

Crestone Needle – A Hard Fourteener

Difficulty:	Class 3
Exposure:	■■■■■
Summit Elev.:	14,197 feet
Trailhead Elev.:	9,900 feet
Elevation Gain:	4,400 feet starting at upper 4wd trailhead (9,900') 3,000 feet starting at S. Colony Lake camp
Roundtrip:	12 miles starting at upper 4wd trailhead (9,900') 3 miles starting at S. Colony Lake camp

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Rick Peckham

August 24, 2015

Crestone Needle is generally recognized as being in the top 5 in climbing difficulty of all the Colorado 14ers. It is characterized by sustained Class 3 rock climbing (for hours) although on rock that is unusually climber-friendly. What I mean by that is that it has a unique geology called the Crestone Conglomerate – originally formed by massive amounts of sediment being shed into a trough, mixed with coarse sediment, hardened, inverted and uplifted to form the spine of the Crestone Peaks. The “cement” that holds the rocks together makes the Crestone Conglomerate a stable and hard rock that forms a 3000’ high wall on these peaks. Rounded stones of generally 2” to 6” diameter stick half-way out of the conglomerate making for great hand-holds and foot placements.

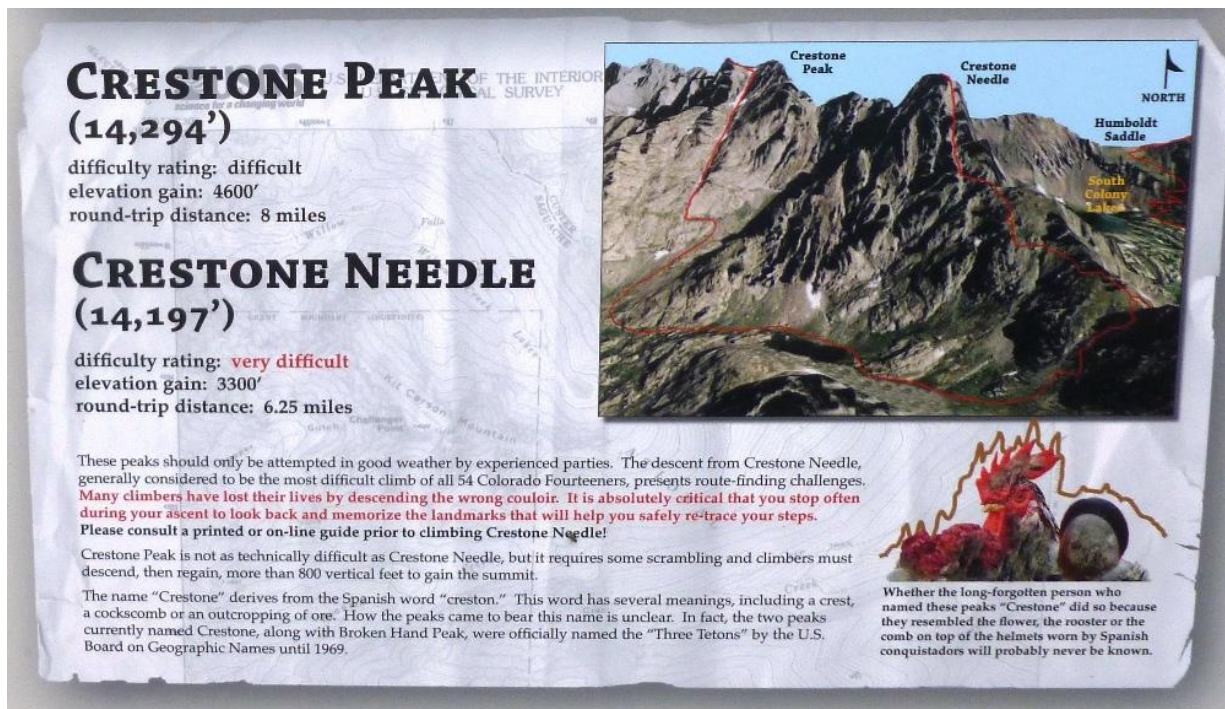
The “easiest” route is not easy - the south face, rated Class 3, Grade II.



Crestone Needle as seen from nearby Humbolt Peak

The challenge with the “Needle” in addition to the climbing, is that there are a few key places that are easy to miss on the way down, which gets you into bad trouble. We used orange construction tape tied to a rock to mark one return but there are others. There are plenty of warnings, but apparently plenty of people who still get fooled.

