

**Key:**

Vertical Gain/Steepness:	<b>E=Easy</b> , 0' to 400' gain per mile
	<b>M=Moderate</b> , 400' to 800' gain per mile
	<b>D=Difficult</b> , 800' to 1200' gain per mile
	<b>X=Extreme</b> , 1200' + gain per mile
Surface/Terrain:	<b>E=Easy</b> , mostly sand, dirt or pine needle covered on established trail
	<b>M=Moderate</b> , small rocks and roots present on established trail
	<b>D=Difficult</b> , loose and rocky on established trail
	<b>X=Extreme</b> , very loose, with large rocks and possibly scrambling required. Trail may not be established or easily recognizable

**Trail Name:**

Swift Creek Trail/Lake of the Clouds Trail (Trail # 1351/1349, TH Elev. 9,240'). Swift Creek trail merges with the Lake of the Clouds trail at about three miles from the parking area. Both trails connect with Rainbow Trail (#1336).

**Trail Location:**

From the Shell station on CO Hwy 69 in Westcliffe, drive west on CR 160 (Hermit Road) for about 6 miles until CR160 veers to the left – continue straight on what appears to be Hermit Road, but is actually CR 164 (Sampson Ridge Road on some maps). Follow CR 164 through several bends for about 1.5 miles to CR 172 (N. Taylor Rd) and turn left (west). Follow CR 172 west until it ends at the Gibson Creek Trailhead parking area. All roads are accessible with a standard 2WD vehicle. Maps: USGS Topo Quads Beckwith Mountain and Electric Peak; USFS San Isabel National Forest; National Geographic Trails Illustrated Map Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

**Trail Summary:**

*Accessibility:* Trails 1349 and 1351 are in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness area and are accessible only via foot and horse travel. Trail 1336 can also be travelled by ATV (50" wide or less), motor bike or bicycle.

*Trail Length and Type:*

Via Rainbow Trail, Swift Creek Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail – 8.3 miles in and out  
Via Rainbow Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail – 11.1 miles in and out

*Vertical Gain and Steepness:*

Via Rainbow Trail, Swift Creek Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail – 2,180' gain; 35% E, 50% M, 15% D  
Via Rainbow Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail – 2,590' gain; 50% E, 50% M

*Surface/Terrain:*

Via Rainbow Trail, Swift Creek Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail – 40% E, 60% M  
Via Rainbow Trail and Lake of the Clouds Trail - 65% E, 35% M

## Trail Experience:

Lake of the Clouds is a popular hiking destination in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness area. There are four pristine mountain lakes set below Spread Eagle (13,423'), Cloud (13,524) and Silver (13,513') peaks. As shown in the Trail Summary above, there are two route alternatives to get to the lakes from the Gibson Creek parking area. The key differences are as follows;

1. Via Rainbow, Swift Creek and Lake of the Clouds – This route is shorter, but steeper, especially between the Swift Creek crossing and junction with Lake of the Clouds trail.
2. Via Rainbow and Lake of the Clouds – This route avoids the steep section on Swift Creek trail, but adds about 1.4 miles one way, as well as an additional 400' of vertical as Rainbow Trail undulates over several ridges.

The description that follows describes the hiking experience of hiking option 1 above. After a short walk up the access trail from the parking area, the first half mile of the hike is along Rainbow Trail. This portion of the hike opens up into a sloped meadow and provides an beautiful vista of the valley below, including an excellent view of Westcliffe/Silver Cliff and Deweese Reservoir. As the trail starts getting back into the trees, you will reach the intersection with Swift Creek Trail.

The first 0.5 mile of Swift Creek Trail is moderately steep and rocky in parts. This portion of the trail works its way up a ridge through moderately dense forest, and eventually begins to traverse the north side of this ridge as it makes almost a B-line towards Swift Creek. The closer the trail gets to the creek (mile 2.3 from the parking area), the flatter it gets, as it goes through beautiful aspen groves and pine stands. The trail in this area is very easy to walk, and could be a destination in itself.

The crossing at Swift Creek is wide, perhaps 30' to 40' wide during midsummer. But, it is very shallow, with many stones and logs to step on as you make your way across. If you don't typically use a walking stick or hiking poles, it is advisable to find one before you get to the crossing, just in case you need a little extra support.

After the creek crossing, Swift Creek Trail quickly reminds you that you are in the mountains and the direction you are going is up! The distance from the creek crossing to the junction with the Lake of the Clouds trail is about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile, and vertical gain in



this section is about 500'. This puts it at the higher end of moderate, but since the vertical gain is not uniform over this section and the steepest parts are very rocky, this section of the trail can be difficult. On top of that, there are a couple of places where you can actually see straight up the trail for 100 yards or so, which can play with your mind a bit, especially if you are packing in. Just put your head down, focus on your footing, and pretty soon you'll be at the junction with Lake of the Clouds Trail!

At the junction of Swift Creek and Lake of the Clouds trails, the trees thin out a bit and open up some spectacular views (to the south) across the Swift Creek drainage, and specifically the NE base of Spread Eagle Peak. The rock formations here are impressive, and provide a hint of more to come. Lake of the Clouds Trail then works it's way back into the trees, and for the most part, will remain tree covered for the remainder of the hike. The distance from the junction to the lower lake is about 1.2 miles, and the incline and trail conditions vary between easy to moderate. At about mile 3.4 you will encounter a few switchbacks along a large rock field. After the switchbacks you will reach a spot where the trail opens up and you get another spectacular view of the base of Spread Eagle Peak – this time from the NW. Here the unbelievable forces of mountain building are on full display as you look at a massive fold in the Paleozoic sedimentary rock.



For an excellent report on the geological history of the Sangre de Cristo range see <https://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1349/pdf/C1349.pdf>

The remainder of the hike is an enjoyable “walk” through the forest. The grade is still in the easy to moderate range, but footing is generally very good. The trail flattens out as you get closer to the lower lake, and essentially ends when you break out of the trees and see the lake directly in front of you.



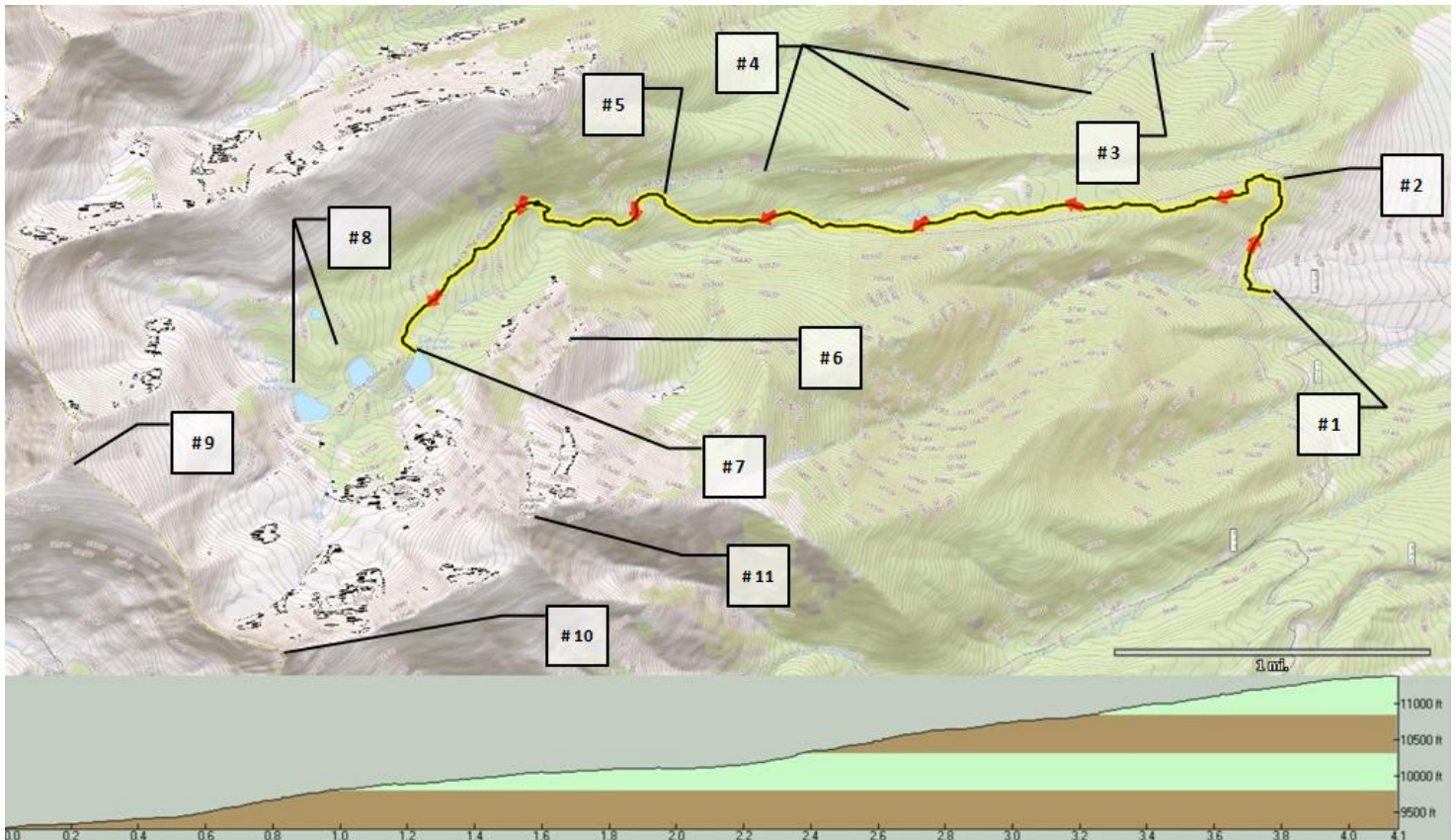


Standing at the north end of the lower lake, looking at the lake, you will notice a trail to your right heading up hill. This trail will take you to the upper lakes, and will add about 0.45 miles and 160' vertical to your hike, depending on how much you explore. This is a beautiful area of the Sangre de Cristos, so take your time and enjoy the views and solitude. While you do, please stay on current trails, and use only pre-existing campsites and fire rings. Remember, Leave No Trace! And, if people before you did not pick up after themselves, please pack up what garbage you can and leave this beautiful area better than you found it!



(full map on next page)

## Map – Swift Creek/Lake of the Clouds (Trail #1351/1349)



- # 1 – Gibson Creek Trailhead/Parking
- # 2 – Rainbow/Swift Creek Junction
- # 3 – Rainbow/Lake of the Clouds Junction
- # 4 - Lower Lake of the Clouds Trail (+ 1.4 mi/400' vertical)
- # 5 – Swift Creek/Lake of the Clouds Junction

- # 6 – Paleozoic Rock Folds
- # 7 – Lower Lake Destination
- # 8 – Upper Lakes (+ 0.45 mi/160' vertical)
- # 9 - Silver Peak
- # 10 - Cloud Peak
- #11 - Spread Eagle Peak

**The Legal Stuff:** The information contained in these trail summaries is intended to be a supplement to the typical tools and references used by people who are well prepared to venture into the mountains. Always carry a map specific to the area you are exploring. Failure to have the necessary experience, physical conditioning, and supplies or equipment can result in injury or death. Trails For All provides no warranties, either express or implied, that the information provided in our published Trail Summaries is 100% accurate or reliable. By using any information provided, you agree to absolve Trails For All from any responsibility for damage or other liability arising from the use of Trails For All Trail Summaries.

