out to be a mistake, as this is an avalanche chute). We scrambled up this grassy area, which was surprisingly steep, until we reached a snowpack which we decided didn't look safe for us to cross with our minimal snow experience. From there, we headed back down, but heard a loud rumble above us when we were resting near a large rock. Taking cover behind the rock, a large (over 6 feet in diameter) chunk of ice hurtled above us, followed by many more slightly smaller chunks. After waiting a while so that we were fairly sure no more would directly follow those ice pieces, we headed down the embankment very carefully, always having one member of the group watching above us to ensure that no more chunks were coming down. Thus we decided that it is very unsafe to try to get up to the lakes from that route, when there is a chance of ice breaking off and hurtling down the avalanche chute. We encountered another group who had done the same sort of route ahead of us, and on their way back they informed us that there was so much snow up in the Lower Ice Lakes Basin that the lake couldn't be seen. From there, we headed back down to the parking lot, keeping an eye out for the moose which we had seen earlier. Upon reaching the parking lot, we spotted the moose on a grassy meadow above where we were parked.

After photographing the moose, we decided to continue up the road to see some of the scenery further up the valley; however, shortly past the campground there started to be snow on the road and it became narrower and rougher, so we decided to check out Silverton instead. On our way back to the main paved road, we spotted another moose over by Mineral Creek. At Silverton, we stopped at the National Forestry office to get some maps, then briefly walked around the town. From there, we headed back on the road towards Ouray, stopping at the Ophir Pass Road, which we had been informed was open to the pass from this side. We only wanted to take the time to go to the first fork, to see what the road was like, so we only drove up the road for a mile. Then we headed back to Ouray for dinner.

The road from Ouray to Silverton cuts along a cliff, and is steeper on the sides than it may look from this photo:



The scenery along this road is very nice:



We stopped at an overlook just before Red Mountain Pass (11,075 ft.) to get a view of Red Mountain ("No. 3"):



Panorama from this viewpoint; there are three peaks around here by the name of Red Mountain, hence the "No. 1" etc. after the name. "No. 3" is in front of us, while "No. 2" is behind and to the left of it:



Looking up at where the road crosses the pass:



This is where the Black Bear Pass takes off; as can be seen from this photo, the start of the road is completely covered with snow. Judging by the number of footprints crossing the snow, it looks like visitors are hiking the road:



Looking up at a road heading up Mill Creek towards the Silver Crown and Silver Cloud Mines; Columbine Lake is off and up to the left before reaching the pass seen in the distance (the trailhead for this lake is located on a side road further down the main road, so this road here probably is on private property):



We are now crossing a very scenic part of the road, the "Million Dollar Hwy":



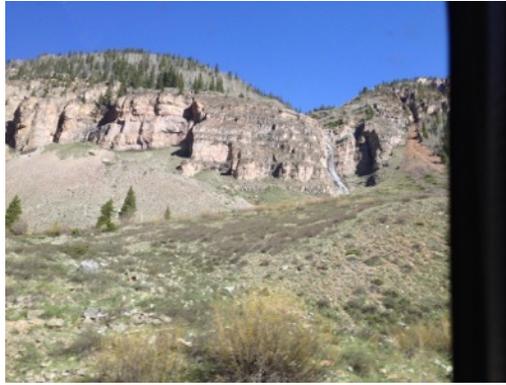
This is where the road to the Columbine Lakes trailhead takes off from the main road; it was another hike which we had considered doing in this area, but due to the amount of snow and the high elevation of the lake we figured that there would be way too much snow on this trail:



Here is the turnoff for the Ophir Pass Road, which we checked out on our way back towards Ouray:



We soon reached the turnoff for the road to the trailhead for Ice Lakes. There were quite a few nice waterfalls which we drove by on our way up the road to the South Mineral Campground:



The Clear Lake road looked steep and narrow but not too rough here, though I think it gets rougher further on, and it almost certainly had snow higher up:



The trailhead for the Ice Lakes Basin crosses through a small meadow before entering the trees; the cliff below lower Ice Lake can be just barely seen in this photo:



Looking back down the road and out towards Anvil Mountain:



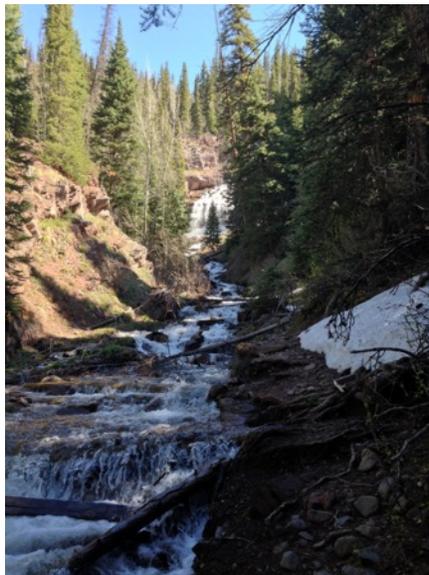
The road goes to the left of this reddish mountain, and the trail to the Ice Lakes Basin goes to the right:



Heading up the trail; after passing through a bunch of trees we encountered this small meadow:



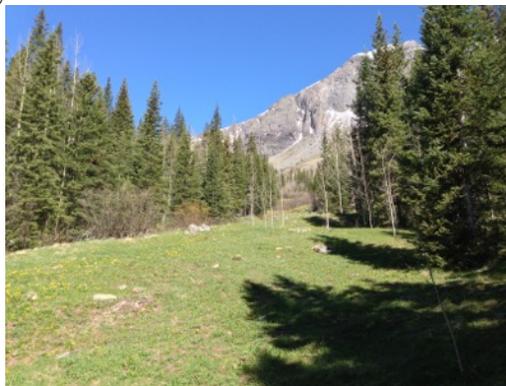
Soon, we crossed Clear Creek, which comes down from Clear Lake:



There were two logs balanced on rocks which served as a bridge over the stream:



Then, we entered the lower part of this very nice meadow:



Looking back down the meadow and across at an unnamed peak:



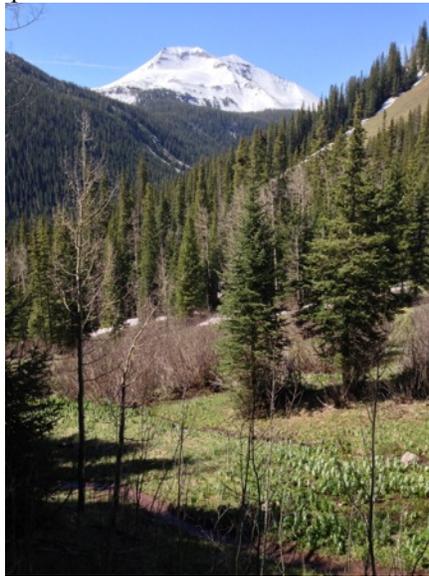
There were multitudes of these interesting plants along the trail and in the meadow through here:



Panorama from this section of the meadow, with the valley containing the South Fork of Mineral Creek, where the road is, to the left, and our route towards the Ice Lakes to the right:



Looking up the valley towards the Twin Sisters peaks:



This is the view up the meadow, which we had to shortcut across to avoid the moose:



The local moose can be seen in the meadow below the center of this photo:



Up ahead is the wall between us and the lower Ice Lake:



This chipmunk appeared to be eating the yellow flowers which were abundant in this meadow:



Looking up the meadow towards the wall which runs between Clear Lake and the Ice Lakes Basin; Ulysses S. Grant Peak is further west (left) along this ridgeline, but it can't yet be seen:



Panorama of the trail through the upper part of this meadow, with the wall on the right being where the trail climbs to the lower Ice Lake:



Continuing along the trail:



This panorama shows where the trail heads up to the basin (left of center, in the trees just left of the clear area on the "wall"); the avalanche chute we went up is between the reddish part of the wall and the gray part of the wall (the ice came from above the gray wall). Note the snowy creek coming down from the Ice Lakes to the left:



Looking back down towards the road and parking area for this hike from a bit further up the trail; we certainly have gained some elevation, but not nearly as much as we will have done by the end of the day:



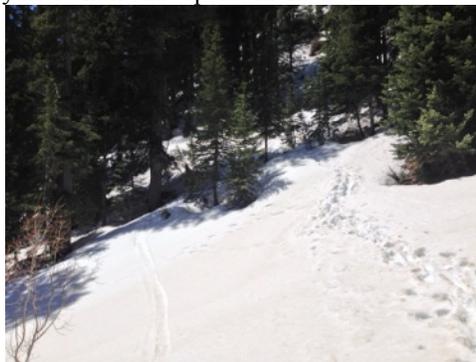
Panorama of the spectacular views we are getting through here:



Looking down the valley towards Anvil Mountain; we are just starting to get a glimpse of the campground far below:



Continuing on, this is the snow which would need to be crossed to continue on the main trail; it looked a bit deeper than we were prepared for, and there didn't appear to be any more non-snow parts of the trail:



We headed up the avalanche chute here, which can be seen going up the crack around the corner and between the red and gray parts of the cliff wall:



The terrain started out flattish, until we needed to cross this snowpack which straddled part of the creek coming down. We ended up heading towards the crack seen to the left in the photo by going above the snowpack (it probably would have been easier to go to the right instead):



The terrain quickly got steep:



Looking across at the Clear Lake Road, which appeared to have snow on it (note the line of snow in the center of this photo); we heard chainsaw noise coming from that area later in the day, so perhaps road work was being done:



We are really gaining elevation here; we can now almost see the parking area where we started on this hike:



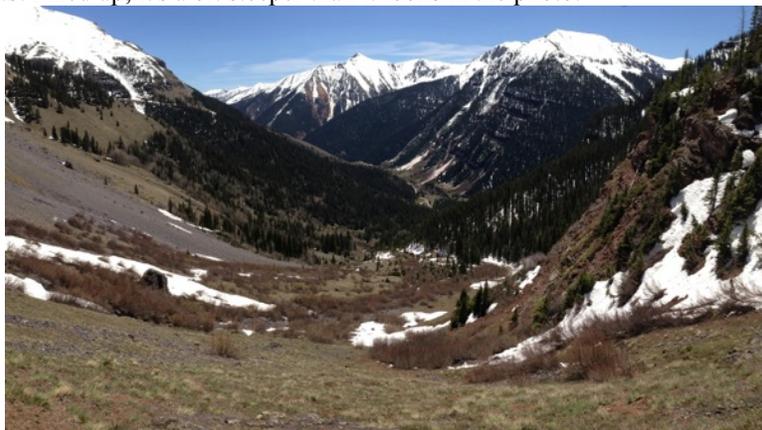
Looking up at the steep route we are taking; we got stopped just around the corner and out of view in this avalanche chute:



Panorama of the absolutely spectacular view we are getting from up here:



Looking down what we have just hiked up; it's a bit steeper than it looks in the photo:



We are now above a large snowfield, and are skeptical that we'll be able to hike much further:



Looking up at the route, which is starting to get more snow-covered, steeper, wetter, and slipperier:



This was where we stopped, as there was lots of water coming over the rock to the right in the photo, and the snow was undercut by the water and thus seemed very unsafe to walk on:



The view from up here really is quite nice; note the road to Clear Lake visible above and to the left of center in the photo, switchbacking up and over to the lake:



We turned around and began heading back down this steep slope; this photo gives perhaps a better idea of the elevation we have gained and the steepness of the climb and descent:



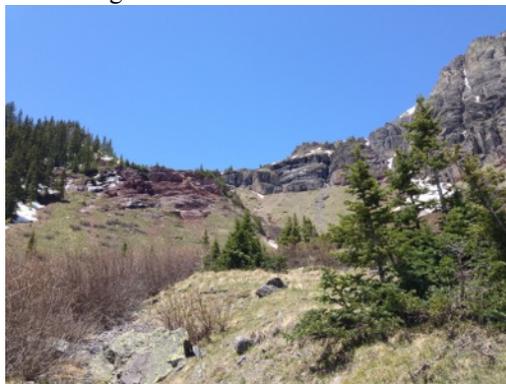
Photo looking back up from not quite halfway down the steepest stretch; the ice block came down the chute to the right in the photo, and we sheltered on this side of the large rock seen just below the chute. Had we been this far away from shelter we would have had difficulty knowing where to go to avoid the ice, and if we'd been up higher and more to the left we'd simply have seen it go by:



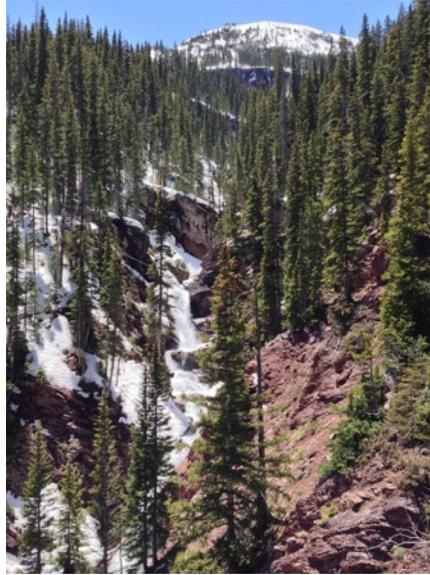
Looking back up from where we regained the trail; it seems like ice blocks could come from anywhere above this, so in retrospect it was foolish to hike up that way, especially at this time of year:



One last look up at the interesting area we were hiking in from further down the trail:



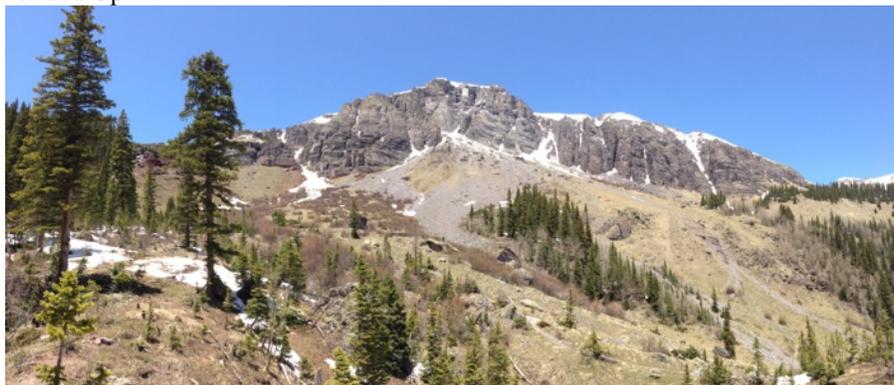
There was a short spur trail to a view of a waterfall, so we went over there to get some photos. The snow, water, trees, and reddish rock all made for nice photography; it's interesting to note how the rock generally gets redder as one gets closer to Utah:



Looking back out and across at the meadow and mountains from here:



Panorama looking up at the rock wall separating where we are from the Clear Lake area and the Ophir area. It looks from the topographical maps that if one was to go across the cliff to the left of the unnamed peak seen in the center of this photo then one would reach the Ophir area, and on the right side one would reach Clear Lake. There is a wall that appears to be similar in nature to this one between the Clear Lake area and Ophir:



On the way back down the trail, we took the route which we had bypassed when avoiding the resting moose; a trail takes off and leads to this waterfall, which seems to be crossed by an old mining bridge. I think the trail on the other side might connect to the road to Clear Lake (the topographical map seems to indicate that it does), but with the amount of water coming down the falls it didn't seem safe to cross the wet and slippery bridge:



Upon reaching the parking area, we spent some time photographing the local moose:



After leaving the parking area, we continued up the road a short distance until we began to encounter snow, the amount of which we predicted would increase, especially as the road here is listed as narrower and more difficult than the earlier part of the road (which was quite easy):



This nice river seems to be the one coming down from the Ice Lakes Basin:



Heading back down this road towards the main road:



This was the other moose we spotted, by Mineral Creek:



Here, we are approaching Silverton, and Kendall Mountain behind it:



From Silverton, we headed back towards Ouray, turning off at the Ophir Pass Road. The Ophir Pass Road splits about a mile up, with the right fork being the main road and the left fork leading to the Bonner Mine. Up to here, the road had been very well graded, relatively wide, and a pleasant drive:



The main fork looked like it got narrower and thus would be harder to turn around on, and as we didn't want to drive all the way to the pass where the road would be closed we decided to turn around here:



Heading back down past the Red Mountain Pass; the peaks through here certainly have interesting colors:



This is the turnoff for Engineer Pass and the Alpine Loop, as well as Poughkeepsie Gulch which is one of the hardest 4WD routes in the area:

