

Colorado's

Best Wildflower Hikes

VOLUME 2: The High Country

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Loveland Pass, West Ridge

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Loveland Pass, West Ridge

Wildflower Alert: Wildflower gems of the tundra begin from the first step at the Continental Divide to a far-horizon view.

*Wildflower
Hike*

50



An hour's drive from Denver, this hike is a delightful adventure in the tundra.

moderate (due to elevation)

2.6 miles out and back

Loveland Pass/Keystone

11,990 to 12,479 feet

late June to August

early to late July

From Denver take I-70 west. Go south on US 6 to Loveland Pass. Park on the east side of the pass.

Trail Rating

Trail Length

Location

Elevation

Bloom Season

Peak Bloom

Directions

ONE OF THE MOST DIRECT ACCESSES to alpine wildflower viewing is just an hour from Denver. Sitting astride the Continental Divide, Loveland Pass reaches 11,990 feet into the Colorado sky. This is the land of tundra, of high country above treeline, and a place of wide skies where snow leaves late and returns early. During this short time, this land of tundra emerges, blooms, and sets seed—all in great beauty.

While most visitors head up the well-worn east trail toward 13,234-foot Mount Sniktau, a lesser-used trail begins across the highway. This one follows the west ridge of the pass, a good portion of it along the spine of the Continental Divide. While much of the west “bowl” can be snowbound well into summer, the exposed ridge itself may be snow-free reasonably early. Whether the alpine wildflower seeker aims for early tundra flowers or waits until later in the bloom season for different species, the alpine floristics are amazing. July’s first week count may be about 40, and during July’s third week, the count may be as high as 60.

Hikers along the Loveland Pass West Ridge Trail ascend through rainbows of color along a rocky trail and then traverse a lush slope up to a saddle with splendid views. An easygoing segment continues out to another wonderful vista point. There, circles of stone have been erected for protection from the cold wind that sometimes sweeps the Continental Divide.

The unpredictable elements of tundra exploration can be surprising. Go prepared for cold, wind, sudden afternoon thunderstorms, and sometimes snow. Be prepared for great beauty as well.

Plenty of parking is available on the east side of US Highway 6.

A gravelled pathway leads past a sign conveying the importance of staying on established trails to protect the fragile and slow-to-heal tundra. Right away exhilaration sets in.

A stone-walled overlook gives visitors a clear view of the west bowl, Loveland Ski Basin, and Interstate 70 traffic whizzing through the Eisenhower Tunnel. West Ridge Trail hikers should continue past the wall in a southerly direction.

Yellow comes in many shades and shapes here, starting with **paintbrush**, **rock senecio**, **stonecrop**, and **alpine avens**. Like many in the rose family, brassy yellow alpine avens have five petals. Color is this flower’s forte even when its flowers are gone. Fall-tinted foliage turns extensive avens patches into giant spills of wine red. The biggest bloom on the tundra is **old man of the mountains** or **alpine sunflower**. With its fuzzy back to the prevailing winds, this species gathers energy for years to put forth a head that can be four inches across—the grand finale.

Passing a gap revealing the south side of the pass, the trail lifts on chunks of angular rock embedded in the path. Clinging to their sheltering edges are

tight mats of **alpine sandwort**, also called **sandywinks**, and **dwarf or deer clover**; its pinkish blossoms are shaped like the tiny hoofprint of a fawn. Slightly looser mats of bi-colored **whiproot clover** nestle by their stone mentors.

At such a popular stop as Loveland Pass, it is not surprising that many “social” trails have been worn into the earth. Stay on the apex of the ridge through an ascending rock garden of buns, mats, and cushions, some of which are early blooming **moss campion**, fragrant **alpine forget-me-not**, and **alpine phlox**.

Spruce *krummholz* (German for “crooked wood”) mitigates the harsh elements for **purple fringe** and **rock senecio** to attain a longer bloom time. Knee-high willows lead the path into an area where expanding colonies of **mountain dryad** or **white mountain-avens**

stabilize the gravelly soil. A member of the rose family like cousin alpine avens, this creamy wildflower typically sports about eight petals instead of the usual five. The distinctive seedheads twist into glistening plumes.

Collections of common **mouse-ear** and **alpine mouse-ear**, both starry white, precede a steeper climb. The trail rises on a rocky footbed to show hikers the important role that matting vegetation plays in holding this complex habitat together. Soil-gathering cushions, taprooted buns, and expanding mats such as **whiproot clover** weave a stronghold, both above and below ground.

Where the route eases a bit, low willows protect burnt-red **king’s crown**. Gaining footholds between tufts of thick grass, saturated cobalt **green-leaf chiming bells**, rosy, round-headed **Parry clover**, and sunny **alpine avens** combine in a pleasing medley.

