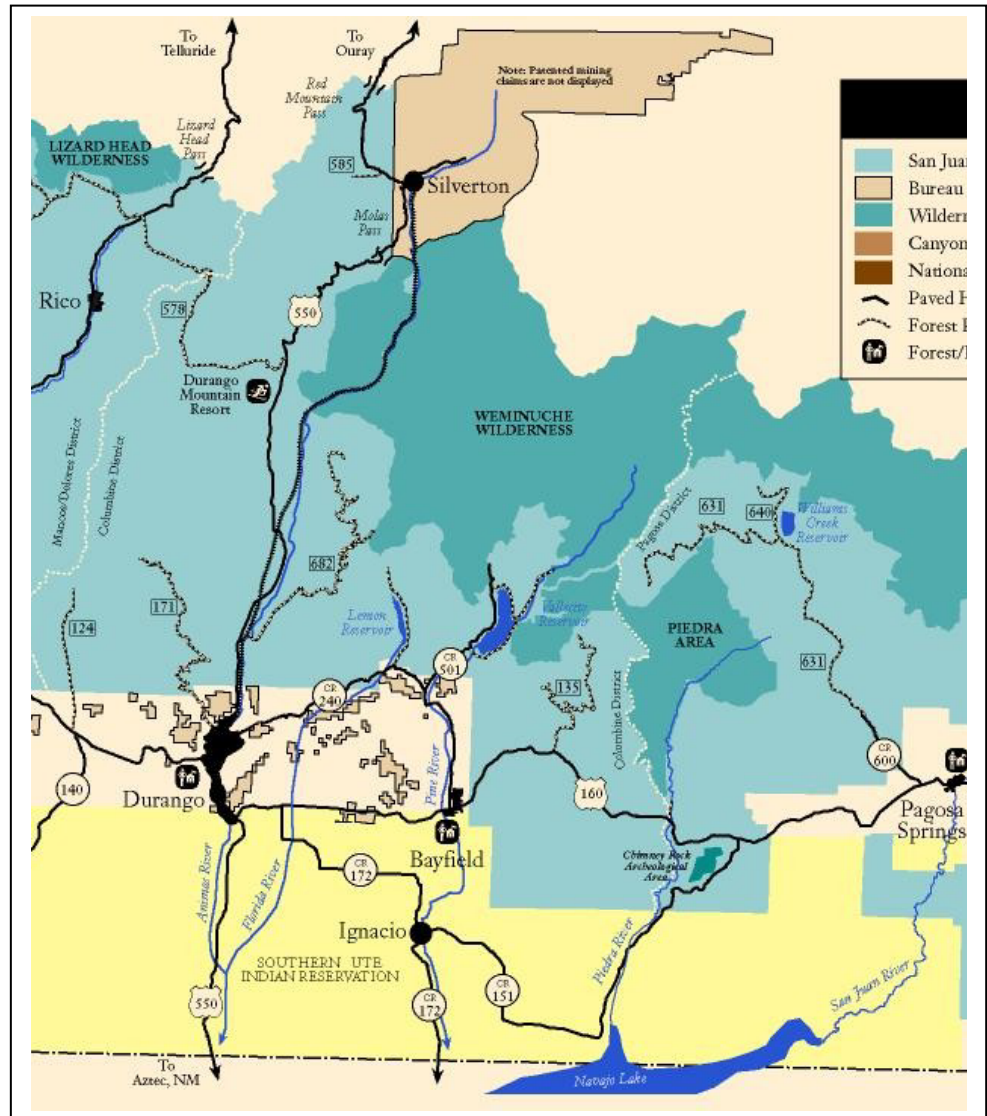


Weminuche Wilderness – reprinted from GORP.org

The Weminuche may be Colorado's wildest land, certainly its largest wilderness at about 490,000 acres. At the heart of the San Juan Range, the wilderness is cut by 80 miles of the Continental Divide Trail. Scores of peaks rise over 13,000 feet, with three towers in the Needles surpassing 14,000.

In a land averaging over 10,000 feet in elevation, alpine meadows and high spruce stands are interspersed with large areas of sharp, granite extrusions and rock slides. The high country originates two drainages that become massive river systems before reaching the sea. To the southwest flow Vallecito Creek, Los Pinos River, Piedra River and the San Juan headwaters, forming the vast San Juan drainage that eventually flows into the Colorado River. To the east, streams like Ute and Weminuche Creeks feed the headwaters of the Rio Grande.

In many respects, the Weminuche is an outdoor adventurer's nirvana. Hikers can lose themselves for days on its 500 miles of trails. Fishermen will find trout hiding in innumerable lakes and streams. Climbers will find the fourteeners in the Needles some of the easier climbs. Several of the thirteeners that dot the wilderness are even greater challenges. Anyone looking for wildlife may spot deer, elk and black bear, and if really lucky, bighorn sheep or cougar.



