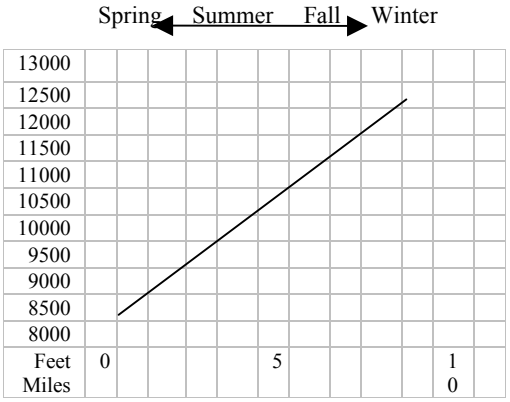
HIKING - FOREST SERVICE - ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NATIONAL FOREST – San Juan RANGER DISTRICT - Columbine
Updated: April, 2003

Needle Creek/Chicago Basin #504

Length: 8.3 miles / 13.3 km.

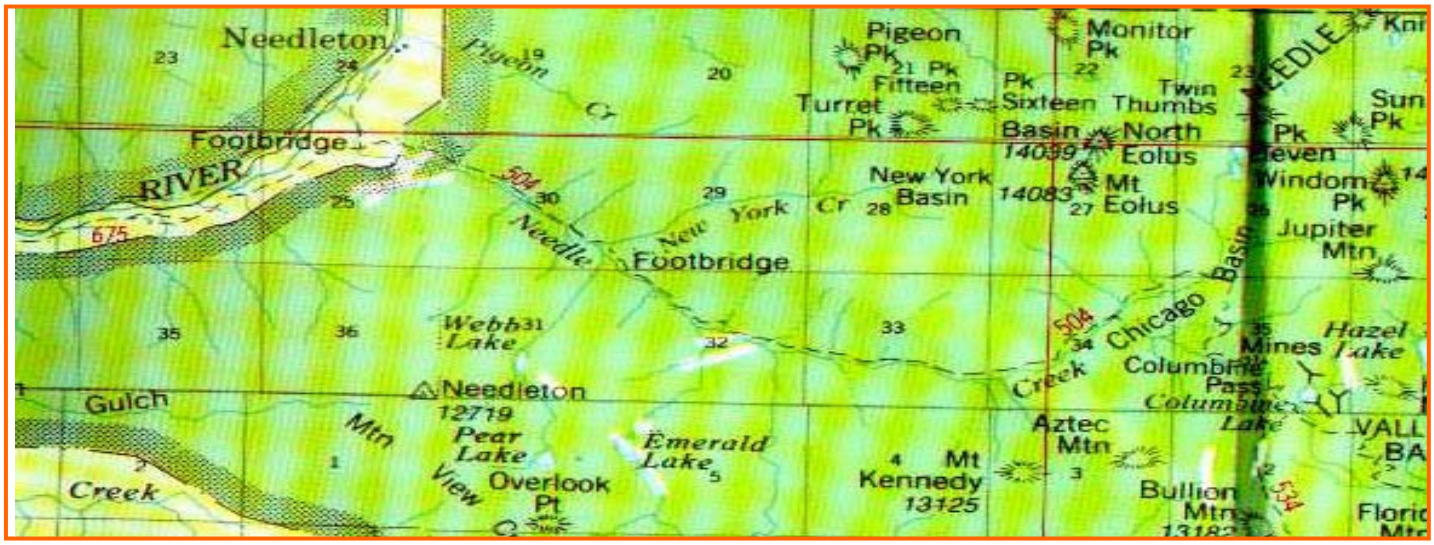
Recommended Season



Use: Heavy in some areas
Difficulty: Strenuous

USGS Map (s):
Snowdon Peak, Mountain View Crest, Columbine Pass
Starting Elevation: 8,200'
Needleton
Ending Elevation: 12,800'
Summit of Columbine Pass

Access # 1:
11-mile hike in on Purgatory Trail #511 and #675, which takes about 5 hours. Trailhead can be reached via U.S. Highway #550, with parking at the trailhead across from Durango Mountain Resort main entrance.



Access # 2:
Ride in on the Durango-Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad. NOTE that on an average summer day, 50 people will disembark from the train to head to Chicago Basin–a beautiful, but crowded, backpacking destination.

Scan of the San Juan National Forest Map
Forest Service Maps and other publications are available at the Public Lands Center, in the Durango Tech Center, ½ mile west of Durango off Highway 160, or by calling (970) 247-4874.

Attractions & Considerations:

The Needle Creek Trail follows the creek until it reaches the lower end of Chicago Basin, 5 miles up the trail. There are few legal camping spots until you reach Chicago Basin. *There is a permanent fire ban in Needle Creek and all of its headwaters*. At 6.5 miles you begin the steep climb to Columbine Pass. There are switchbacks for the next 2 miles and an ascent of 1,500 feet. The alpine meadows are full of blooming wildflowers in late July and August. This area has excellent views and photographic possibilities. Water can be found off the trail in most of the tributaries, but, due to Giardia, it should be filtered. As with all high-altitude areas, storms can move in rapidly, bringing severe wind, lightning, rain, snow, or hail. Plan accordingly.

Fishing Considerations: Fishing is fair for cutthroat trout in Needle Creek below Chicago Basin. Please check the fishing regulations regarding limits, allowable lures, and restrictions on certain lakes, rivers, etc.

Weminuche Wilderness Regulations:

- Group size is limited to 15 people.
- In the Needle Creek Drainage campfires are not allowed. This includes Chicago Basin.
- Camping is not allowed within 100 feet (approximately 35 adult steps). f any water source
- Camping is not permitted around Twin Lakes.
- Outfitter-guides who receive any form of compensation must obtain a special-use permit to operate on public land.
- Possession of motorized equipment and mechanized means of transport are not permitted.
- Recreational livestock are prohibited from being restrained within 100 feet of lakeshores and streams or within riparian areas.