

Sullivan Gulch

Whoever said, “You can’t squeeze water from a stone,” never struck the sweet spot southwest of Basin that cracked the cleft of Sullivan Gulch. One of few creeks in the Boulder area that retain a population of West slope Cutthroat trout, Sullivan Gulch cradles a history in its upper reaches from wood-cutting in the 1890s to cattle grazing and firewood gathering more recently. But it’s the first mile of narrow trail that releases the sweetest trickle down past the chin of Swede Park.

Begin in a meadow that catches the weep shallowing out into the Boulder River. From the trailhead, part the roadside fringe of trees to find a dirt path leading to a trail sign. Behind the sign is a fence, and behind the fence is a quagmire of crusted hummocks scoured by rills of water through tall grass. With balance and a bit of fancy footing you could braid your way between clumps of willow, juniper, alder, and aspen, and keep your boots dry. But to avoid any ankle sloshing, step around mud puddles to the fence gate, then totter back across a seep to the meadow’s left edge where a subtle footpath hugs the base of the hill.



Keep far left against the treed slope. The trail fades in and out, pinching and widening through short stretches of leveled rockfall and grassy path. The first quarter-mile climbs mildly and funnels you into a creek bottom bound by high slopes. Firs crowd into the middle ground as the narrowing meadow swells and dips softly between tumbled rocks.

You may lose the trail and pick it up again. Keep the creek on your right, the gulch’s forested shoulder on your left, veering sometimes toward water, arching occasionally a few steps upslope into trees. You neither cross the creek nor climb steeply before the half-mile mark. If you are deftly dodging

cowpies while progressing up-channel, you are on course.

And on cue for the spell that begins to spin itself, for here hides the sweet spot of Sullivan Gulch. Aspens glimmer. Water burbles past sheer, massive skirts of scree winging up through streamers of trees to blocky bluffs. The trail is a muddle of rock and runoff, liquid and light, where a parade of seven dwarves may fail to surprise you.

Then the gulch really tightens. Lapping beneath the wall of scree on your right the creek is dressed with plants that love their feet wet: groundsel, currants, and cow parsnip, low clumps of dogwood and willow, rose brambles higher up the bank.

At the half-mile mark, rock-hop across the shallow water toward an aspen grove. There is just space enough in this gulch for its creek and the wide dirt trail tilting alongside it. Stroll the bank, but as you hit the first mile you must make a choice: Cross the creek a second time and continue forward along Sullivan Gulch, or climb the wide grassy road on your right up a side gully another mile to Swede Park.

A nod perhaps to the population of Swede wood-choppers resident a few miles west in Bernice in the 1890s, Swede Park floats you up from the dewy creek-bottom to an open plateau of sage and Douglas fir, a prime destination for a picnic. The trail to Swede Park follows a slender riffle a quarter mile before it curves up steeply to the right. For a half mile more the abrupt path drifts between obvious and elusive before it begins to crest into a meadow more than 800 feet above the trailhead. Trace your way a final quarter mile toward the opposite end of the clearing as Swede Park arcs in a half-moon toward a vista north over Red Rock Creek snaking into the Boulder River.

If you’d rather not leave the hollow of Sullivan Gulch, ignore the climb to Swede Park and cross left across the creek instead 1 mile from the trailhead. Skirt a rock knob and a single fir tree rising from the center of the gully. The trail is wide and green as a park boulevard even into September.

Within a tenth of a mile climb a brief hill of loose shale to the top of an artificial earthen dam. Rumored to have been built decades ago by Basin residents to create a fishing pond for their children, the dam separates the lower, lush notch of Sullivan Gulch from its upper channel. The pond today is a grassy, silted ghost of its former self. But the remaining dam may have helped to distinguish this waterbody from most others in the area: While rainbow trout occupy the lower mile of creek, a small population of westslope cutthroat, uncommon in the area, have been recorded for 1.5 miles upstream of the barrier.

Beyond the dam, the nature of Sullivan Gulch shifts. Linger in the fluid, intimate cleft of the lower channel or continue past grazed, timbered slopes toward a steeper climb.

At a mile and a quarter from the trailhead, the track curves away from the water to meet Sunnyside Road (U. S. Forest Service Road #105) entering on the left through Kleinsmith Gulch. A large sign restricts motorized use through the area from October 15 through December 1. Hook around the sign on the wide road back toward the creek. Wind along level ground through a wetland with live and dead standing lodgepole pine. Just short of the 2-mile mark, another gulch enters from the left.

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks defines this side drainage as Sullivan Gulch; other maps reserve the name for the drainage along the road, which bypasses the side channel to fork in 0.1 miles. If you choose the left fork, prepare yourself for an ascent up a gully on a rutted, muddy ATV road so steep in frequent sections you may gasp and strain and curse the human body plan that cheated you with bipedal motion instead of gifting you with four-wheel drive. There is no view to speak of. Though the track flattens after 1.25 miles where it hooks sharply left, your eventual destination is another road.

Bear right instead at the fork to link to Bear Gulch or Berrys Meadows. For a quarter mile climb gently through lodgepole pine and whortleberry to the powerline, then hike the line as the view opens, climbing abruptly for prolonged stretches. About 3 miles from the trailhead at a curve in the road, a small clearing marks a notable turn-around offering views of Pole and Jack Mountains.

To gain the high point of the trail, continue a quarter mile through a gate to a "T" junction. Reject the right branch; the trail spits you back out at the powerline above a sheer and dizzying descent. Turn left instead and drop half a mile into the drainage that connects you to Bear Gulch or Berry's Meadows.

Wherever you choose to turn around, make your way back down the lower channel. Sweating past scree, sparkling with sun, Sullivan Gulch bleeds water. Take your cue from the creek-side brush and sop the trickle.



Distance: 2 miles one-way to Swede Park; 5 miles one-way to Bear Gulch Trailhead

Elevation Gained: 850 ft (Swede Park); 1400 ft (above Bear Gulch)

Directions

From I-15 Exit 156 (Basin) drive west on Cattle Drive Road 2.8 miles to the trailhead. From I-15 Exit 151 (Bernice) drive east on Cattle Drive Road 2.3 miles to the trailhead. Cattle Drive Road is mostly dirt and non-maintained but readily passable in two-wheel drive. The sign at the trailhead is partially obscured by roadside brush; look for a pull-out on the north side wide enough to turn a large horse trailer around.



View from the edge of Swede Park looking north to where the Red Rock Creek snakes into the Boulder River.