



Hiking Wheeler Peak



An ascent of Wheeler Peak provides an exhilarating experience for visitors in good physical condition. Certain safety precautions should be taken to ensure a safe and enjoyable climb to the summit.

Objective Hazards

Hazards such as the weather, rockslides, and avalanches, can not be controlled. During your climb of Wheeler Peak, be aware of potential dangers like:

Rockslides

Steep slopes and rock walls are dangerously unstable on Wheeler Peak. Do not take short cuts. Stay on established trails.

Avalanches

are common in the Wheeler Peak area during the winter and spring. Some trails cross avalanche paths and unstable snowslopes. Be alert for signs of an unstable snowpack such as settling or “whomp” sounds. Climbers should carry the proper avalanche equipment during the winter and spring seasons and consult with park rangers about current avalanche conditions.

Sudden Changes in the Weather

Most weather systems approaching Wheeler Peak come from the west or southwest. When climbing Wheeler Peak from the east, or lee slopes, hikers are often unaware of storms approaching from the west since the mountain blocks their view. At the first sign of a storm, turn back to the safety of lower elevations. Changes in the weather can occur in a matter of minutes. Storms can be severe any month of the year with lightning, rain, snow, or hail often associated with very strong winds. It is better to return to the mountain in safe condition than to continue climbing in dangerous situations.

Subjective Hazards

Subjective hazards, such as improper clothing and equipment, exceeding physical abilities, or ascending too rapidly can be controlled. Before climbing Wheeler Peak, make sure that your party is properly equipped and knows their limitations.

Hypothermia occurs when a person’s entire body temperature is lowered. It is a condition in which a persons entire body temperature is lowered. Weather changes can be accompanied by sudden drops in temperature making hypothermia a potential danger, even in summer months. Hypothermia can render a person helpless in a matter of minutes but can be avoided by wearing appropriate clothing, being prepared for sudden changes in the weather, and consuming plenty of food and fluids.

Mountain Sickness, or altitude sickness, is a condition brought on by ascending to high elevations too rapidly. Difficulty in breathing, nausea, headache, and lethargy are symptoms of a person experiencing mountain sickness. This condition is caused by the lack of oxygen at higher elevations. A victim with mountain sickness is in serious danger and the proper remedy is to descend to lower elevations immediately.

Before climbing Wheeler Peak, it is advisable to spend a night or two camping in the nearby campgrounds to acclimate to the higher elevations. During the ascent, hike at a steady pace with frequent rests. Be alert for the symptoms of mountain sickness. Individuals with heart conditions should not attempt to climb Wheeler Peak without consulting a physician.

Winter Mountaineering

Climbing Wheeler Peak during the winter months is a serious undertaking. Severe storms can rage for days on the upper portions of the mountain while the surrounding valleys the weather remains mild. Large accumulations of snow can occur with hurricane-force winds creating extreme avalanche conditions. Winter

mountaineers should be equipped for arctic conditions and be proficient at winter survival skills. Winter climbers and skiers are urged to check with park rangers about current conditions and register at park headquarters.



“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings.” John Muir’s appropriate quote describes the climbers reward upon reaching the summit of Wheeler Peak, with the basin and range topography of Great Basin extending before you in a 360 degree panorama.

To the Top

The preferred trailhead for the Wheeler Peak trail is one half mile before the Wheeler Peak campground on the scenic drive. This trailhead has plenty of parking and avoids a 200 foot climb in elevation that is added to the hike if you start at the campground.

From the trailhead, the trail travels west through stands of aspen along the southern slopes of Bald Mountain. Openings in the aspen stands provide outstanding views of the route up to Wheeler Peak. After one mile of easy hiking the trail intersects with one coming from Wheeler Peak Campground. There is another intersection about 100 yards to the west. This is the trail to the summit of Wheeler Peak.

The trail climbs through a wide meadow before switching back. **Please do not cut this switch back- the plants are very fragile!** Continue along the traverse until you gain the saddle (11,000 feet). Stunted, gnarled limber pine and

Engleman spruce indicate treeline. Views are commanding to the east and west, with the clear waters of Stella Lake visible 1,000 feet below to the east.

The trail then climbs south up the wide ridgeline over shifty quartzite scree and rocks. At the 12,000 foot level, the trail passes rock piles used for windbreaks. Hardy alpine plants such as phlox and sky pilot shelter here, finding a niche in the environment.

The final 1,000 foot climb to the summit is steep. Stay on the trail unless it is snow-covered, in which case you should choose your route carefully. Do not proceed if a safe route cannot be located. The snow slopes can be icy and are located above high cliffs. The summit is a long ridgeline with the highest point located at the center.

Leave No Trace



Leave No Trace is a national program that promotes and inspires responsible outdoor recreation through education, research, and partnerships. Following the six principles of Leave No Trace helps to both make your trip into the backcountry a safe trip with minimal impact on the resource.

For more information on the Leave No Trace program and Leave No Trace workshops, visit their web site at www.lnt.org, call (800) 332-4100, or write to P.O. Box 997, Boulder, CO 80306.

The six principles of Leave No Trace are:

1. **Plan Ahead and Prepare**
2. **Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces**
3. **Dispose of Waste Properly**
4. **Leave What You Find**
5. **Minimize Campfire Impacts**
6. **Respect Wildlife**