

President's Perspective



I hope everyone is having a fun and active summer. But remember, winter and ski season are never that far away! Linda and I recently spent two weeks exploring Utah and Colorado. The following is our first-hand account of a small victory for Silent Sport enthusiasts over the Motorized Majority.

San Juan Mountains, Colorado. June 5, 2005: The dashed line on the map looks intriguing. It's labeled "California Gulch". The map contradicts itself – the legend says that a dashed line is a "Four-Wheel Drive Road", but

California Gulch is marked as "No Motorized Use". Might be a good hiking opportunity. Let's go check it out!

We drive to the trailhead (the dirt-road-head to be more precise). It's near the old mining ghost town of Animas Forks, and a couple thousand feet above the mining town-turned-tourist town of Silverton. The GPS shows 11,300 feet elevation. We're "way up there". As we're lacing up our hiking boots, we hear the roar of engines. A half-dozen ATVs go screaming by (with nary a helmet among them). Apparently they also thought the dashed line on the map looked intriguing. Oh well. Can't be any worse than Yellowstone in winter. (Jeeping and ATVing are big business around here, taking advantage of the extensive network of old mining roads in this former mining region.)

We begin our hike up California Gulch. A few minutes into the hike, we see the ATVs coming back in our direction. They pass by and roar back down into the valley below. Shortly thereafter, we see the reason for their turnaround: A patch of snow across the road, about three feet deep and a hundred feet long. The tire tracks in the snow show that the ATVs tried their best to get through, but to no avail. We discover that the snow has just enough crust that we can walk on top of it. We make it across the snow patch, and have California Gulch all to ourselves.

The Motorized Majority can overrun Yellowstone in winter, and they can pull strings in Washington to get even more access to the backcountry. But on this day, in California Gulch, the Silent Minority has prevailed!

On closer inspection, we realize that we are the first people here this year. No tracks. No other footprints. No noise! Cool, dry, fresh mountain air. Above the tree line. At this elevation, the sky is bluer, the sun is stronger. We continue our hike, up a gentle grade (which doesn't feel quite so gentle in the thin air). The tops of the 13,000-foot mountains that surround us are not that far above us.

In an ironic twist, about two miles from, and six hundred vertical feet above our starting point, we meet the same fate that stopped the ATVs. The occasional patches of snow on the road have become an unbroken blanket that continues all the way up to California Pass in the distance. We can no longer find the road. The GPS shows 11,850 feet elevation. The calendar says that summer is just around the corner, and a heat wave is in full swing back home, but it's still winter up here. We turn around and retrace our steps. The going is much easier on the way down.

Epilogue: A few weeks later, sitting at my desk at work, and wishing I were still in Colorado, I stumbled across a web site with Four-Wheel Drive Road conditions. It stated:

California Pass is OPEN

Yeah, it is now. But not when we were there. We had it all to ourselves.

Larry