

The Complete Hiking Guide to Mount Waas Summit

Two Routes Through Utah's La Sal Mountains

A comprehensive guide to reaching the Grand County highpoint via Don's Lake (Beaver Basin) and Miner's Basin routes

Table of Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
 2. [Mountain Overview](#)
 3. [Route Comparison](#)
 4. [Route 1: Don's Lake \(Beaver Basin\) Route](#)
 5. [Route 2: Miner's Basin Route](#)
 6. [Safety and Preparation](#)
 7. [Best Times to Visit](#)
 8. [What to Expect](#)
 9. [Additional Peaks and Extensions](#)
 10. [References](#)
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Introduction

Mount Waas stands as a magnificent sentinel in Utah's La Sal Mountains, offering hikers one of the most rewarding summit experiences in the American Southwest. At 12,331 feet above sea level, this peak serves as Grand County's highest point and

provides breathtaking panoramic views that stretch across the red rock country of Moab, the Colorado River valley, and the distant peaks of Colorado.

The La Sal Mountains, whose name means "The Salt" in Spanish, were christened by the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition in 1776. These explorers, passing through in August when summer temperatures in the valleys below often soar above 110°F, couldn't believe the mountains were covered with snow and assumed they must be covered with salt, like some of the surrounding valleys. This naming reflects the dramatic temperature differential that makes the La Sals such an appealing escape from the desert heat below.

Mount Waas offers hikers two distinct approaches, each with its own character and challenges. The Don's Lake route via Beaver Basin provides a shorter, more direct path to the summit, while the Miner's Basin route offers a longer journey through fascinating mining history and varied terrain. Both routes reward hikers with spectacular alpine scenery, abundant wildflowers in season, and views that rank among Utah's finest.

This comprehensive guide examines both routes in detail, providing the information necessary for hikers to choose the approach that best suits their abilities, time constraints, and interests. Whether you're seeking a challenging day hike or planning a multi-day exploration of the La Sal range, Mount Waas serves as an excellent introduction to these remarkable mountains that form such a dramatic backdrop to Utah's famous red rock country.

Mountain Overview

Mount Waas represents the fourth tallest of Utah's county peaks and stands as the fourth highest summit in the La Sal Mountains, claiming the distinction of being the highest peak in the northern half of this remarkable range [1]. The mountain's elevation of 12,331 feet places it well above the treeline, offering hikers the opportunity to experience true alpine conditions within relatively easy reach of the desert Southwest.

The peak has served as an important landmark for over a century. As early as 1882, Mount Waas functioned as a survey station, and during the 1880s, it hosted a "heliograph station" operated by the Coast Guard and Geodetic Survey to determine altitudes and locations across the region [2]. This historical significance adds depth to

the hiking experience, as modern adventurers follow in the footsteps of early surveyors and explorers.

The name "Waas" itself carries cultural significance, with sources indicating it stems from Ute origin, where "Waas" means "man" in the Ute language. Some accounts suggest Waas was also the name of a Ute Chief, connecting the mountain to the indigenous peoples who first knew these lands [2]. Interestingly, the letters WAAS also correspond to the Wide Area Augmentation System, an extremely accurate navigation system developed for civil aviation, though this appears to be coincidental given the mountain's much older naming.

Geologically, Mount Waas forms part of the La Sal Mountains' laccolitic structure, where magma intruded between sedimentary layers and cooled to form the distinctive dome-shaped mountains visible today. This geological formation creates the dramatic contrast between the high, forested peaks and the surrounding red rock desert that makes the La Sals so visually striking from locations like Arches National Park and Canyonlands.

The mountain's position in the northern La Sal block provides access to several other notable peaks, including Green Mountain, Pilot Peak, and Manns Peak, making it an excellent base for extended explorations of the range. The summit itself features two benchmarks, including a witness benchmark that points to the primary survey marker, testament to its continued importance for navigation and mapping [3].

From a hiking perspective, Mount Waas offers no technical climbing routes, but the approaches involve significant boulder-hopping, loose talus navigation, and route-finding challenges that require careful attention and proper preparation. The mountain's relatively remote location and the rough access roads mean that fewer people attempt this peak compared to more accessible summits, providing opportunities for solitude that are increasingly rare in popular hiking destinations.

Route Comparison

Understanding the differences between the two primary routes to Mount Waas is essential for planning a successful ascent. Each approach offers distinct advantages and challenges, and the choice between them often depends on factors including available time, vehicle capabilities, hiking experience, and personal preferences for route character.

Aspect	Don's Lake (Beaver Basin) Route	Miner's Basin Route
Total Distance	2 miles round trip (from 4WD trailhead)	7-8 miles round trip
Hiking Time	3-4 hours	4-8 hours
Elevation Gain	1,731 feet	2,700+ feet
Difficulty Rating	Moderate	Moderate to Challenging
Trail Type	Off-trail route finding	Old mining roads and trails
Vehicle Access	4WD required to trailhead	4WD required to trailhead
Road Quality	Very rough, technical sections	Rough but more frequently used
Starting Elevation	10,600 feet	9,705 feet
Route Finding	Significant route finding required	Follows established paths initially
Historical Interest	Natural alpine environment	Rich mining history
Crowds	Very few people	Relatively more popular
Best For	Experienced hikers seeking solitude	Hikers interested in history and longer routes

The Don's Lake route via Beaver Basin appeals to hikers who prefer shorter, more direct approaches and don't mind significant route-finding challenges. This path requires navigating without established trails for much of the route, making it ideal for experienced hikers comfortable with off-trail travel. The shorter distance and lower elevation gain make it possible to complete the hike more quickly, but the technical nature of the route and rough access road mean it's not necessarily easier overall.

The Miner's Basin route attracts hikers who enjoy following historical paths and don't mind longer distances. This approach initially follows old mining roads and established trails, making navigation somewhat easier in the early sections. The route passes through Miner's Basin, which hosted a copper mining town from 1898 to 1908, adding historical context to the hiking experience. The longer distance and greater

elevation gain require more time and endurance, but the more established path structure can feel more secure for hikers less comfortable with extensive route finding.

Both routes require high-clearance 4WD vehicles to reach their respective trailheads, though the Beaver Basin road is generally considered more technically challenging. Hikers without appropriate vehicles can park at Don's Lake for the Beaver Basin route (adding 3.5 miles each way) or at the La Sal Loop Road for the Miner's Basin route (adding significant distance and elevation).

Weather conditions affect both routes similarly, with the high elevation making them suitable primarily from mid-June through early October. Snow can linger well into summer on north-facing slopes and in shaded areas, particularly affecting the final approaches to the summit. Both routes involve significant talus and boulder navigation near the summit, requiring careful attention to footing and weather conditions.

Route 1: Don's Lake (Beaver Basin) Route

The Don's Lake route via Beaver Basin represents the shorter but more technically demanding approach to Mount Waas. This route appeals to experienced hikers who appreciate route-finding challenges and prefer the directness of off-trail travel over longer established paths. The approach offers intimate alpine experiences and spectacular views while requiring strong navigation skills and comfort with unmarked terrain.

Access and Approach

Reaching the Beaver Basin trailhead requires careful navigation through a network of forest roads that become increasingly challenging as they approach the mountain. The journey begins in Moab and follows a scenic route through Castle Valley before climbing into the La Sal Mountains' forested terrain.

Detailed Driving Directions:

From Moab, drive 2.5 miles north on U.S. Highway 191 toward the Colorado River. Just before crossing the river, turn right (east) onto Utah Highway 128, also known as the River Road. This scenic highway follows the Colorado River closely, providing beautiful

views of the flowing water and towering red rock canyon walls that make this area famous worldwide.

Continue on Highway 128 for approximately 15.8 miles, enjoying the dramatic scenery as the road winds through the river corridor. Watch for the signs indicating Castle Valley and La Sal Loop Road, and turn right (south) at this well-marked junction. The pavement continues as you begin climbing away from the river valley.

Follow the main road, known as Mountain Valley Road, southward as it gradually gains elevation toward the mountains. The landscape transitions from desert scrub to pinyon-juniper woodland as you climb. At approximately 16.2 miles from the Highway 128 turnoff, the road surface changes from pavement to dirt. Stay left as the pavement ends, continuing on the main dirt road.

The road quality remains reasonable for the next several miles, but begins to deteriorate as you climb higher. At 18.4 miles, turn right onto Forest Road 207, marked with a small sign. Continue climbing through increasingly dense forest, with aspen groves becoming more prominent at higher elevations.

At approximately 20.9 miles, take another right turn, after which you'll soon pass a large State Trust Lands sign. The road becomes noticeably rougher from this point forward, requiring careful attention to vehicle clearance and traction. Continue following the main road to a fork at 22.2 miles, staying right at this junction.

After just one-tenth of a mile, you'll encounter another fork with a sign for Don's Lake pointing left. This represents a crucial decision point for vehicle access. **Vehicles without high clearance and 4WD capability should park here at Don's Lake**, which offers a pleasant camping area near a small alpine lake. The additional hiking distance from Don's Lake to the actual trailhead adds 3.5 miles each way to the total hike distance.

For those continuing with appropriate 4WD vehicles, stay right at the Don's Lake fork. At approximately 23.1 miles, the road forks again, and you should stay right once more. The road becomes increasingly technical from this point, with steep grades, loose rock, and narrow sections that require careful driving.

At 23.5 miles, the road makes a sharp uphill U-turn to the right. This section can be particularly challenging, with erosion making the turn narrow and uncomfortable for larger vehicles. The road surface becomes very rough at 23.8 miles, requiring slow, careful progress over rocky terrain.

At 24.8 miles, you'll reach the first clearing where camping becomes feasible for those who prefer not to drive the final challenging section. However, better campsites await at the actual trailhead, located approximately one mile further up the increasingly deteriorating road. The road finally ends in a streambed at 10,600 feet elevation, providing a small parking area in a forest clearing.

Route Description

The Don's Lake route begins immediately with route-finding challenges, as no established trail leads from the parking area toward Mount Waas. The key to success lies in identifying the correct line of travel and maintaining proper direction throughout the ascent.

Initial Approach (Parking to Saddle):

From the parking area at the road's end, orient yourself toward the north, where Mount Waas becomes visible through the forest. The initial objective involves reaching the prominent saddle between Mount Waas and Green Mountain, known as the Waas-Green saddle. This saddle appears as a distinct low point on the ridge and often retains snow cornices well into summer.

Begin hiking north from the vehicles, following faint deer trails when available. The terrain initially consists of mixed forest with scattered meadows, requiring careful attention to maintain the correct bearing. Look for the most logical line of travel that avoids dense forest and steep terrain while trending generally northward toward the visible saddle.

As you progress, the forest begins to thin, and the terrain becomes more open. Follow a faint deer trail north up into a sloping valley that lies just west of Mount Waas. This valley provides the most reasonable approach route, avoiding the steeper terrain directly below the peak's south face. The valley floor offers relatively easy walking, though occasional deadfall and rocky sections require attention.

The ascent through this valley covers approximately 1,000 feet of elevation gain over roughly one mile of travel. The grade remains moderate throughout most of this section, though it steepens noticeably as you approach the saddle. Navigation becomes more straightforward as you climb higher, with the saddle becoming increasingly prominent and the correct line of travel more obvious.

Saddle Approach and Cornice Navigation:

As you near the Waas-Green saddle, you'll encounter the most technically challenging section of the route. Snow cornices often persist on this saddle well into summer, creating both navigation challenges and potential safety concerns. These cornices form when wind-blown snow accumulates on the lee side of the ridge, creating overhanging formations that can be unstable.

The key to safely surmounting the cornice lies in finding the most stable and least overhanging section. Experience from previous climbers indicates that the far eastern end of the ridge typically offers the safest passage, where the cornice formation is minimal or absent entirely. Approach this area carefully, testing snow conditions and avoiding any sections that appear unstable or heavily overhanging.

During late season or in low-snow years, the cornice may be absent entirely, making this section much more straightforward. However, even without snow, the saddle area can present challenges due to loose rock and steep terrain. Take time to identify the safest route before committing to the final approach to the saddle.

Summit Approach (Saddle to Summit):

Once you've successfully reached the Waas-Green saddle, the character of the route changes dramatically. The remaining 700 feet of elevation gain to the summit involves navigating steep talus and boulder fields that require careful attention to route selection and footing.

From the saddle, turn east and begin climbing toward the Mount Waas summit, which becomes clearly visible from this vantage point. Previous climbers have established a use trail through the talus, marked by cairns and worn paths that help guide the way. However, this trail can be faint in places and may not always follow the most logical route, so maintain awareness of your surroundings and be prepared to make independent route choices.

The talus field consists primarily of loose rock ranging from small stones to large boulders. The key to efficient progress involves identifying stable rocks and avoiding areas where loose material might shift underfoot. Move deliberately and test each step, particularly on steeper sections where a slip could result in a significant fall.

As you climb higher, the terrain becomes increasingly rocky, with larger boulders requiring occasional scrambling. While no technical climbing skills are required, comfort with Class 2 scrambling over stable rock proves essential. The route generally

follows a zigzagging pattern through the talus, taking advantage of the most stable terrain and avoiding the steepest sections.

The final approach to the summit involves navigating through a boulder field where route-finding becomes particularly important. Look for cairns and signs of previous passage, but don't rely entirely on these markers, as weather and rockfall can alter the landscape. The summit itself sits atop a relatively flat area surrounded by the boulder field, making the final few hundred feet somewhat easier than the steep talus below.

Summit Experience

The Mount Waas summit provides one of the finest viewpoints in the La Sal Mountains, with panoramic vistas extending in all directions. The summit area itself consists of a relatively flat, rocky platform marked by two official benchmarks that reflect the peak's historical importance as a survey station.

The primary benchmark, established by the U.S. Geological Survey, sits near the highest point and provides the official elevation measurement. A witness benchmark, located nearby, points toward the primary marker and serves as a backup reference point. These markers connect modern hikers to the long history of exploration and mapping in the region.

Views from the summit encompass an extraordinary range of landscapes and geological features. To the southwest, Mount Peale rises as the highest peak in the La Sal range, while the southern La Sal peaks extend toward the horizon. The northern view reveals Castle Valley spread below, with the distinctive spire of Castleton Tower prominently visible among the red rock formations.

Perhaps most dramatically, the western vista opens across the Colorado River valley toward Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park. On clear days, the view extends far into the distance, encompassing the distinctive red rock formations that make this region famous worldwide. The contrast between the alpine environment of the summit and the desert landscape below creates one of the most striking panoramas available anywhere in the American Southwest.

