

ALBERTA FALLS, THE LOCH, BEAR LAKE, NYMPH LAKE, DREAM LAKE, AND TWIN OWLS LOOP (IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK)

Our hike to The Loch, in the Bear Lake area of Rocky Mountain National Park, was the first major hike we did in RMNP during our May/June 2015 trip. If you are planning on hiking this trail around the same time that we did, be sure to check the weather forecast before departing, as storms can be worse in the vicinity of The Loch than in some of the other parts of RMNP. The Loch is located 3.5 miles from the Bear Lake parking lot, or 3.4 miles from the Glacier Gorge parking area. We chose to park at Bear Lake as we wanted to check out Nymph, Dream, and possibly Emerald Lakes after hiking to The Loch, and we had been informed at the ranger station that the Bear Lake parking lot fills up early (however, this did not turn out to be a problem due to the inclement weather). Interesting stops along the way were Alberta Falls at 1.2 miles from the Bear Lake trailhead, and the turnoff to Mills Lake 1.4 miles later (which we did not hike to as there appeared to be more snow on that route than to the Loch, and additionally when we left The Loch we encountered substantial rain so we opted to not go to Mills Lake as well; note that, during our trip, nearby Lake Haiyaha was completely iced over, and the trails to it were impassable due to snow). After returning from The Loch, as the rain had subsided, we hiked up to Bear Lake, Nymph Lake (0.5 miles from the parking area), and Dream Lake (0.6 miles beyond Nymph Lake). The trail on to Emerald Lake (0.7 miles further) appeared to be passable, but it was very muddy and snowy, hence we decided to instead check out the Lumpy Ridge area in the later afternoon. We ended up doing the short loop hike up to a viewpoint of the Twin Owls (1.7 mile loop), which was nice because we got to see a different sort of rock formation in the RMNP area.

There is a lot of hiking at the Bear Lake Trailhead, and it's also a very pretty area, which makes it popular:



Topographical map of the Bear Lake trails; most trailheads in Rocky Mountain National Park have a topographical map which shows the hikes which can be done from that trailhead and gives hikers who only have the park maps a better idea of the difficulty of the route:



We headed over towards the junction with the Glacier Gorge trail, getting some views up into the Glacier Gorge area:



It is not substantially longer to hike over from Bear Lake:



Looking down at a section of rapids in a narrow canyon below as we begin to follow the river draining from Glacier Gorge and The Loch:



The trail was snow-free through here, and it was very well maintained, which made for exceptionally easy hiking:



Looking at another section of nice rapids; in warmer times there is probably less water as there would be less snow, and this would be a good spot to stop and walk across the river. However, at this time one should not cross this river due to the speed and coldness of the water:



Reaching Alberta Falls; I'm guessing that waterfalls are more spectacular during this time of year because there is more snowmelt occurring and thus there is more water going over the falls than there is in autumn:



Panorama showing how the trail passes near the falls; it looked possible to get closer to the top of the falls, but the rocks were slippery and we were already getting wet from the spray of the water:



Continuing up the trail, it becomes obviously less travelled, though it still is a very well-maintained trail:



Switchbacking back near the river again:



The river cuts through another narrow section; this seems like it would be a great place to explore more thoroughly when there is less water:



Looking back out towards the main road:



There were many little cascades coming down the mountainsides:



We started to encounter a bit more snow and water on the trail through here:



Now we have reached the intersection with the trail coming in from Granite Pass and the Longs Peak area:



Again looking out towards Estes Park and the main road:



We are starting to get some views up into the Glacier Gorge area now:



This is a very scenic trail, and we were disappointed that we couldn't do more hiking here because of all the snow and the approaching storm:



The trail turns and starts heading up towards Loch Vale:



Panorama from just before we enter the main canyon area :



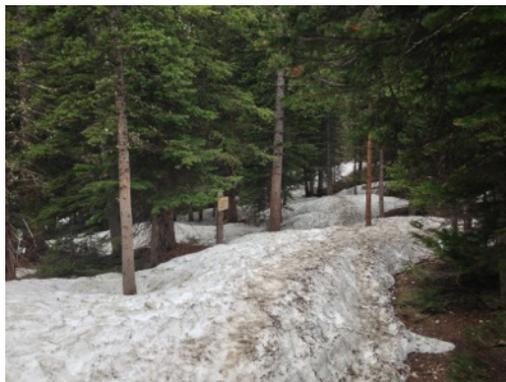
Up ahead and to the right is Loch Vale and The Loch, while Glacier Gorge and Mills Lake are off to the left:



Looking up into Glacier Gorge from a bit further along the trail:



We'd had quite pleasant walking so far, but now we encountered a bit more snow:



Panorama of the split of the trails, with Mills and Black Lakes to the left and Loch Vale to the right:



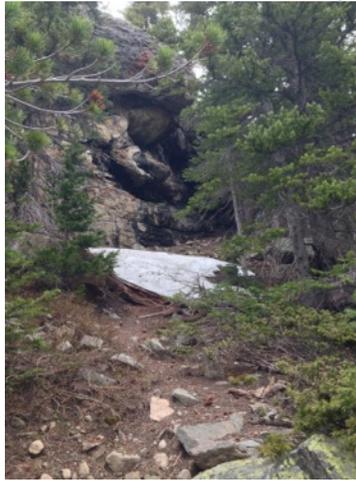
The trail to Lake Haiyaha turns off from the trail to The Loch just ahead, and although there were a few footprints heading off that way we had been informed at the visitors center that the trail was not findable and the terrain was unsafe for hiking in that area at this time:



Continuing up the trail to The Loch, we crossed a bunch of short stretches of well-packed snow, then reached the first switchback. This is the view up the river at the switchback (the trail seen in the photo appears to be a use trail to a viewpoint):



Up ahead a little ways, we spotted this interesting cave area which would make a good picnic spot in warmer weather:



Continuing along the trail to The Loch:



Looking across at a tall peak, which I think is Thatchtop Peak:



Looking back down the stretch we have switchbacked up and over at Glacier Gorge, where Mills Lake is located:



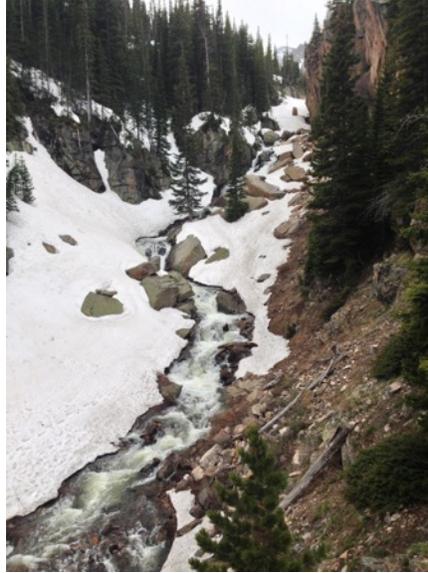
Up ahead, we can see that there is a lot of snow down by the river:



There is more snow on the trail to cross, but nothing that poses an issue:



Another look down towards the snow around the river:



Soon we encounter more snow, this time a lot deeper than it was previously:



This is part of what we have crossed now; we have a bit more snow to get over this section of it though, some of which crosses a creek and has collapsed:



A brief respite from the snow before needing to cross it again; luckily there have been enough hikers on this trail that the route is easy to follow and we won't get lost:



This is the last snowpack, which reaches all the way to the lake:



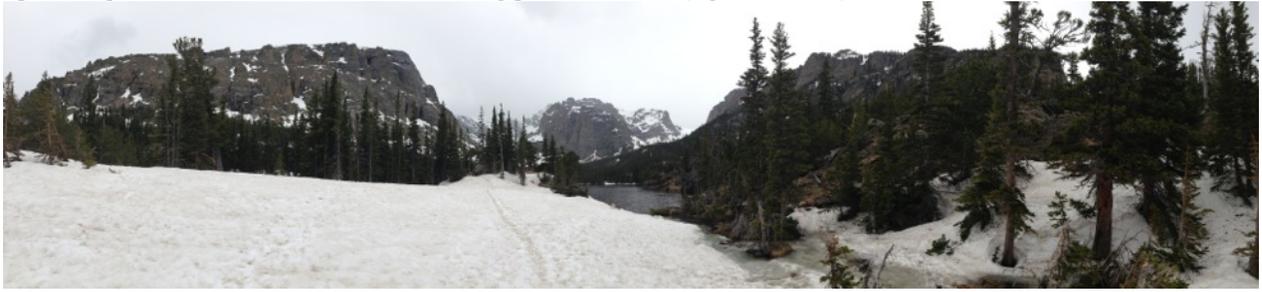
Approaching Loch Vale; the foot trail across the snow is very helpful, and luckily the snow here is solidly packed:



Our first view of The Loch:



The snowpack is quite thick, and there was ice covering part of the lake (right of center):



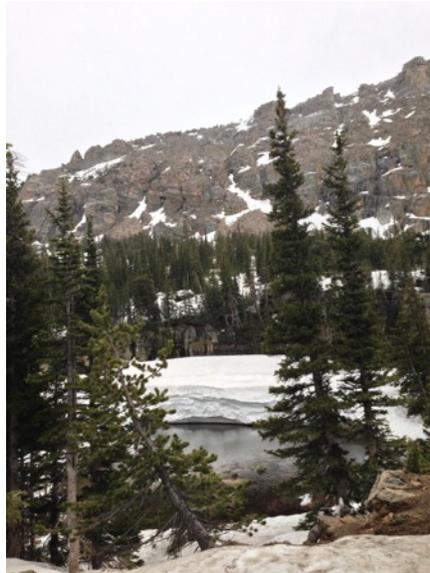
The lake was hard to photograph because the clouds were so white:



I tried putting the camera closer to the lake to try to capture some of the ripples in the water:



Looking across the lake at a big snowpack on the other side:



Bear Lake isn't as spectacular as most of the lakes one can drive to in the Canadian Rockies, but it is still a nice lake and probably is much prettier in the bright sunshine:



This sign shows the route up towards Flattop Mountain, which was one of the hikes we had hoped to do when planning this trip; I think once past treeline the snow would be way too thick to continue, though we might have gotten some nice views:



Panorama of Bear Lake; that isn't Flattop Mountain which is right of center, it's a (very) false summit:



Since the sun was beginning to come out from behind the clouds, we decided to head towards Nymph Lake; we were surprised at the amount of pavement on this trail:

