



(970) 586-1206

<http://www.nps.gov/romo>

Longs Peak Keyhole Route Frequently Asked Questions

1) Is the Keyhole Route a hike or a climb?

This is not a “walk in the park.” This is much more than a hike. This is a climb, a classic mountaineering route that should not be underestimated. The Keyhole Route crosses enormous vertical rock faces, is exposed to falling rock, and requires scrambling on all fours. The route has narrow ledges, loose rock, and steep cliffs. Depending upon conditions, you might encounter snow and ice any time of the year. The terrain requires route finding skills and the ability to assess and adjust to unexpected or changing weather conditions. A slip, trip or fall could be fatal.

2) Would you describe the Keyhole Route as dangerous?

Summiting Longs Peak is an incredible experience and most people who do so do it safely. However, the difficulty of this route is often underestimated. As with any high altitude mountaineering route you will encounter hazards along the way. Be sure to adequately plan, prepare for, and manage your climb – don’t take it lightly.

3) Are you still providing “technical” and “non-technical” ratings concerning the Keyhole Route?

Park employees no longer provide a rating of the Keyhole Route. Ratings are subjective and influenced by rapidly changing conditions that should be anticipated in the high alpine terrain of Longs Peak. The decision is yours to make. Our goal is to provide the best available information that will assist in determining if, when and how you may choose to climb this mountain.

In the past, some visitors have mistakenly assumed that a “non-technical” rating meant “safe.” Exposure and other risks along the route exist all the time. Weather and conditions can change in a matter of minutes. Check the “Longs Peak conditions” page on the park’s website at <http://www.nps.gov/romo/planyourvisit/longspeak.htm> or call the park Information Office at (970) 586-1206 to find out the most recent available conditions along the Keyhole Route.

4) How have people been injured or killed on the Keyhole Route?

Many accidents on the Keyhole Route occur on the way down from the summit when fatigue or the false assumption that “I’ve done the hardest part” can lead to inattention and poor decision making. Be just as focused and alert, or even more so, on the way down!

Summit fever is dangerous. The Keyhole rock formation, 6 miles from the Longs Peak Trailhead, is an ideal spot to stop and assess how you and other members of your group are feeling. Is the weather changing or likely to change? Take the time to fairly assess your physical condition and the ever-changing conditions on the mountain before you tackle the most difficult part of the climb ahead. While you are at it, snacks and water will provide energy for the trip beyond or your return back to the trailhead.

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4 continued) Along the Keyhole route there are numerous areas where an un-roped fall can be fatal. If you find yourself off route and wondering which way to go – don't shortcut – retrace your steps to your last known position. Many people have fallen while shortcutting or continuing ahead after losing the route.

Attempting the summit in the afternoon greatly increases your risk – the round-trip from the Longs Peak Trailhead averages 10 to 15 hours. Increased risk factors include: weather, eventual darkness, and a decline in the ability to see others on the route or to successfully navigate in the late afternoon light.

Solo travel is never recommended particularly on a high risk activity such as the Keyhole Route. Some have died or sustained serious injury because they were travelling alone or chose to separate from the rest of their group. Travelling with others provides an added margin of safety with decision making, shared observations of changing conditions, and the ability to assist or go for help in the event of an accident. Although you may encounter other people along the route, this in no way substitutes for travelling with others who can share in the assessment and decision making responsibilities.

No one plans to get hurt or killed on Longs Peak. **Safety is your responsibility and our concern. The most important part of your climb is to plan for a safe return. Remember to enjoy the experience along the way. Too much focus on the summit can lead to poor decisions!**

5) Do I really need to start at the trailhead before sunrise?

Yes. Time for the 15 mile round- trip averages 10 to 15 hours. Much of this route is above tree-line so give yourself plenty of time to be back below tree-line before afternoon thunderstorms and lightning develop. Of course, thunderstorms have been known to appear early in the day as well! At these elevations storms often produce snow, sleet and hail.

6) What are the symptoms of high altitude sickness?

High altitude sickness (also called acute mountain sickness) occurs when you cannot get enough oxygen at high altitude. How physically fit you are plays no role in whether you get altitude sickness. The symptoms of altitude sickness include: a dull to throbbing headache, loss of appetite, sick to your stomach or nausea, vomiting, and feeling weak or dizzy. It is important to watch for these symptoms in yourself as well as others in your group. If symptoms develop, don't wait to turn around. The best treatment for high altitude sickness is to go to a lower elevation as soon as safely possible. To successfully summit Longs Peak - it is in your best interest to spend time acclimating and hiking other lower elevation summits before attempting Longs Peak.

7) Is the "trail" to the summit of Longs Peak easy to find?

There is no "trail" to the summit of Longs Peak. The designated, maintained hiking trail ends at the Boulder Field, about 5 miles from the trailhead. From here you walk and scramble over boulders toward the Keyhole feature. Once at the Keyhole, the best route follows red and yellow bull's-eyes painted on the rocks. If you lose the bull's eyes you are likely off-route and will encounter more difficult climbing with potentially severe consequences. It is important to retrace your steps back to the bull's-eyes before continuing. Do not shortcut! Keep in mind if the route is in "winter- like" conditions sections of the bull's-eyes will not be visible. Do not rely on GPS systems or other technology to "show" you the route. Check out the Keyhole Route brochure on the park's website: <http://www.nps.gov/romo/planyourvisit/longspeak.htm> which describes the different sections of the Keyhole Route starting at the Boulder Field and ending at the summit with brief text and photos.

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8) How many miles is the Keyhole Route to Longs Peak?

From the Longs Peak Trailhead to the summit of Longs Peak along the Keyhole Route is 7.5 miles. The actual Keyhole Route begins after the Boulder Field. The last 1.5 miles is by far the most difficult, exposed and hazardous portion of the route.

9) How many people should I expect to see on the Keyhole Route during the summer?

At 14,259 feet (4,345 meters), Longs Peak is one of the most popular “Fourteeners” in Colorado. It is common to see hundreds of people along the route and on the summit. In 2002, a research survey showed over 9,500 people reached the summit of Longs Peak; thousands more turned around at the Boulder Field. But....do not rely on the presence of others if you need help. Preparedness and self-reliance are essential.

10) When is the best time of year to try to climb the Keyhole Route?

In general, the most snow-free and ice-free time of year to climb Longs Peak is mid-July through mid-September. However, weather and conditions vary so it's best to check with a ranger or online for current conditions, 970-586-1206 or <http://www.nps.gov/romo/planyourvisit/longspeak.htm>

Conditions are constantly changing and influenced by altitude, wind and sudden changes in weather. Obtain a reliable weather forecast for elevations ranging from 8,000 feet to 14,000 feet and be prepared for all types of conditions before you depart the trailhead. Never hesitate to turn back if conditions deteriorate.

11) I know I should carry common sense, what else should I carry in my pack?

- Lots of water - take and drink plenty of fluids such as water or sports drinks, a minimum of 3 to 4 quarts. You will not find water sources along the Keyhole Route.
- High-energy food and snacks
- Layers of clothing (jackets & pants), including insulating, windproof clothing like synthetic or wool, not cotton.
- Sturdy footwear and extra socks
- Storm gear appropriate for rain or snow
- Hat and gloves
- Sunglasses with UV protection
- Sunscreen
- First aid kit
- Topographic map and compass/GPS
- Flashlight or headlamp with spare batteries
- Waterproof matches
- Pocket knife
- Whistle

12) How is cell phone coverage?

It varies greatly and is extremely unreliable. Do not rely on your cell phone to assist you during an emergency!

Thank you for taking the time to read more about the Keyhole Route. We hope the information provided will assist you with planning for a safe and enjoyable experience on Longs Peak. Don't hesitate to turn back for any reason – your life may depend on it. Longs Peak will await your return.