Hiking

In the massive Weminuche, the hiking possibilities are practically endless. My own experiences have been around the periphery at each end of the Continental Divide Trail and several days up Vallecito Creek. Pull out a map and you will find the hikes sketched out here plus plenty more areas for designing your own route. And pick up a copy of Dennis Gebhardt's *A Backpacking Guide to the Weminuche Wilderness*. Dennis's book is one of the most thorough examinations of a particular wilderness locale I have yet encountered.

Vallecito Creek - 17 miles from Vallecito Campground to Humpback Pass; Elevation gain: 3,604'; Access: Highway 160 east about 15 miles from Durango; at Bayfield, take Route 600 north past Vallecito Reservoir to where road ends at Vallecito Campground.

Vallecito Creek is one of the most spectacular, and popular, routes to penetrate the Weminuche Wilderness. The walk follows the creek almost all the way to its origin at a lake just below the Continental Divide, then jogs east to scale Hunchback Pass at 12,493 feet. Early on, the trail enters a gorge, skirting the wall several hundred feet above the stream. At about 8 miles, Johnson Creek enters from the west, with a trail heading up toward Columbine Pass and Chicago Basin. This makes a great sidetrip of about 6 miles one-way. I had my heart set on peering into Chicago Basin, but the day of my detour was socked in with an early fall snowstorm.

About 12 miles from Vallecito Campground, Sunlight Creek feeds in from the west. The meadows around Sunlight and Rock Creek two miles further make good basecamps for exploring. Rock Lake is about an 8 mile round trip from the latter and Hunchback Pass also makes a good dayhike.

Those not wanting to retrace their steps have a couple of options. One is to pick up the Continental Divide Trail below Hunchback and follow it about 10 miles to the trailhead at Stony Pass, on the north side of the wilderness. Another is to circle east around Rock and Flint Lakes, then out along Flint Creek and the Los Pinos River (a long backpack). Finally, crossing Columbine Pass will ultimately lead west to the Durango-Silverton Railroad, which picks up hikers (see the Chicago Basin hike).

Chicago Basin - 15 miles from the Durango-Silverton Railroad to Vallecito Creek; Elevation gain: 3,560'; Access: Take the railroad to Needleton Bridge. Inform the conductor in advance that you intend to disembark there and get instructions for flagging the train if you intend to return this way. (Check with the railroad in advance as they are apt to change their policies regarding hikers.)

Another very popular route, this trail leads to the famous Needles. Expect to run into the climbing crowd aiming for these pinnacles. The route proceeds up Needle Creek. At about 5 miles, you will find yourself in Chicago Basin, surrounded by towering giants. Fourteeners Mt. Eolus and North Eolus anchor the semi-circle on the west and the equally tall Windom and Sunlight Peaks guard the east. Between them rise thirteeners Peak Eleven and Glacier Point - a sight to behold.

Continuing onward, the trail climbs to 12,680' Columbine Pass in another couple of miles. Then it's six miles down Johnson Creek to the Vallecito Creek Trail, an alternate route to retracing steps to the railroad.

Please note Chicago Basin is a very heavily used area - treat it lovingly.

Continental Divide Trail - The Continental Divide Trail runs 80 miles from Stony Pass in the northwest corner of the Wilderness to Wolf Creek Pass in the southeast. Oddly, three passes, Weminuche, Squaw and Piedra, are the lowest points on the Divide Trail - the route's average elevation exceeds 12,000'. I found the opposite ends, in fact, opposite. Out from Stony Pass, the trail pass through rounded open meadows. At the Wolf Creek end, the trail passes through timbered hillside. In between lies one of the remotest areas of Colorado.

Rainbow Hot Springs: If you are looking for a good soak, hike around 10 miles to [Rainbow Hot Springs](#). The terraced pools are set in rock beside the West Fork of the San Juan River, like two small, perfect diamonds. The hot springs are a mere four-mile hike from [West Fork campgrounds](#).

Fishing

For wild trout fishing in the backcountry, the Weminuche Wilderness is the place to head. The Los Pinos watershed has two major streams, the [Los Pinos River](#) itself and [Vallecito Creek](#). In the wilderness sections of the watershed, the trout run wild - no hatchery-raised fish here. Trout aficionados say a serious angler could pop flies forever along Vallecito's riffles and pools. Both streams require at least a good dayhike in - but head in for a few days to really experience the magic of wilderness trout fishing.

Maybe it's stretching the definition of southwest, but the other side of the Weminuche launches another great trout stream, the [Rio Grande](#). In the headwaters, brown trout run in sparkling, clear pools.