

the ridge. On some maps it may be labeled the Chickaloon–Knik–Nelchina Trail. Follow this trail south, then east to the Glenn Highway. This rolling trail has some very wet muck holes created by ATVs, but generally the walking is good. On a clear day, the approach to the Purinton Creek trailhead is spectacular with its panoramic view to the south of the rugged Chugach Mountains.

The two ends of the trail are reasonable for day trips by mountain bike in dry conditions, although each has a long steep hill that requires a tough stint of pushing the bike. Hicks Creek valley is too wet for cycling. The Purinton Creek Trail is hilly. Much more of the route can be used for ski touring, either for day trips from either trailhead or as a several-day trip for experienced skiers and winter campers. The route near the trailheads is likely to be packed by snowmobiles. In midwinter prepare for temperatures to -30°F or colder.

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SYNCLINE MOUNTAIN

Circuit: 26 miles, traverse 24 miles

Allow: 3 days

High point: circuit 4,350 feet; traverse 5,471 feet

Total elevation gain: circuit 2,400 feet; traverse 4,900 feet

Best: June–September

Maps: USGS Anchorage D1, D2

Agencies: Alaska Division of Mining, Land, & Water and U.S. Bureau of Land Management

A network of trails around Syncline Mountain provides access into the backcountry of the Talkeetna Mountains, inhabited primarily by caribou, sheep, miners, and—during the last part of summer—hunters. Two different trips are possible, a circumnavigation of Syncline Mountain and a steep but otherwise straightforward traverse over it. In late June, watch for the Nelchina caribou herd migration through this area. And look for sheep, black bears, grizzlies, coyotes, wolves, and other wildlife any time. In season, there are blueberries and the gamut of Alaska wildflowers. Both trips are rugged and require routefinding skills and backcountry experience.

The part of the circuit that follows Alfred Creek lies along the route of the old Chickaloon–Knik–Nelchina Trail, which provided access to gold mines on Alfred and Albert Creeks before there was a Glenn Highway. In the early 1900s, prospectors traveled Alfred Creek, coming from Knik Arm by way of Chitna Pass (see Trip 48). Gold was discovered on Alfred Creek in 1911, but prospectors were also going beyond Alfred to Albert and Crooked Creeks. When the price of gold was deregulated in the mid-1970s, mining activity began again, and Alfred Creek valley contains an active

operation. The ATV access trail on that side of Syncline Mountain is well used and has been maintained.

Driving directions. One trailhead is at Glenn Highway mile 118.5. Here, turn west (uphill) on Trailhead Road, and drive 800 feet to a parking area (elevation 3,245 feet). The turn off the highway is marked as part of the “Chickaloon–Knik–Nelchina” trail system. The parking area, outhouses, and access road are on a remnant of the old Glenn Highway. To begin the hike, follow the old pavement.

The other trailhead is off Martin Road: drive to Glenn Highway mile 123.3, and turn onto Martin Road (sometimes muddy but drivable by most cars). It is marked by a “Trail” sign. Follow Martin Road 1.4 miles to a substantial ATV trail known as Squaw Creek Road. Park about 0.2 mile along Squaw Creek Road, across a shallow stream ford. Because of mud holes, this “road” is not drivable by street vehicles much beyond the parking area. The ATV trail from Belanger Pass joins Squaw Creek Road another 0.2 mile beyond the parking spot.

The Circuit

The circuit of the mountain follows the valleys of Squaw, Caribou, Alfred, and Pass Creeks and climbs over Belanger Pass to complete the loop. The route follows ATV trails and mining roads most of the way, although one option at the west end of Syncline Mountain takes hikers off the trails for a high-country traverse with views overlooking vast, wild valleys.

The circuit can start and finish at the Squaw Creek Road parking area. The trip distance is about the same, the walking is easier, and there is no need to shuttle cars. However, because the Glenn Highway start offers greater scenic variety, that is the route described here. From the mile 118.5 parking area, walk the old Glenn Highway 0.8 mile west to a former gravel pit north of the road. An ATV track known as Meekins Trail begins at the right (northeast) side of the pit. Follow this sometimes-wet trail over the

Caribou Creek valley, June (John Wolfe, Jr.)



toe of Gunsight Mountain and down into the Squaw Creek valley at 2,700 feet, about 3 miles. Find reasonable camping in another mile in spruce woods just across Gunsight Creek, near where the ATV trail forks.

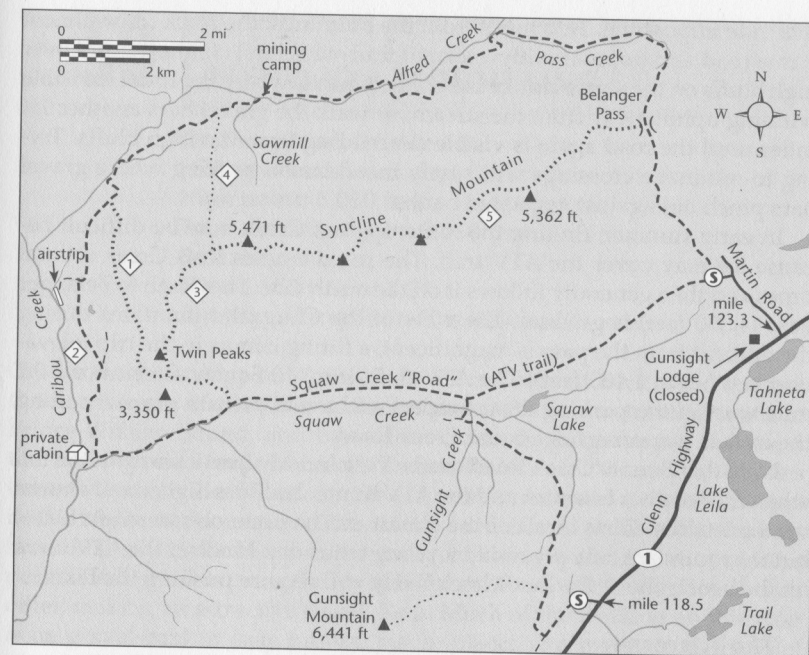
From the trail fork, the route to the left winds through a swampy area, and the right fork heads directly to Squaw Creek and fords it. Go right, and cross the creek (usually no problem). Then head uphill to the Squaw Creek ATV "road," which parallels the creek. Follow it west (left) about 3 miles. When it descends to the level of Squaw Creek, look for a smaller ATV trail on the right.

At this point, there are two options. The side trail leads to the high route around the end of Syncline Mountain (marked 1 on the map). This 3½-mile off-trail trek between the Squaw and Alfred Creek valleys, sometimes brushy and with only intermittent animal trails to follow, is the most difficult but most beautiful part of the circuit. It is also possible to hike from Squaw Creek valley to Alfred Creek valley on a little-used ATV trail that parallels Caribou Creek (marked 2 on the map) instead of crossing the mountain slope. This alternate route is about 2 miles longer, requires 6 to 8 crossings of Squaw Creek, and has some unavoidable boggy areas. It is somewhat easier but less scenic than the off-trail route.

To access the high route, find the ATV side trail about 200 yards before Squaw Creek Road crosses Squaw Creek for the first time. There is more than one trail; if in doubt, follow the road to the first crossing of Squaw Creek and walk back to the trail. Follow this ATV trail uphill and left (west) through brush onto a bench. Leave the trail at its high point, before it starts downhill. Strike out cross-country, heading for the pass between two bumps locally known as Twin Peaks. Stay at about 3,200 feet elevation while contouring around the northern Twin Peak. On your way toward Alfred Creek, look for occasional animal trails through the brush. Flat camping places are hard to find (but not impossible). Water is also difficult to find, as some streams are underground in spots. Listen for running water.

As you round the northwest flank of Syncline Mountain, pick a route and descend into forest to an ATV trail that traverses the base of the mountain at about 2,750 feet. Follow this ATV trail as it bends downhill, paralleling a drainage ravine, and descends to Alfred Creek.

To avoid the high traverse and follow the lower ATV trail around this end of Syncline Mountain, continue on Squaw Creek Road almost to Caribou Creek. The stream crossings are generally easy but cold. Just before a well-used campsite in spruce woods on the north side of the road (about ½ mile before Caribou Creek), follow an ATV side trail straight up the steep bluff. A slightly less steep alternate trail is immediately to the left. Once up the hill, this trail passes through delightful meadows and some very wet areas and is sometimes indistinct. Bear left at forks to stay near the bluff above Caribou Creek and to go west of the tiny lake shown on the map. After little more than 2½ miles, this trail intersects a more substantial ATV trail, placing you about halfway down a long straight grade. (Note: if coming around the mountain counter-clockwise, this junction is not at all



obvious.) A small stream runs in the ATV trail here. Turn right (uphill), and follow this trail as it bends away from the little stream and runs level along the base of Syncline Mountain. Approximately at the point it turns distinctly left and downhill, it becomes common with the off-trail traverse route described above. Paralleling the ravine of an Alfred Creek tributary, descend to Alfred Creek.

Follow the ATV trail a short way up Alfred Creek to a stream that drains the south side of a plateau, obvious on the USGS map. Turn on an ATV trail up this stream and then immediately turn very steeply (still on an ATV trail) up a narrow brushy ridge separating the smaller stream from Alfred Creek. This route gains the top of a plateau, at about 3,150 feet elevation, where the views are grand in all directions. The ATV trail cuts across the plateau's southern edge for a mile and drops to a mining operation near the confluence of Sawmill and Alfred Creeks (elevation 2,900 feet). Avoid the mine buildings, which are private property, and continue up Alfred Creek.

The ATV trail crosses Alfred Creek about six times in the 2 miles upstream of the buildings. Unless the water is high, the easiest option is to follow the trail and walk in wet boots. During high water, it may be preferable to reduce the number of crossings. Alfred Creek is potentially dangerous, as it can be at least knee-deep and very swift. In such conditions, cross at the first wide place upstream of the mining camp, as it becomes increasingly difficult upstream. Cliffs on the south bank appear to make continuing on

that side impossible. Two miles from the buildings, the track (now almost a true road and popular with weekend four-wheelers) climbs up and over high bluffs on the south side of the creek. Recross where the route is visible winding uphill away from the stream, or walk the gravel bars another 1½ miles until the road again is visible descending from the high bluffs. Trying to minimize crossings will surely mean bushwhacking where gravel bars pinch out against vegetated banks.

In early summer, finding the route up Pass Creek may be difficult because ice may cover the ATV trail. The route crosses Pass Creek several times and then generally follows it on the north side. The climb to Belanger Pass (4,350 feet) is gradual. The view of the Chugach Mountains during the descent from the pass is magnificent, a fitting climax to the trip (elevation loss about 1,400 feet). The ATV trail drops to Squaw Creek Road 0.2 mile west of the parking area. Respect and avoid private property along the trail as it approaches Squaw Creek Road.

Note that Squaw Creek Road can be very muddy, particularly in the fall when the weather is wetter and the ATV hunter traffic is higher and churns up the surface. Parts or all of the circuit can be done on mountain bikes, but the routes are only pleasant bicycling when dry. Much of the ATV route on the bench above Caribou Creek likely will require pushing the bike.

The Traverse

The traverse over Syncline Mountain offers nice views of the Chugach and Talkeetna Mountains and avoids most of the mining areas. Hikers up high are more likely to see sheep and caribou. Hiking time averages about 1 mile per hour in this trailless terrain.

To do the traverse, follow the directions for the circuit to Twin Peaks. To climb the mountain (elevation 5,471 feet), head up its southwest ridge (marked 3 on the map). Animal trails make much of the route easy (though steep), and the ridge-top walking is delightful. From the pass between the Twin Peaks to the high point at 5,471 feet is a little over 2 miles. From point 5471, several trips are possible. Stay high, exploring ridges and watching wildlife, returning at day's end to camp. (Camping on the ridge requires carrying water or descending from camp to find water.) Or descend via the steep north ridge (marked 4 on the map) toward the plateau above Alfred Creek and continue the circuit around Syncline Mountain. Another possibility is to follow the ridge tops (marked 5 on the map) east and north to Belanger Pass, about 7 miles (no water), or to gain the ridge top from Belanger Pass as a grand day trip.

The trail up to Belanger Pass also may be used for access to intriguing country northeast of the trips described here. Possible explorations could head east and north from Pass Creek toward South Lake or could follow Alfred Creek toward its headwaters (see USGS maps). Another option in the area is an ascent of Gunsight Mountain (6,441 feet) from Meekins Trail. This may be done summer or winter but may be best in winter when low brush is covered.

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MENTASTA MOUNTAINS

One way loop: 21 miles

Hiking time: allow 3 days

High point: 6,050 feet

Total elevation gain: 3,050 feet

Best: June–August

Map: USGS Nabesna C5

Agency: Wrangell–St. Elias National Preserve

On the northern edge of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve, the headwaters of the Copper River flow north before turning south to Prince William Sound, and two minor creeks begin gathering the water that will become Interior Alaska's Tanana River. A 6,000-foot pass divides these two creeks, Lost Creek and Trail Creek, and creates a traversable gap in the Mentasta Mountains. The creeks have carved valleys that make a fine, if mostly trailless and often rocky, trekking route in and out of the peaks. Both streams cross the quiet Nabesna Road within 2 miles of each other, making an attractive closed loop. Much of the walking on this loop is on gravel bars or easy tundra, but in places you may encounter brief stretches of tussocks or willows and will likely wade braided river channels several times. There is no one trail, though in places all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) or sheep have made segments of trails. Backcountry routefinding skills and an ability to read a topographic map are essential. Watch for Dall sheep, caribou, wolves, bears, moose, pikas, hares, lynx, and glimpses of the high, white Wrangell Mountains.

Driving directions. Take the Tok Cutoff/Glenn Highway to mile 59.8 near Slana (262 miles east of Anchorage), and turn southeast onto the

