

The Continental Divide Trail 1978-2008

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (the Trail). After over a decade of planning and lobbying, the Trail was officially designated a national scenic trail in 1978. Thirty years later, the Trail is only 75% completed, and stretches in part and parcel mostly along the spine of America, the continental divide (the Divide), deviating where rough terrain and private lands necessarily move it off the Divide. Approximately 3100 miles in length and stretching from the Mexican border in southern New Mexico to the Canadian border in northern Montana, the trail also includes Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho. Approximately 750 miles of the Trail crosses through Colorado, with over a third of that distance, more than 250 miles, stretching along the Divide that forms the border of the Rio Grande National Forest.

It enters the Forest on the Conejos Peak Ranger District just south of Cumbres Pass, covers many miles on the Divide District where the headwaters of the Rio Grande “horseshoe” the continental divide way to the west and leaves the Forest where the continental divide heads north from the Saguache District to the east of Windy Peak. Along this long stretch that crosses the Divide many times, the Trail also traverses through the magnificent public lands of the San Juan, Gunnison and Pike-San Isabel National Forests as well as the Gunnison BLM.

Colorado is the only state where the Trail climbs above 12,000 feet in elevation. Along the stretch described above, circling the San Luis Valley to the west along the Divide within the San Juan Mountains, it remains above this elevation for more than 100 miles!

Since the Trail was designated in 1978, the United States Forest Service has been the designated Agency with the overall responsibility for the planning, development and management of the Trail, in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service when appropriate. In 1995, the Continental Divide Trail Alliance (CDTA, headquartered in Pine, CO) was formed in partnership with the Forest Service. The CDTA is a non profit organization dedicated to the completion, maintenance and protection of the Trail through fund raising, publicity, education and volunteer coordination.

One of the goals for both the Forest Service and CDTA is to complete the Trail in its entirety as a non motorized trail. Currently over 70% completed, some sections of the Trail are currently located on roads and motorized trails.

A Partnership High on the Divide

In 2006, a proposal to relocate a section of the Trail off motorized routes and closer to the Divide was funded by Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO). Known as the Stony Pass to Cataract Lake project, it partnered together the Forest Service, Colorado State Parks, Continental Divide Trail Alliance and the Colorado Trail Foundation (CTF) on a successful 12 mile trail relocation project which merged both the Colorado Trail and Continental Divide Trail. The project removed both trails from motorized routes which

veered well away from the Divide, back onto a spectacular high elevation trail that crosses the Divide multiple times as it traversed along the Divide from Stony Pass to Cataract Lake on the Divide District of the Rio Grande NF and Gunnison District of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison NF's as well as the Gunnison BLM. This newest section of Colorado's Continental Divide Trail was completed this past summer by volunteers from both CDTA and CTF, together with Forest Service employees and volunteers from the Southwest Conservation Corps, as well as support from the two counties involved – Hinsdale and San Juan. It is a magnificent stretch of high elevation alpine Trail that offers million dollar views in all directions.

Hiking the Trail, whether as a day hike, weekend overnight trip, or lengthier stretch involving multiple days and campsites, can and should be a most rewarding journey if you are prepared. Likewise, unprepared travelers may find the journey intimidating and downright dangerous. While the following topics deserve a more detailed discussion in a future article in *SLV Lifestyles*, they go hand in hand with enjoyable ventures onto your public lands, whether hiking the Trail or venturing to your favorite special place.

Leave No Trace – Everyone who uses and enjoys the backcountry is responsible for the stewardship of these lands. Respect these lands in their natural state and strive to leave no trace of your presence.

Safety – Preparation and education is essential for a safe and enjoyable experience. Well prepared and experienced hikers knowingly exchange the comforts of civilization for the comforts and experiences to be enjoyed in the backcountry. Please take into account and with you maps of the area you will be heading; knowledge of the terrain, of water sources; weather and lightning patterns; of what cautions need to be taken in regards to wild animals; physical abilities and potential for high altitude sickness.

Some of the information presented in this article was derived from the most excellent book – Colorado's Continental Divide Trail, authored by Tom Jones and John Fielder.

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