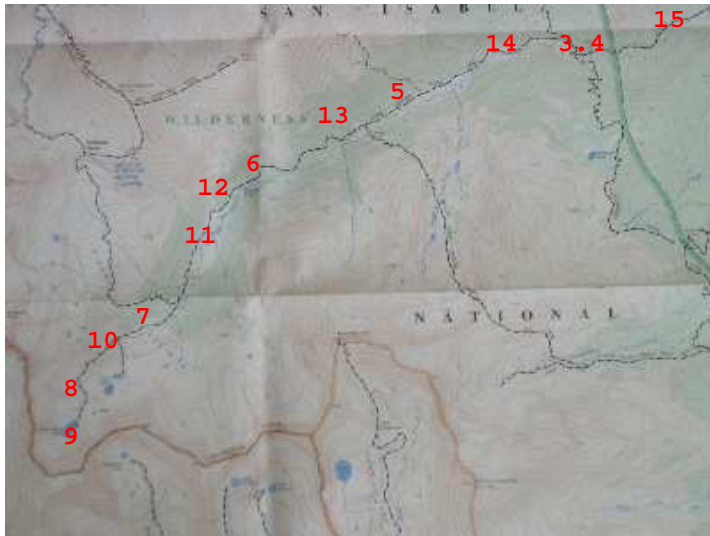


Collegiate Peaks Wilderness



We got to the trail head at around 2pm - a little later than we meant to. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that we had to buy Gavin a new pack in Colorado Springs since the straps on his old one had rotted while it was in storage. Apparently, no one makes straps for such an old-school pack anymore. So, it had to be repacked, and then we realized we didn't have the ziplock bags for the food we'd bought the night before. So, by the time we got on the trail, it was a bit later that would have been ideal. However, we were both very excited and ready to go! We started at the pine creek trail head, which is 30 miles or so north of Buena Vista on Highway 24. We got the packs on and we were ready to hit the

trail. The first surprise is that the first half-mile of trail is through a ranch and the rancher has a fee box up. It's only \$1/person (\$2/four-legged-friend) so it's not a huge deal. Gavin does have to run back down and get the license number off the rental car, though. The first mile is through pine trees and cactus. We spent some time wondering why my pack was suddenly riding so heavily on my shoulders until we realized I forgot to buckle one of the straps after we got it off the plane. We get back into the valley pretty quickly. The trail starts out pretty wide, but pretty quickly it gets into the trees - and starts climbing. We don't have too many pictures from the first day. I was really having trouble at times. The trail head is at ~9000 ft and we were going to try to get to a meadow at ~10,800 ft. This is about when I realized that one day in Colorado Springs will not condition you to walking up 1000 ft at



The going was pretty slow, as I was having to stop and catch my breath often on the hills - and the whole trail is pretty much hill at this point. The thunderstorms started around 3:30 or so. It never rained too hard where we were, but it was cool enough that we got a little chilled every time we stopped walking for a few minutes. The creek falls pretty quickly during the entire walk up the valley until you get to the junction with the Colorado Trail, so there's a nice babbling brook noise as you're walking. I let Gavin take my sleeping bag for me, eventually, so we could try to make better time. I was worried about our destination for the next day - I had hoped to make it to the junction with South Pine Creek

Trail for our first camp to cut off miles on the really high altitude hiking above the tree line. It was about 6pm or so when we finally emerged into the first meadow at the trail junction. I had expected that we

would get this far in about 2 hours, so we had really been moving slowly. However, when we came around the trees and got a site of the high country above us, it was all worth it. We'd pretty much gained most of the elevation that we were going to for a while, so the going got much easier. We hiked through a couple meadows, and I was really enjoying myself again. We started seeing more people, too. There were a few campsites set up in the meadows. As we got into the trees to climb up a small rise some other campers hailed us and warned us that there weren't too many more good camp sites higher up. We decided to camp in the next meadow up, which wasn't really necessary as we



found out the next day, but was lucky anyway. We set up camp and got our

first surprise. We were setting up the tent when all of a sudden I realized there was no rain fly! It was sitting in the guest bedroom at home where we'd put it to allow the seam sealer to dry without interference from the dogs. Never fear, we rigged a poncho to keep the rain from coming in the mesh at the top of the tent. Gavin went down to the creek to pump some water (which was not easy because the attachment for the output on our brand new filter was cracked - we knew this before we left Houston, but decided we'd just suffer this trip since it will take 4-6 weeks to get a replacement from the company). After we procured water, we got out our dinner: this is where we got our second surprise. We got out the tiny camping stove and the matches and tried to light the stove. Apparently, the box of kitchen matches I have at home are safety matches! None of

them would light. We really needed hot water for most of our meals, so Gavin hiked back down to the lower meadow to see if he could bum some matches off someone. Luckily, the nice men in the next campsite down had an extra lighter which they gave us. Phew!

Day two dawned fairly early. We were up before 7:00 and on the trail before 8:00. We'd decided to leave camp where it was and take one "light" backpack for the day. The first hour or so was a pretty gradual climb up through the meadows. Then we started having to climb ridges between the meadows. Gavin was carrying the pack at this point (which I was really grateful for!), and we were making really good time. We passed the old mining cabin near the South Pine Creek Trail junction (I was an idiot to think we could make it here on the first day!) and were soon treated to the first truly fantastic view. We saw our first wildlife at this point: a jackrabbit. The hike in the high meadows was great - I'm going to just let the pictures do the talking for a bit.





We finally got to the top meadow. Gavin was tired of the pack so I carried it a little way - but even small hills were giving me trouble. Somewhere in this meadow, the trail crosses the creek. We never did figure out where this is supposed to happen, but there are plenty of convenient rocks. We were now at about 12,000 ft and getting ready to climb up to the mountain lake we'd been heading for all day. Luckily at this point, we weren't looking too closely at the map to realize that the lake was at 12,700 ft and we had only a mile or so of trail left (steep!). As it was, we made the incredibly smart decision to leave the pack in the meadow so we wouldn't have to carry it up the final (we thought) ridge. Well, if we'd known how high we had to go, we probably wouldn't have made it. As it was, I didn't think I was going to make it up the last 200-300 ft. Gavin had a great time snapping pictures of me finding every rock to



rest on that I could. By this time the weather was rather threatening, but luckily it went everywhere but where we were. (We didn't get a drop of rain all day!) We finally clambered up the final rise and got a shock - we were right up at the top of the tundra. There was nothing above us but rocks. We took a bunch of pictures of the Silver King lake and one of the Twin Lakes that we could see below us. Here's a bunch of pictures of the final rise, lake, and the valley below.



We didn't want to tempt fate with the weather any more than we already had, so we started down pretty soon. We were almost back down to the spot where we'd stashed the pack when we saw a beaver. We'd actually seen this guy on the way up, but he was too far across the meadow for a picture. He was curious about us, though. He ran behind some bushes and popped out the top to watch us just like a prairie dog. He was pretty shy; even though Gavin was about 10 feet from him when we came up on him on the way down, he was half way across the meadow before I could get a picture. When we got back down the valley far enough to see where we'd been at the top, we were shocked. As Gavin said, if I'd known where we were going on the way up, I might not have had the resolution to get there.



Ignorance is bliss. In the woods above the South Pine Creek Trail junction there's a waterfall called Bedrock falls. It's not really accessible right from the trail, but we got views above and below it. This cascade is where I lost my sunglasses. I had them on my hat (which I forgot) and dislodged them

when I was trying to take the picture. As you can probably understand, I wasn't about to try to fish them out of the creek right here. We knew we were almost back when we got back to the cabin, but we were pretty tired by that point. As best as I can tell, the hike was about 6 miles - each way! We stumbled into camp at around 5:30 pm after 9 1/2 hours on the trail. We slept until about 7 and then got up, pumped water, and made dinner. We started having trouble with our stove that night. I didn't



realize that the fuel canister needed to be shaken and we were trying to boil almost 3 cups of water at once. It took about half an hour to get it close enough to boiling that we thought it would "cook" the dehydrated beef stroganoff. Star gazing wasn't great that night because it was pretty cloudy and the



moon was quite full and bright. However, we did get a pretty good light show in the form of a thunderstorm that was far enough away not to be threatening.

Day three dawned bright and beautiful. We briefly discussed



getting "lost" so we could spend another day of two up here. But decided since we'd made a point of calling Becca before we got on the trail and telling her to send people looking for us if she hadn't heard from us by the time our plane was



supposed to leave Denver, we'd better not do that. We took one last look back at the meadow we'd made our home for two nights and started down. The walk back to the car was excellent. Down is much easier than up, especially on fresh legs, and the day was gorgeous. I appreciated the scenery on the initial portion of the trail



much better on the way back and consequently took many more pictures. We got back to the car without incident and came back to the land of the oil refinery. The only consolation is that we had enough spectacular photos to make everyone back in Houston really jealous! I hope you've enjoyed the narration and the pictures. There are more photos in the albums linked off our homepage.