

36 PETERS CREEK WINTER TOUR

DISTANCE: 6.3 miles roundtrip

TIME: Half day

ELEVATION GAIN: 790 feet

HIGH POINT: 1670 feet

SEASON: November–April

SURFACE: Snow

GRADE: Rolling

INDIGENOUS LAND: Dena'ina Athabascan

MANAGING AGENCY: Chugach State Park

MAP: USGS Anchorage B-7 NE

ONLINE MAP SEARCH: “peters creek valley trail ak”

TRAILHEAD GPS: 61.397351°N, 149.412501°W

On a winter day, especially once the light has returned, try a tour on skis, on foot, or on snowshoes to Fourmile Creek, where a terrace and opening in the trees overlook a forested valley backed by a brilliant-white mountain landscape. Peters Creek is one of the deep valleys of Chugach State Park, extending about 16 miles from the trailhead. Tributary names along the valley are mile markers—Fourmile, Sixmile, Sevenmile, and Ninemile Creeks. Prospectors before 1920, or later homesteaders, must have named these based on some lower trailhead. Today, Fourmile Creek is about 3 miles in, a good distance for a tour. Advantages of coming to this forested valley in winter are that it puts you in the mountains without real risk of avalanche, the trees protect you from wind, and the lack of leaves means the sun can get in.

In part because the trail once was a road, the route is wide and is one of the places where the park allows snowmachines when snow cover is adequate. Sometimes you may be breaking trail, and other times you may be on a relatively wide trail broken by snowmachines. Motorized traffic does not appear to be heavy, so the risk of too much noise is low. Bicycles are allowed on the first 5 miles year-round. At 1.7 miles in, the nonmotorized trail diverges from the motorized trail; the Fourmile Creek destination is in a nonmotorized area. A long, skinny loop adds variety.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

Search online for “malcolm drive ak,” or follow these directions. On the Glenn Highway northeast of downtown Anchorage, take the Peters Creek exit (about milepost 22). Turn southeast toward the mountains on Ski Road, and drive 0.8 mile to a T

intersection at Whaley Avenue. Turn right (west) away from the mountains. The road immediately bends left and becomes Chugach Park Drive. Follow Chugach Park Drive 1 mile through a couple of steep grades. Turn left on Kullberg Drive, and go 0.1 mile. Turn right on Sullins Drive, and proceed 0.7

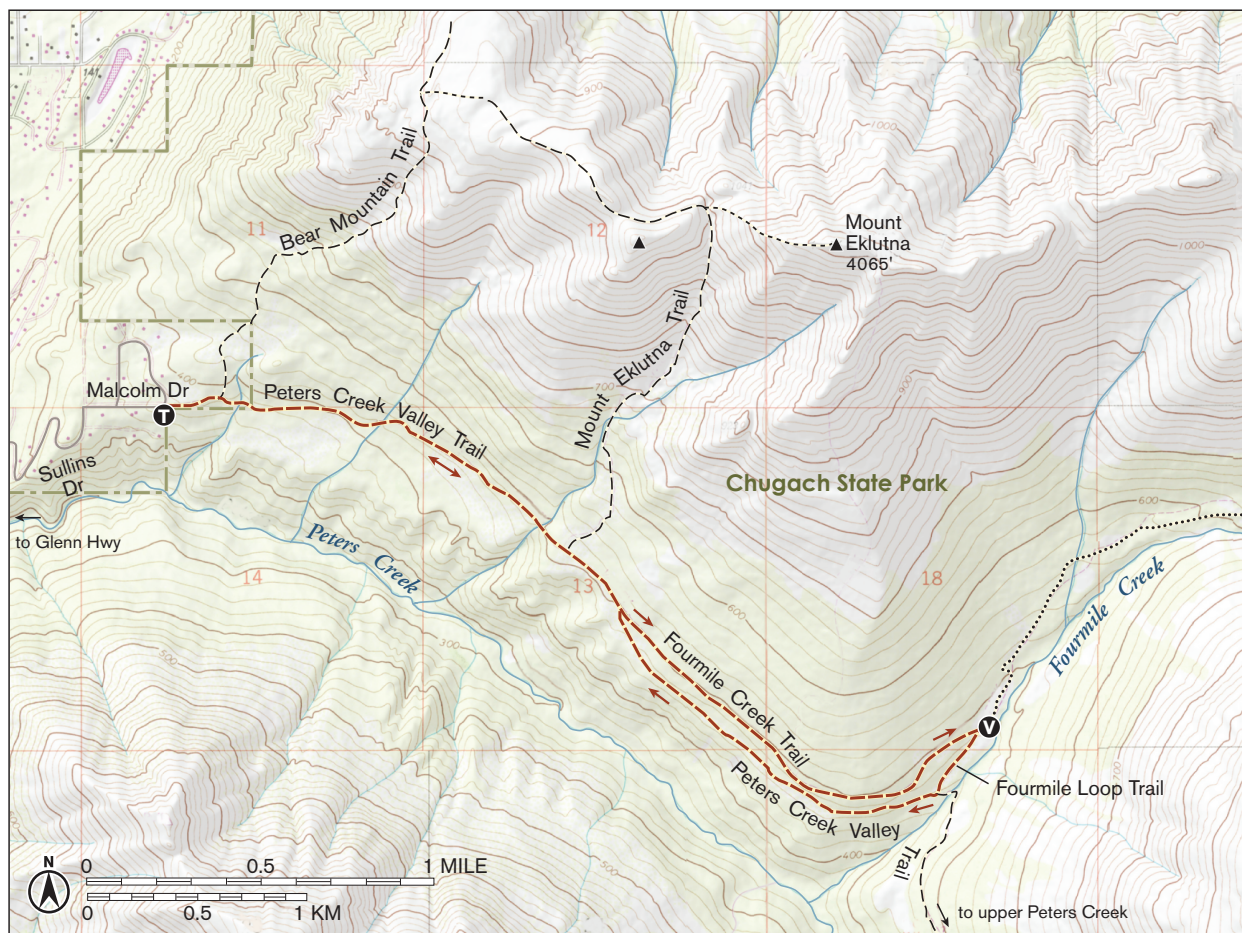
mile through sharp bends to Malcolm Drive. Turn right on Malcolm Drive. The trailhead is 0.2 mile straight ahead, where Malcolm Drive bends to the left.

Parking is little more than a wide spot in the road, accommodating a handful of cars. On busy days, cars park parallel along the road. A private driveway is adjacent to the trailhead; take care not to block it. In fact, the first portion of the trail passes through undeveloped private land. Stay on designated trails, and be respectful of neighbors near the trailhead (keep noise down, stay out of the road, and keep dogs leashed).

ON THE ROUTE

There are no houses in the Peters Creek valley, except at the trailhead, and no development except for the old homestead road that now serves as a trail. It is the wildest forested valley in the park.

From the trailhead, the old road rolls in a rising fashion for 1.5 miles. The grades are moderate, requiring skiers to set their edges into the snow going up (herringbone) and down (snowplow). One grade about 0.4 mile in is the steepest—okay going up but a little dicey on the descent; some may wish to walk this one. Between the upgrades are flatter spots and mild downhill. Snow conditions will make a big





Skiing toward Peeking Mountain on the Peters Creek Trail in March

difference: when the trail is soft, the route will be most forgiving for skiing. When unbroken, it could be perfect for snowshoeing. When icy, don't bother trying to ski this route; use slip-on metal spikes over your boots, and hike it.

Only 0.2 mile in, while still passing through private property, a smaller trail takes off uphill. This steep, mostly summer route heads to "Bear Mountain," a rolling alpine plateau that looks from the lowlands like a summit. The route gets some use in winter, but portions are steep enough to avalanche. At 1.4 miles, the Mount Eklutna Trail takes off uphill. This, too, is a mostly summer route (see Seasonal Options) and crosses areas at risk of avalanche in winter. Near

this junction is the high point of the route (1670 feet). As the trail begins to descend, look for views 10 miles up Peters Creek to Peeking Mountain—the same mountain that "peeks" over the front range in vistas from Anchorage. (Original author Helen Nienhueser named it when her children were small as "Peekaboo Peak," a name the US Board of Geographic Names deemed too frivolous and adjusted for greater formality.)

The Fourmile Creek Trail junction (marked) appears at 1.7 miles. The Fourmile Creek Trail is really the continuation of the old main road, and the Peters Creek Valley Trail diverges to the right. Using one of these trails on the way into the valley

and the other coming back creates the loop portion of the trip. The two trails run parallel at different elevations, but the character of the vegetation alongside each and the views at gaps are different, making the loop desirable. For now, stay straight ahead to take the Fourmile Creek Trail, which rises pleasantly and descends gently a couple of times as it enters the side drainage of Fourmile Creek. A last descent glides into a flat, open clearing—an old homestead site, the cabin removed. To the southeast is a bluff above Fourmile Creek, which has places of open water even in winter. To the southwest is a big open view, with the forested hillside dropping away below the clearing and an impressive snowy mountain ridge rising up on the far side of Peters Creek. Timed right, the sun streams in here, making a good lunch spot. To the north and northeast are the near ridges of Mount Eklutna and the Fourmile Creek valley, rising shiny white above the dark branches of spruce, birch, willow, and cottonwood. The valley of Fourmile Creek curves enticingly out of sight, and likely someone will have broken a trail in that direction (see Extending Your Trip).

This area serves as wildlife habitat and as a place for people to enjoy because the Alaska office of The Conservation Fund was instrumental in brokering a deal to buy up large homesteads and donate the land to Chugach State Park, removing the crumbling cabin and retaining the trails.

The Fourmile Loop Trail (marked) takes off where you entered the clearing. Follow this zippy,

rolling downhill a quarter mile to the Peters Creek Valley Trail, turn right, and follow this trail to close the loop. Then follow the trail you started on back to the trailhead.

EXTENDING YOUR TRIP

Ski or snowshoe up the Fourmile Creek valley, following or diverging from skier or moose trails, and generally climbing at moderate grades to stay on terraces north of the creek. Ski to the end of an old track, approximately as shown on the USGS map, where a small bluff provides a natural break point (elevation 2040 feet) and views. This is at the second drainage bowl on the left. This extension adds about 2.8 miles, for a total of 9.1 miles roundtrip. Locations farther up valley or on open mountain slopes above the trees are prone to avalanche and should be avoided by those not equipped and trained; see Avalanches in the Introduction. Of course, there is the entirety of the Peters Creek valley to explore as well.

SEASONAL OPTIONS

In summer, the alpine beckons. Connect the Bear Mountain and Mount Eklutna Trails as a loop for a rugged ridge ramble. The full loop plus an out-and-back spur to the Mount Eklutna summit (elevation 4065 feet) amounts to 6.5 miles, with 3250 feet of cumulative elevation gain. The Peters Creek Valley Trail can be hard to follow in some areas because it is minimally maintained and gets overgrown, but it warrants exploration as access to a fine, big valley.

37 EKLUTNA LAKE BIKEPACKING

DISTANCE: Up to 26 miles roundtrip

TIME: 2 days

ELEVATION GAIN: Up to 800 feet