To the east, the view extends toward the Colorado border and the distant peaks of the Colorado Rockies. This perspective provides context for the La Sal Mountains' position as an isolated range rising dramatically from the surrounding plateau country. The

elevation difference between the summit and the valleys below exceeds 7,000 feet, creating the dramatic relief that makes these views so spectacular.

Descent Considerations

The return journey via the Don's Lake route requires the same careful attention to route-finding and terrain navigation as the ascent. However, several factors make the descent potentially more challenging and deserving of special consideration.

Descending the steep talus field from the summit demands particular care, as loose rock becomes more likely to shift when approached from above. Take time to identify stable footing and avoid rushing, even if weather or time pressures create urgency. The consequences of a fall on steep, loose terrain can be severe, making careful movement essential throughout the descent.

Navigation during descent can prove more challenging than on the ascent, as landmarks appear different when viewed from above. Take time at key decision points to identify the correct route, and don't hesitate to backtrack if you find yourself in terrain that doesn't match your memory of the ascent route. The use trail through the talus may be easier to follow when descending, as the worn path often becomes more visible when viewed from above.

The descent from the saddle back to the parking area requires particular attention to navigation, as the forest environment can make it easy to drift off course. Maintain awareness of your general direction and use prominent landmarks to stay oriented. The deer trails that may have helped during the ascent can be confusing during descent, as they often branch and lead in multiple directions.

Weather considerations become particularly important during descent, as afternoon thunderstorms are common in the La Sal Mountains during summer months. Plan your ascent timing to ensure you're off the exposed summit and upper slopes before typical afternoon storm development. If caught in deteriorating weather, prioritize safety over speed and be prepared to wait out dangerous conditions in sheltered areas.

Route 2: Miner's Basin Route

The Miner's Basin route offers hikers a longer but more historically rich approach to Mount Waas, following paths carved by copper miners over a century ago. This route

appeals to those who appreciate the intersection of natural beauty and human history, providing insights into the challenging lives of early mountain settlers while offering a more structured hiking experience than the Beaver Basin alternative.

Historical Context

Miner's Basin carries a fascinating history that adds depth to the hiking experience. In 1888, copper was discovered in this remote mountain basin, sparking interest from mining companies and prospectors willing to tackle the challenges of establishing operations in such an isolated location. By 1898, a full mining town had been established, complete with residential buildings, mining infrastructure, and supply networks that required tremendous effort to maintain.

The mining community that called Miner's Basin home during the summer months numbered between 75 and 80 residents at its peak. These hardy individuals endured the challenges of mountain living, including harsh winters, difficult supply logistics, and the constant dangers associated with mining operations. The town operated seasonally, with most residents retreating to lower elevations during the severe winter months when snow made access nearly impossible.

The mining operation continued until 1908, when economic realities forced its abandonment. Copper prices and the costs associated with extracting and transporting ore from such a remote location ultimately made the operation unprofitable. The amount of work that went into carving roads, ferrying supplies, and building a functional town in such a challenging environment represents an astounding feat of determination and engineering for its time.

Today, remnants of this mining heritage remain visible throughout the basin, including old mining roads, equipment remnants, and structural foundations. These historical artifacts provide tangible connections to the past and help hikers appreciate the scale of human effort that once transformed this wilderness area. However, visitors should note that some areas within the basin remain private property, and a map at the trailhead clearly shows these boundaries to ensure respectful access.

Access and Approach

The approach to Miner's Basin follows a more straightforward route than the Beaver Basin alternative, though it still requires high-clearance 4WD vehicles and careful

driving on rough mountain roads. The route benefits from more frequent use, making the road somewhat better maintained and easier to follow.

Detailed Driving Directions:

Begin in Moab and drive north on U.S. Highway 191 for 2.3 miles toward the Colorado River. Just before crossing the river, turn right (east) onto Utah Highway 128, following the scenic River Road as it parallels the Colorado River through spectacular red rock canyon country.

Continue on Highway 128 for approximately 15.5 miles, enjoying the dramatic scenery of towering canyon walls and the flowing Colorado River. Watch for signs indicating Castle Valley and La Sal Loop Road, and turn right at this well-marked junction.

Follow the paved road as it climbs away from the river valley, transitioning through different ecological zones as elevation increases. At 10.7 miles from the Highway 128 turnoff, you'll reach an important junction. Turn right (south) onto the La Sal Loop Road, following signs that direct you toward the southern portion of the mountain range.

Continue on the La Sal Loop Road for 4.5 miles, climbing steadily through mixed forest environments. Watch for the Miner's Basin road sign on the left (east) side of the road. This turnoff is well-marked and represents the beginning of the 4WD portion of the journey.

Turn left onto the Miner's Basin road and prepare for rougher driving conditions. While this road requires high-clearance 4WD vehicles, it receives moderate use and is generally in better condition than the Beaver Basin access road. The road climbs steadily through forest environments, with several steep and rocky sections that require careful attention but are manageable for properly equipped vehicles.

Continue for 3 miles to the road's end at Miner's Basin, where you'll find a parking area, pit toilet, and the small pond that gives the area much of its character. The parking area provides space for several vehicles and serves as the staging point for multiple hiking routes in the area. Good camping opportunities exist near the pond for those planning multi-day adventures or early morning starts.

Route Description

The Miner's Basin route to Mount Waas follows a logical progression from established mining roads to increasingly wild terrain as it approaches the summit. This structure makes navigation somewhat easier than the Beaver Basin route, particularly in the initial sections where the path is well-defined.

Initial Section (Trailhead to Mining Road Junction):

From the east side of the parking area near the pond, locate the trail that heads generally south from the basin. This trail, known as the Trans La Sal Trail or Miners Basin Trail #040, begins as a well-defined path that follows the route of an old mining road. The initial walking is pleasant and relatively easy, providing an opportunity to warm up while enjoying the forest environment.

The trail meanders south through mixed coniferous forest, crossing a small stream within the first few minutes of hiking. This stream crossing is typically easy, though it may require careful rock-hopping during high water periods in early summer. The trail surface consists of packed earth and rock, generally providing good footing though occasional muddy sections may develop during wet periods.

Continue following the obvious trail as it gradually gains elevation through the forest. The grade remains moderate during this initial section, making for comfortable hiking while you adjust to the altitude and mountain environment. After approximately 20 to 30 minutes of hiking, the trail begins making a hard right turn (west) around a prominent gully.

This turn represents a crucial navigation point, as the route to Mount Waas diverges from the main trail at this location. Just before the trail makes its hard right turn, look for an old mining road that branches off to the left. This junction may not be immediately obvious, as the mining road can appear faint compared to the main trail, but careful observation will reveal the worn path heading in a more direct line toward the mountain.

Mining Road Section (Junction to Ridge):

Take the left branch onto the old mining road, which immediately begins climbing more steeply toward the ridge above. At the first minor junction encountered on this mining road, stay left to maintain the correct route toward Mount Waas. The road

surface becomes rougher and less defined as you climb higher, but the general route remains clear.

The old mining road provides fascinating insights into the engineering challenges faced by early miners. The grade has been carefully calculated to allow pack animals and equipment to navigate the steep terrain, resulting in a route that switchbacks strategically up the mountainside. While the road surface has deteriorated over the decades, the underlying engineering remains sound and provides a logical route up the mountain.

As you climb higher on the mining road, the forest begins to thin and views start opening up toward the surrounding peaks. The road makes several switchbacks as it gains elevation, each turn providing new perspectives on the basin below and the peaks above. Stay on the main road and ignore lesser-used side roads that branch off at various points, as these typically lead to old mining sites rather than toward the summit.

The mining road becomes increasingly faint as you approach the ridge, but the general route remains clear. Look for cairns and signs of previous passage, though don't rely entirely on these markers as they may be displaced by weather or wildlife. The road eventually reaches the ridge at a prominent saddle, providing the first clear views of Mount Waas and the route ahead.

Ridge Section (Mining Road End to Weather Station):

Upon reaching the ridge, the character of the route changes significantly. The old mining road effectively ends at this point, and the remainder of the route follows a combination of use trails and cross-country travel along the ridge toward Mount Waas.

From the ridge, turn left (north) and begin following the ridgeline toward the prominent peak visible ahead. This peak, designated as elevation 12,183 feet on topographic maps (sometimes listed as 12,185 feet on older maps), hosts an old weather station that serves as an important landmark and intermediate objective.

The ridge walking involves navigating through a combination of rocky terrain, scattered trees, and alpine meadows. While no formal trail exists, the route generally follows the high ground along the ridge crest, taking advantage of the most stable terrain and clearest passage. The walking can be challenging due to loose rock and occasional scrambling sections, but the route-finding remains relatively straightforward as long as you maintain your position along the ridge.

As you approach the weather station peak, the terrain becomes increasingly rocky, requiring more careful attention to footing and route selection. The weather station itself sits prominently on the summit, a somewhat surprising man-made intrusion in this wilderness setting. The station likely requires helicopter servicing, highlighting the remote and challenging nature of this location.

The weather station peak provides excellent views in all directions and serves as an ideal rest stop before tackling the final approach to Mount Waas. From this vantage point, the route to Mount Waas becomes clearly visible, though the challenges ahead also become apparent.

Final Approach (Weather Station to Summit):

From the weather station peak, the route to Mount Waas involves a descent to a saddle followed by the final climb to the summit. This section represents the most challenging portion of the entire route, requiring careful navigation through steep, rocky terrain.

Begin by descending northeast from the weather station toward the saddle between the weather station peak and Mount Waas. This descent involves losing approximately 300 feet of elevation, which can be frustrating after the long climb to reach the weather station. However, this elevation loss is necessary to access the final approach route to Mount Waas.

The descent to the saddle involves navigating steep, loose terrain that requires careful attention to footing. Take time to identify stable rocks and avoid areas where loose material might shift underfoot. The route generally follows the fall line down the slope, but don't hesitate to traverse to find more stable terrain when necessary.

Once you reach the saddle, the final 600-foot climb to the Mount Waas summit begins. This section involves the most challenging terrain of the entire route, with steep, rocky slopes and significant boulder-hopping required. The route follows a series of switchbacks up the steep ridge, taking advantage of the most stable terrain available.

Navigation through this final section requires careful attention, as the route weaves between large boulders and through rocky terrain that can be confusing. Look for cairns and signs of previous passage, but maintain awareness of the general direction and don't rely entirely on these markers. The key involves maintaining progress toward the summit while avoiding terrain that becomes too steep or unstable.

The final approach to the summit involves scrambling through a boulder field where route-finding becomes particularly important. The summit itself sits atop a relatively flat area, making the final few hundred feet somewhat easier than the steep approach below.

Navigation Challenges and Solutions

The Miner's Basin route presents several navigation challenges that require attention and preparation. While the initial sections follow established paths, the upper portions of the route involve significant route-finding that can be confusing, particularly in poor weather conditions.

The most critical navigation point occurs at the junction where the route leaves the main Trans La Sal Trail to follow the old mining road. This junction can be easy to miss, particularly if you're focused on the main trail rather than watching for the less obvious mining road. Take time to study the terrain carefully at this point and don't hesitate to backtrack if you find yourself continuing on the main trail past the gully.

The mining road section, while generally clear, includes several junctions where side roads branch off toward old mining sites. The key to staying on route involves following the most well-used path that continues climbing toward the ridge. When in doubt, choose the route that maintains the most direct line toward the visible ridge above.

Ridge navigation requires maintaining awareness of your general direction while adapting to the terrain. The ridge crest provides the most logical route, but occasional detours around obstacles or difficult terrain may be necessary. Use the weather station as a prominent landmark to maintain proper direction during this section.

The final approach from the weather station to Mount Waas presents the most significant navigation challenges, as the route weaves through complex rocky terrain. Take time at key decision points to identify the best route forward, and don't hesitate to backtrack if you find yourself in terrain that becomes too difficult or dangerous.

Seasonal Considerations

The Miner's Basin route experiences significant seasonal variations that affect both accessibility and hiking conditions. Understanding these variations helps in planning

the optimal timing for your ascent and preparing for the conditions you're likely to encounter.

Spring conditions typically persist through June, with snow remaining common on north-facing slopes and in shaded areas well into summer. The mining road sections may be clear while the upper elevations remain snow-covered, creating mixed conditions that require careful assessment. Snow can actually make some sections easier by covering loose rock, but it also creates avalanche risks and navigation challenges.

Summer conditions from July through September generally provide the most favorable hiking weather, with warm days and cool nights typical at elevation. However, afternoon thunderstorms are common during this period, making early starts essential for safety. The exposed ridge sections and summit area become particularly dangerous during electrical storms.

Fall conditions can be excellent for hiking, with cooler temperatures and fewer crowds, but weather can change rapidly and early season storms may bring significant snowfall. The aspen groves at lower elevations provide spectacular fall color, adding visual appeal to the hiking experience.

Winter access is generally not feasible due to road closures and extreme avalanche danger on the upper slopes. The La Sal Mountains receive significant snowfall, and the exposed nature of the upper route makes winter ascents extremely dangerous for all but the most experienced mountaineers with proper equipment and training.

Safety and Preparation

Mount Waas presents several safety challenges that require careful preparation and appropriate equipment. The combination of high elevation, remote location, challenging access roads, and technical terrain creates an environment where proper planning becomes essential for a safe and successful ascent.

Essential Equipment

Navigation Equipment: - Topographic maps: Mount Waas and Warner Lake USGS 7.5' quadrangles - Compass and GPS device or smartphone with offline maps - Altimeter for elevation reference - Route description and waypoints

Clothing and Protection: - Layered clothing system for variable mountain weather - Waterproof and windproof outer shell - Insulating layers for cold conditions - Sun hat and warm hat for temperature extremes - Sunglasses and high-SPF sunscreen for intense alpine sun exposure - Sturdy hiking boots with ankle support for rocky terrain

Safety and Emergency Equipment: - First aid kit appropriate for remote mountain travel - Emergency shelter (space blanket or bivy) - Headlamp with extra batteries - Whistle for emergency signaling - Emergency communication device (satellite communicator recommended)

Hiking Equipment: - Trekking poles for stability on loose terrain - Minimum 3 liters of water per person (no water sources on route) - High-energy food for extended hiking - Backpack appropriate for day hiking with gear

Vehicle Preparation

Both routes to Mount Waas require high-clearance 4WD vehicles, making vehicle preparation and capability assessment crucial for safe access. The rough mountain roads can damage unprepared vehicles and strand hikers far from assistance.

Vehicle Requirements: - High ground clearance (minimum 8 inches recommended) - 4WD capability with low-range gearing - Skid plates to protect undercarriage - Good tires with adequate tread depth - Full-size spare tire and tools for tire changes

Pre-Trip Vehicle Inspection: - Check all fluids and top off as necessary - Inspect tires for wear and proper inflation - Test 4WD system operation - Ensure emergency equipment is present (jumper cables, tow strap, tools) - Carry extra water and emergency supplies in vehicle

Driving Considerations: - Allow extra time for slow progress on rough roads - Yield right-of-way to descending vehicles on narrow sections - Avoid driving during or immediately after heavy rains - Consider turning around if road conditions exceed vehicle capabilities

Weather Awareness

Mountain weather in the La Sal range can change rapidly and dramatically, creating dangerous conditions for unprepared hikers. Understanding typical weather patterns and recognizing warning signs helps ensure safe decision-making throughout your hike.

Seasonal Weather Patterns: Summer weather typically features warm, sunny mornings with afternoon thunderstorm development. These storms can bring lightning, heavy rain, hail, and rapid temperature drops that create hypothermia risks. Plan early starts to be off exposed terrain before typical afternoon storm development.

Lightning Safety: The exposed ridges and summit areas of Mount Waas become extremely dangerous during thunderstorms. Lightning strikes are a serious risk on high, exposed terrain. If thunderstorms threaten, retreat immediately to lower elevations and avoid ridge crests, isolated trees, and metal objects.

Hypothermia Prevention: Mountain temperatures can drop rapidly, particularly during storms or at night. Maintain dry clothing, consume adequate calories, and recognize early hypothermia symptoms including uncontrollable shivering, confusion, and loss of coordination.

High Altitude Considerations: The summit elevation of 12,331 feet can cause altitude-related problems for some hikers, particularly those coming from sea level. Symptoms of altitude sickness include headache, nausea, fatigue, and dizziness. Ascend gradually when possible and descend immediately if symptoms worsen.

Emergency Procedures

The remote location of Mount Waas means that emergency assistance may be hours away, making self-rescue capabilities and emergency preparedness essential for all hikers.

Communication: Cell phone coverage is unreliable throughout most of the route, making satellite communication devices valuable for emergency situations. Consider carrying a personal locator beacon (PLB) or satellite messenger for emergency communication.

Injury Response: Serious injuries on Mount Waas may require helicopter evacuation due to the remote location and difficult terrain. Carry a comprehensive first aid kit and ensure at least one group member has wilderness first aid training.

Getting Lost: If you become lost or disoriented, stop immediately and assess your situation. Use map and compass to determine your location, and don't continue moving unless you're confident of your direction. Signal for help using whistle blasts or mirror flashes, and prepare to spend the night if necessary.

Vehicle Breakdown: Vehicle problems on the access roads can strand hikers far from assistance. Carry emergency supplies in your vehicle, including extra water, food, warm clothing, and signaling devices. Consider traveling with multiple vehicles when possible.

Best Times to Visit

The timing of your Mount Waas ascent significantly affects both the difficulty and enjoyment of the experience. Understanding seasonal conditions, weather patterns, and access limitations helps ensure optimal timing for your adventure.

Seasonal Access

Summer Season (July - September): Summer provides the most reliable access and favorable hiking conditions. Roads are typically clear of snow, though muddy conditions may persist in shaded areas following heavy rains. Daytime temperatures are warm but comfortable at elevation, with cool nights that may require warm clothing.

July represents the peak of the hiking season, with the most stable weather and clearest access roads. Wildflowers reach their peak during this period, adding spectacular color to the alpine environment. However, afternoon thunderstorms are common and require careful timing of ascents.

August continues the favorable summer conditions while offering slightly more stable weather patterns. Water sources may become scarce during dry years, making adequate water carrying essential. The aspen groves at lower elevations begin showing early fall color toward the end of the month.

September offers excellent hiking conditions with cooler temperatures and fewer crowds. Early fall weather can be ideal for hiking, though the possibility of early season storms increases as the month progresses. Aspen fall color reaches its peak, providing spectacular scenery throughout the approach routes.

Shoulder Seasons (June and October): June conditions vary significantly depending on winter snowpack and spring weather patterns. Early June may still have significant snow on north-facing slopes and in shaded areas, while late June often provides excellent conditions. Road access may be limited by snow or mud during early June.

October can provide outstanding hiking conditions with crisp, clear weather and spectacular fall colors. However, weather becomes increasingly unpredictable, and early season storms can bring significant snowfall. Be prepared for winter conditions and have flexible plans that allow for weather-related changes.

Winter Season (November - May): Winter access is generally not feasible due to road closures and extreme avalanche danger. The La Sal Mountains receive substantial snowfall, and the exposed nature of both routes makes winter ascents extremely dangerous. Even experienced mountaineers should approach winter travel in this area with extreme caution.

Daily Timing

Early Morning Starts: Plan to begin hiking by sunrise or earlier during summer months to avoid afternoon thunderstorms. Early starts also provide the best lighting for photography and the most comfortable temperatures for hiking. The alpine environment offers spectacular sunrise views that reward early risers.

Weather Window Assessment: Check weather forecasts carefully before departing, and be prepared to postpone or cancel your trip if threatening weather is predicted. Mountain weather can change rapidly, so maintain flexibility in your plans and be prepared to turn back if conditions deteriorate.

Seasonal Daylight Considerations: Summer provides long daylight hours that allow for leisurely pacing and extended time on the summit. However, don't let long days encourage complacency about timing, as afternoon storms can still create dangerous conditions regardless of available daylight.

What to Expect

Understanding what to expect during your Mount Waas ascent helps set appropriate expectations and ensures proper preparation for the challenges and rewards ahead.

Physical Demands

Both routes to Mount Waas require good physical conditioning and endurance appropriate for mountain hiking. The combination of elevation gain, rough terrain, and

high altitude creates a challenging environment that demands respect and preparation.

Cardiovascular Fitness: The sustained elevation gain and high altitude environment place significant demands on cardiovascular fitness. Regular aerobic exercise, including hiking with a loaded pack, provides the best preparation for the sustained effort required.

Strength and Stability: The rocky terrain and boulder-hopping sections require good leg strength and balance. The loose talus and uneven surfaces demand constant attention to footing and the ability to recover from occasional slips or stumbles.

Endurance Requirements: Plan for hiking times that may exceed your normal pace due to altitude, terrain challenges, and route-finding requirements. The Miner's Basin route, in particular, requires sustained effort over 4-8 hours of hiking.

Terrain Challenges

Talus and Scree Navigation: Both routes involve significant sections of loose rock that require careful attention to footing and route selection. Learn to identify stable rocks and avoid areas where loose material might shift underfoot.

Boulder-Hopping: The upper sections of both routes require scrambling over and around large boulders. While no technical climbing skills are required, comfort with Class 2 scrambling over stable rock proves essential.

Route-Finding: Neither route follows established trails for the entire distance, requiring navigation skills and comfort with cross-country travel. The ability to read terrain and identify logical routes becomes crucial for success.

Scenic Rewards

Panoramic Views: The summit of Mount Waas provides some of the finest views available in the American Southwest, encompassing red rock country, distant mountain ranges, and the dramatic contrast between alpine and desert environments.

Wildflower Displays: Summer hiking offers spectacular wildflower displays, including Utah Blue Delphinium and numerous other alpine species that create colorful meadows throughout the approach routes.

Wildlife Encounters: The La Sal Mountains support diverse wildlife populations, including deer, elk, black bears, and numerous bird species. While encounters are generally positive, maintain appropriate awareness and food storage practices.

Solitude Opportunities: The challenging access and technical nature of both routes mean that Mount Waas receives fewer visitors than more accessible peaks, providing opportunities for solitude that are increasingly rare in popular hiking destinations.

Additional Peaks and Extensions

Mount Waas serves as an excellent base for exploring other peaks in the La Sal range, offering opportunities for extended adventures and multi-day explorations for ambitious hikers.

Green Mountain

Green Mountain sits immediately adjacent to Mount Waas and can be easily added to either route with minimal additional effort. From the Waas-Green saddle on the Beaver Basin route, Green Mountain requires only a short detour and provides excellent views with minimal additional elevation gain.

Pilot Peak

Pilot Peak lies south of Green Mountain and can be reached via a short ridge walk from Green Mountain. This extension adds moderate distance and elevation gain while providing access to additional viewpoints and the satisfaction of multiple summit achievements.

Manns Peak

Manns Peak, at 12,272 feet, represents another significant summit accessible from the Beaver Basin area. The approach involves following old pack trails and provides opportunities for longer adventures in the northern La Sal range.

Multi-Day Options

Circumnavigation Routes: Expert hikers can attempt circumnavigation routes around Mount Waas that involve traversing challenging terrain and require advanced route-

finding skills. These routes should only be attempted by experienced mountaineers with proper equipment and emergency preparedness.

Camping Opportunities: Both Beaver Basin and Miner's Basin offer excellent camping opportunities for those planning multi-day adventures. Camping allows for early morning starts, extended exploration, and the opportunity to experience the mountain environment during different times of day.

Peak Bagging Combinations: The La Sal range offers numerous peaks that can be combined into extended adventures for dedicated peak baggers. Consider combining Mount Waas with other La Sal summits for comprehensive exploration of the range.

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This guide represents a compilation of information from multiple sources and personal accounts. Mountain conditions can change rapidly, and hikers should always exercise appropriate caution and judgment. The author and sources assume no responsibility for accidents or injuries that may occur during hiking activities.

Disclaimer: This hiking guide is provided for informational purposes only. Mountain hiking involves inherent risks, and conditions can change rapidly. Hikers assume full responsibility for their safety and should possess appropriate skills, equipment, and judgment for mountain travel. Always check current conditions and weather forecasts before departing, and be prepared to turn back if conditions become unsafe.