The problem is that while you can turn around to see what you should look for on descent, there are 5 other spots that look the same, so leaving an artificial marker is best.



Sign at trailhead. Note the red warnings.

Our game plan was to drive up the rough S. Colony "road" to the trailhead, backpack to S. Colony Lake and set camp, then rise at 3:30 am for a 4:00 am start. We'd seen what looked like a break in the daily storms and a change in wind direction from the northwest (that had been bringing in all the smoke from the 82 fires in Oregon and Washington) to wind from the south typical of the summer monsoons. As it turned out, we had an all-clear day from storms and smoke.



Rick C. at trailhead, ready to hike the 4 ½ miles and 1400' to camp at S. Colony Lake.



We got to the Lake, spotted a great campsite and were greeted there by a family of Colorado Big-Horn Sheep



Rick C. at camp with cup of wine and framed by Crestone Needle.



Rick P., happy with the rest of the wine.



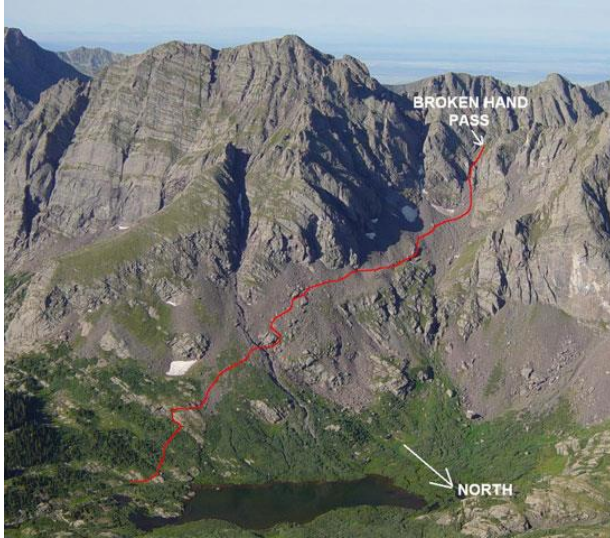
We get lots of visitors on these climbs.

The Climb

We had been at this location just one week earlier climbing the nearby 14er, Crestone Peak. That turned out to be a story of self-rescue from the onslaught of an unusual trio of thunderstorms, hail and snow – at a critically steep part of Broken Hand Pass, which is the 1500’ hurdle that precedes the actual climb of either Crestone Peak or Crestone Needle.

Despite those difficulties, given the weather outlooks around the state, we decided to “get back on the horse” and return for the second and harder Crestone.

We arose at 3:30 am and were on the trail in the dark by 4:00 am. We climbed the whole route up to Broken Hand Pass in darkness, arriving at the top of the Pass just at daybreak at about 6:15am.

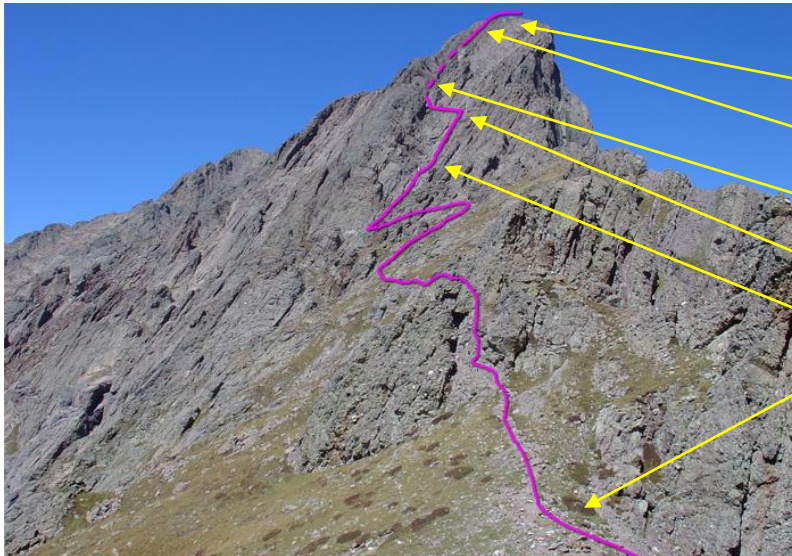


Route to Broken Hand Pass, we did in the dark.



Final pitch to the Pass at dawn.

Next was heading from the Pass to the base of the East Gully, the first of two involved in the ascent.



The upper route to the Needle:

- Summit
- Summit Pitch
- West Gully
- Crossing the dihedral
- East Gully
- Broken Hand Pass

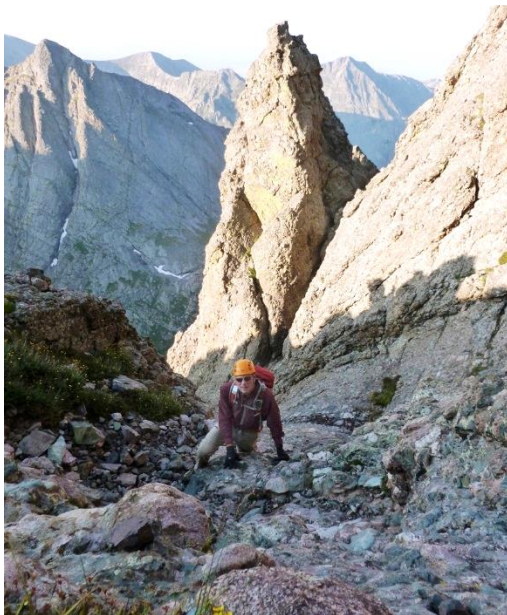
Distances not what they appear – the West gully is over 100' more vertical rise than the East gully.



Rick P. at dawn with Crestones behind.



We got to the East gully and began the ascent up the middle alongside the water runoff.

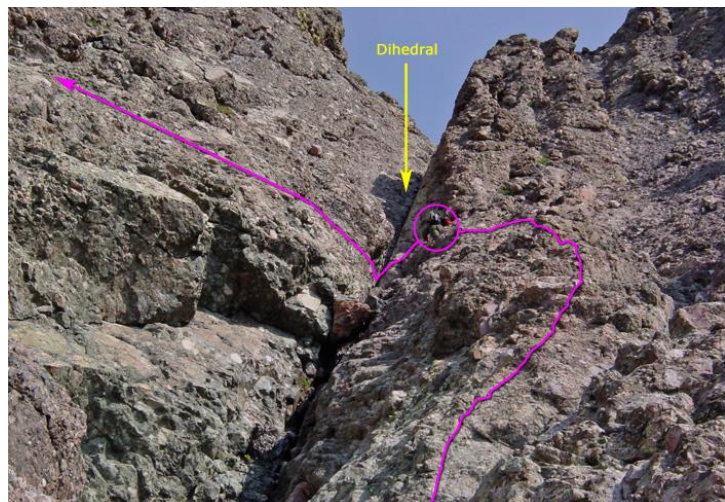


Rick C. heading up the East gully

The Crux

Most would say the crux of this climb is not actually at the top. It is a traverse from the East gully across what is called a dihedral to a rib separating the East Gully from the West gully where the route continues. If you kept going up the East gully it quickly turns into a Class 4+ much more challenging climb. A “dihedral” has a few definitions, here it means the walls of a narrow gully that flare up at the same, steep angle on both sides. It is difficult to cross.

The circle shows the position of a climber about to do the straddle cross.

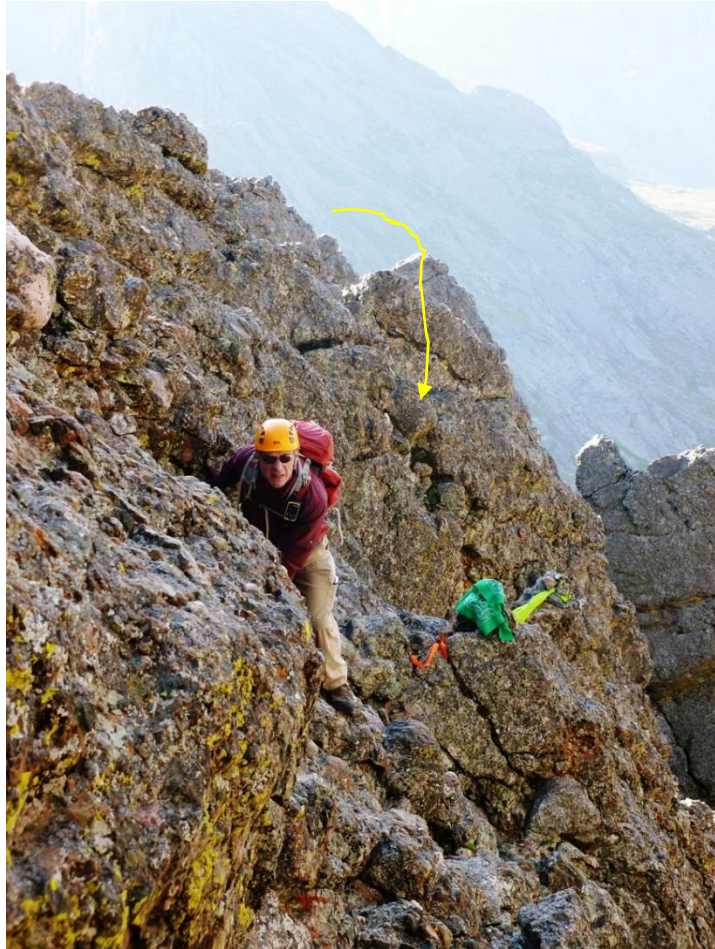




Rick P. (above) and Rick C. (below) in various parts of the crossing. The actual toughest part is the next move Rick P. needs to make above – reaching around the protruding rock face to only slight finger-holds – it seemed to us it was the one place on the whole mountain there wasn't a good hold – and at a critical juncture.

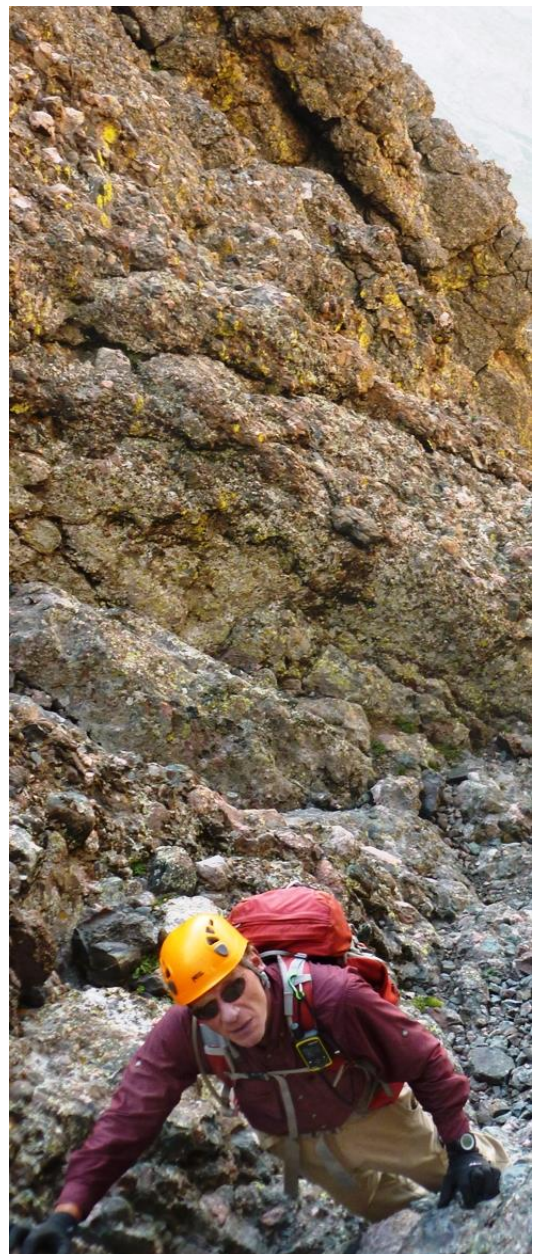


After that crossing, you climb across a rib and come out into the West gully. The instructions in route reports say: *“It’s a good idea to stop here and look back at the terrain to visualize your descent. Without careful route finding, it’s easy to miss the exit of the West gully.”* That’s the typical understatement you find in these climb reports. There’s just about no way without a marker on return down the West gully you’d see the correct place on the side wall you just start climbing up to get over to the rib.



Above: Rick C. at the start up the West gully after having come over the top (yellow arrow). Now imagine finding that on return! We left the orange ribbon, others left articles of clothing as markers – smart. If you miss and go further down, it reportedly doesn’t end well.

Climbing the conglomerate in the West gully





OK this was pretty funny. I'm huffing and puffing up the West gully with a pack with 5 layers of clothing just in case (like last week), full climbing boots, helmet (to protect against rock fall), emergency GPS locator – water bladder, etc. etc. We ran into a guy who climbs in his sandals and a tank top – that's it! I have no idea how you get up and down a mountain like that in sandals nor what would happen if weather came in suddenly as it does – but he was fast and capable – up and down. Also note in the picture of him you can see the rocks sticking out of the conglomerate – that's what you climb on – and he does it in sandals!



