

Backpacking In High Mountains

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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We had been up to 9,000 feet a couple weeks earlier and saw just one snowbank in the woods. Driving home we could see that though there was a lot of snow in the high peaks of the northern Sangre De Cristo mountains, it was in patches. There were large areas without snow, even above 13,000 feet. It was time to give it a try.

{bot_wrgoogle}We decided on a two night trip to Bushnell Lakes and possibly to the top of Bushnell Peak (13,105 feet). About this time I received a phone call. I own a backpacking website, so I get emails with questions all the time, but this was only the second time someone had called me at home. The man on the other end was calling from Texas, wondering about the conditions in the Sangre De Christos - was there too much snow?

"I hope not," I told him. "Me and a friend are headed up there tomorrow." He said he had called the forest service rangers for an area south of where we would be, and they had told him everything was still snowed in up high. He was going for a week, starting a few days after us, and wondered if they might be exaggerating. We agreed that they probably were.

Challenges Of High Mountains

It was hot when we started, even with only 13 pounds on my back (I like to go light). Where the trail split we decided to go to the Stout Lakes instead, by the Twin Sisters Peaks. This was the next valley over from Bushnell Lakes, and a shorter hike. When we came to a trail register we noted that only a couple people had been up there this year. One had left an entry on the way down: "Lost the trail in the snow at 10,800 feet." It was dated just a few days earlier.

We headed up the trail, soon hearing the roaring stream it follows. We saw the first small patches of snow before we crossed it at about 9,600 feet. Then we were hiking on a trail that doubled as a stream itself, complete with small waterfalls. The snow patches were more frequent, and we walked over the stream/path on a snow bridge at one point before realizing that it was a three-foot fall if it had broken.

Several hours up the trail there was no trail. It was somewhere under several feet of snow. It is hard to get too lost following a stream up a valley, though, so we kicked steps into the hard snow and continued on. In places we found the trail again, and even had long dry stretches to hike. The melting process is very irregular. In one of our photos Mike is standing on dry grass next to a seven-foot high wall of snow. In another, I'm trying to climb a twenty-foot snow-cliff.

Then there is the photo from the first lake. It is of myself, standing on it. There was dry ground around half of it, but it was frozen. We headed back down to a small pond that was only partially covered in ice. It had been a hot day of backpacking in deep snow. We put our water bottles in a snowbank and set up the tarp on the grass. Marmots came near to investigate.

The next day we hiked up past the first and second lakes, both above tree line. We followed a stream up a steep hill and into a meadow full of wildflowers at about 12,000 feet. There were frozen lakes below, flowers around us, and a 13,012-

foot mountain waiting above, past rocky climbs and slippery fields of snow. We made it to the top - the highest Mike had ever climbed - and signed the register. We could see mountains in all directions, some of them over 60 miles away.

By the time we made it back to the camp, I was sick. I hadn't anticipated the effect of the sun. I had a hat and sunglasses, but the sunlight reflects at you from all sides when you cross snow and ice. It wasn't just a sunburn, but sun-sickness. I spent the night alternating between feeling on fire and having chills run through my body. Mike got the chills the following day. With that in mind, here are some tips for backpacking in the high mountains.

1. Call the forest service. Find out what the conditions are where you plan to hike, so you can bring the proper equipment and clothing.
2. Have a good map and know how to use it. This is especially important in early summer, when you might lose the trail in the snow.
3. Sun block is just a start. Where a hat, sunglasses and long sleeves.
4. GPS your car location. If you have a GPS device, mark your car in case you lose the trail.
5. Check the trailhead register. Those backpacking before you may have stopped on the way out to note that a bridge is washed out, fallen trees have covered the trail, or something else you should know.
6. Climb high early. Afternoon thunderstorms are common in many high mountain ranges. If you want to go to the summits and high ridges, it's best to do it early and be lower before noon.

It's great to have meadows and valleys to yourself. That's one of the advantages of backpacking in the high mountains early in the season. Just be ready for a wide variety of hiking conditions.

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