

## Alpine Tunnel- St. Elmo

**Direction to trailhead:** Take U.S. Highway 50 west past Salida to Poncha Springs. At the traffic light (intersection of U.S. 50 and Colorado State Highway (CSH) 285 turn right (north) and continue for 0.58 miles. Turn right onto CSH 285 and drive for 15.59 miles to Chalk Road (County Road)162 just before Nathrop, CO. Turn left (west) onto Co 162 and continue 15.5 miles to Forest Service Road 295. (There will be a large brown sign indicating St. Elmo is straight ahead and FSR 295 goes to the left) Turn left on FSR 295 and drive for approximately 5.6 miles to parking area and trail head. You will pass over a bridge just before you reach the parking area. The trail head is located on the northwestern side of the parking area. About 98 miles one way.

**Length of hike:** 5.7 miles RT

**Beginning elevation:** 11,044 feet

**Elevation change:** 574 feet

**Difficulty:** Moderate

**Description:** This is an especially scenic, interesting and historic trail. It follows an old narrow gauge railroad bed about 3 miles to the site of the south portal of the Alpine Tunnel (Figure 2). In some sections railroad ties can still be seen embedded in the trail (Figure 2). The tunnel connected St. Elmo and Pitkin, Colorado although the railroad continued to Gunnison, Colorado. Construction of the tunnel began in 1879 and the tunnel was open to traffic in 1891. Due to a series of avalanches, accidents and fatalities the tunnel was abandoned in 1910. This tunnel is still the highest in altitude and longest in North America.

About 0.4 miles from the trail head you will reach a locked green metal gate. Walk around the north side of the gate. Continue along the trail as it slowly gains in elevation through a Colorado blue spruce forest. After about 0.33 miles, the trail makes a broad curve to the south then continues back to the northwest. This curve, known as Sawmill Curve, was infamous because of the several train wrecks that occurred here as the trains descended downhill from the south portal of the tunnel. An information sign describes the curve in more detail. After about 1.27 miles the trail turns west and continues in that direction to the end of the hike. After about 2 miles the trail leaves the forest and goes through a much more open area to the end of the trail. This section provides excellent views of the mountains to the east and northeast (Figure 3) and the valley below. Here wild flowers bloom in great abundance and color during late summer (Figure 4). They are found all along the trail.

At the end of the trail you will reach the location of the southern portal of the tunnel (Figure 5). There are two information signs just beyond the portal location that describe the tunnel and the difficulty workers faced during the construction. Return the way you came for a round trip distance of 6 miles.

A note of caution, snow melt in late spring an early summer, and summer thunder storms can result in water flowing across the trail in several locations and also down the trail making the trail slippery and wet.

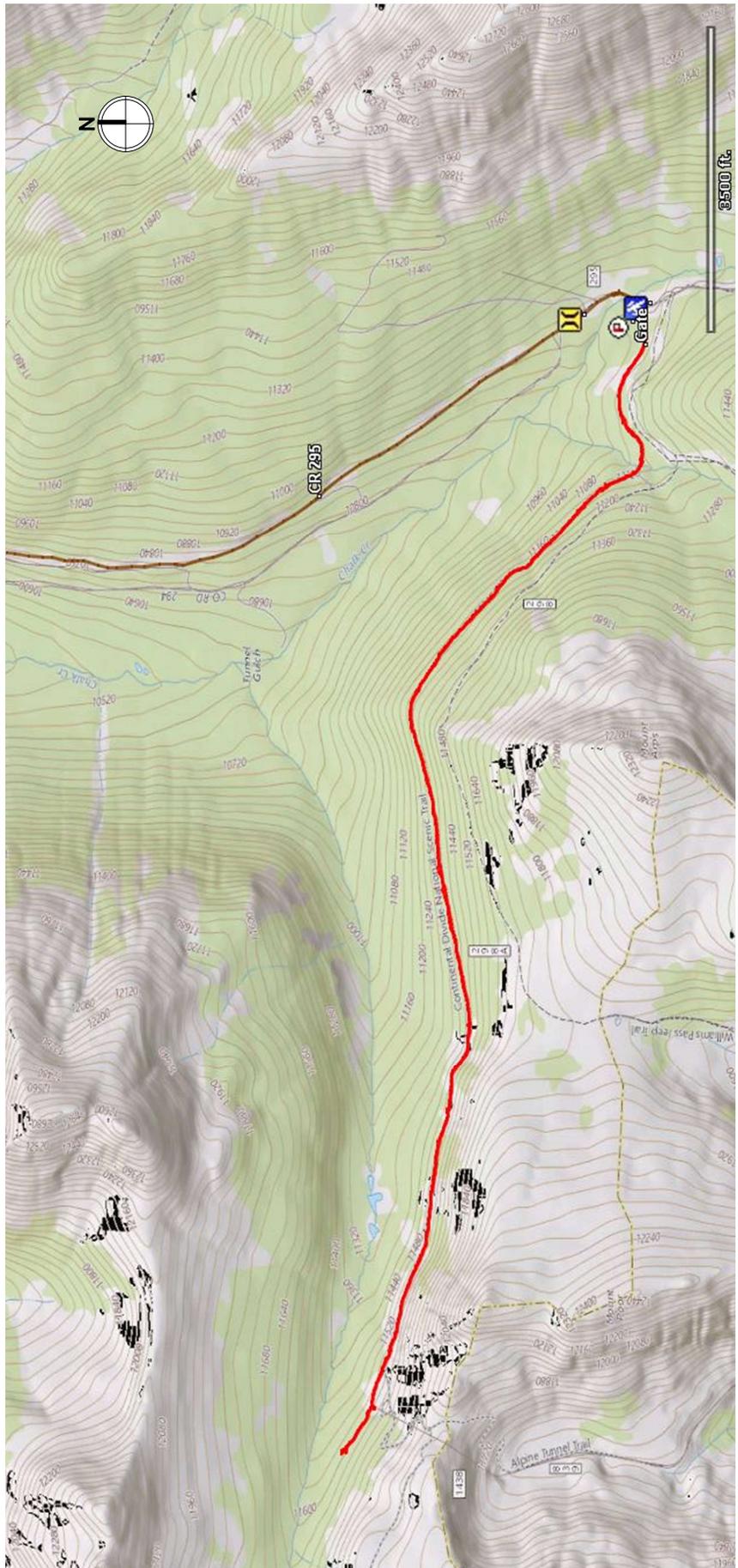


Figure 1. Map of Alpine Tunnel Trail



Figure 2. View of the Trail with Embedded Railroad Ties



Figure 3. View of Mountains



Figure 4. Wild Flowers Growing Along Trail



Figure 5. Location of South Portal, Alpine Tunnel