Finally nearing the top of the West gully – but not done yet!



Rick P. showing that above the West gully the climbing to summit gets even steeper.



Summit Crestone Needle, 14,197' at 9:30am, 5 ½ hours from camp.
In the background are the two peaks of Crestone Peak (the left one is the real summit)



We found and left this stone at summit – it says “Crestone Needle, 14,187 ft.”

At about 10:00 am after a sandwich at summit, with the weather holding nicely, we began our descent. It didn't take long to appreciate how tricky it is to find a few key points on the way down. Most of the



warnings (as shown earlier with the orange ribbon and clothing markers) are about how to exit the West gully to cross to the East gully. But there's another key place – namely right near the summit when you down climb the steep summit approach – if you go too far (easy to do), you see what you think is the top of the West gully, but it's actually the top of the East gully – heading down that gets you into a loose and Class 4 down climb which even those who ascend that way, don't want to do.

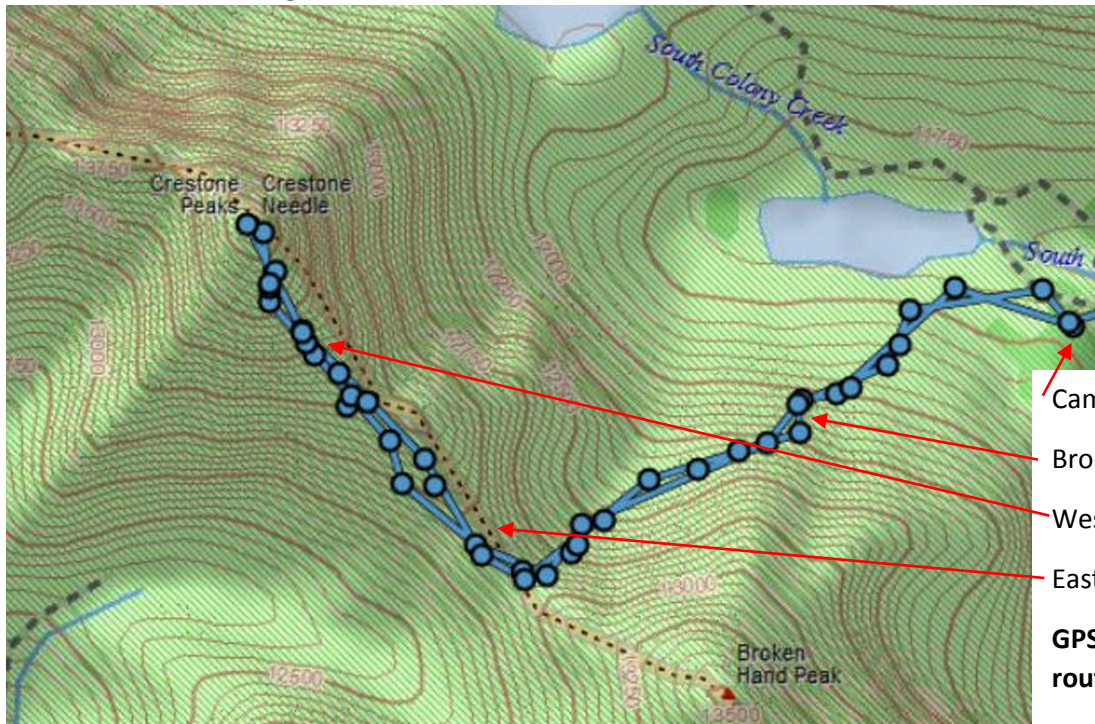
So on the way up, when you exit the West gully and turn left towards summit – mark how to re-enter the West gully.

The way down is like climbing down a climbing wall, facing the mountain, one hand or foot at a time. For me it was time consuming but there were lots of hand holds and knobs for your foot placement, although on the very-steep sections I sure appreciated Rick P. being there to call out where a 2" knob was to step on that I didn't see myself.

Rick C. resting for a moment, finally mid-way down the East gully. We got back to camp at 3:45pm, over 11 ½ hours round trip – slow but safe and exhilarating!

We then packed up camp and hiked down the 4 ½ miles to our car and drove home.

Crestone Needle is a big one, checked!



- Camp site
- Broken Hand Pass
- West Gully
- East Gully
- GPS tracked our route!**