MOUNTAIN DRYAD

Dryas octopetala subspecies hookeriana

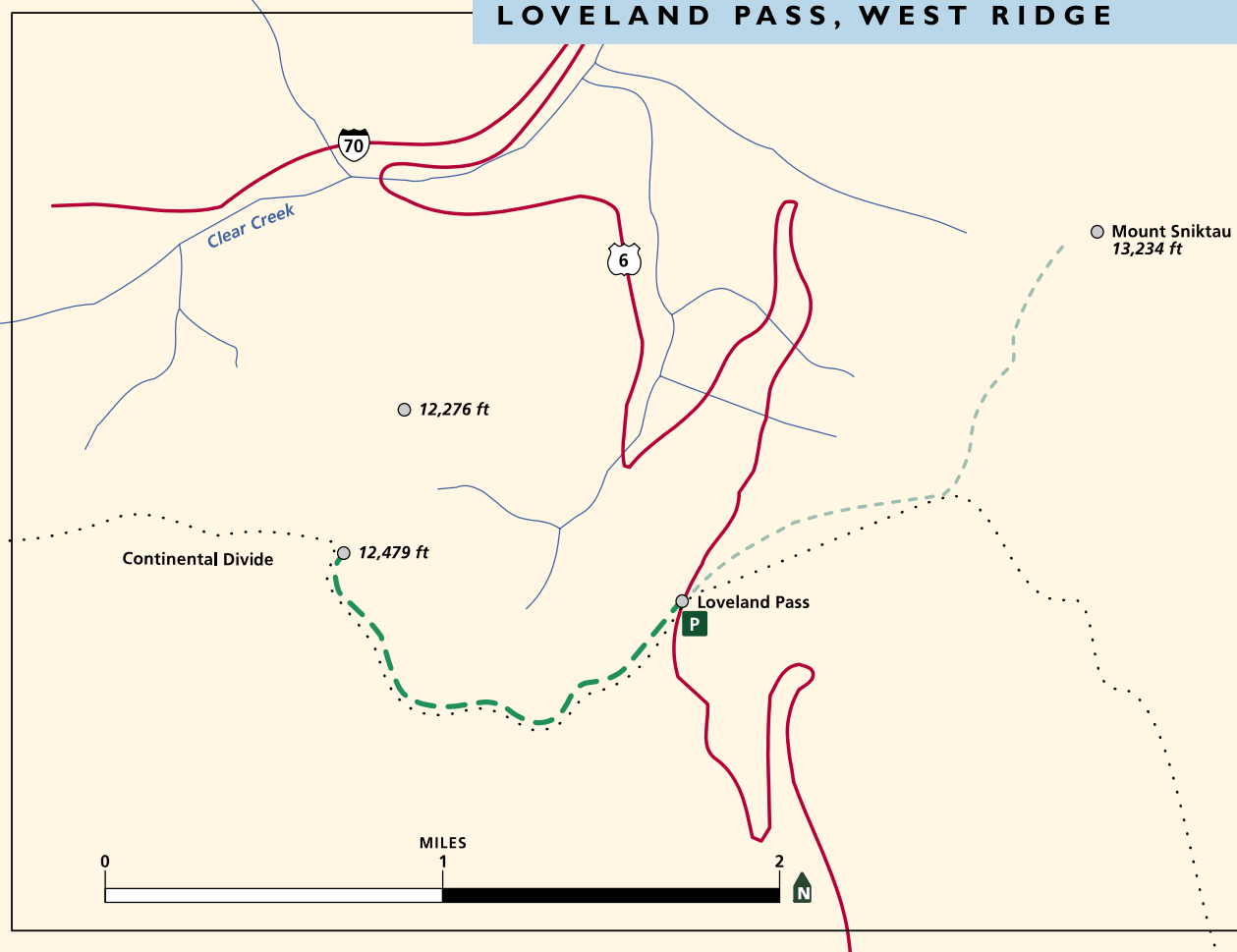


The Latin genus name *Dryas* comes from Greek mythology. A dryad was a wood nymph. Though at first it is not apparent, mountain dryad is a woody sub-

shrub, rooting as its prostrate stems touch the soil. Other common names are white mountain avens and alpine rose. The showy creamy-white flowers generally have 8 petals, which is what the Latin species name *octopetala* means. Feathery seed plumes keep mountain dryad showy as they await dispersal by the obliging wind. Its veined and scalloped lance-shaped leaves are evergreen. Ptarmigan, those feathered alpine masters of seasonal disguise, relish them.

Favoring dry, limestone-infused tundra around the world in arctic and alpine regions, mountain dryad not only stabilizes the soil, but, just as importantly, serves as a nitrogen fixer. Cousin alpine avens *acomastylis rossii subspecies turbinata* is prolific in the high country.

LOVELAND PASS, WEST RIDGE



At a break in the ridge, the view expands to full circle. As you continue along, hummocky grasses become more prevalent when the trail begins descending. Sharing the locale is white **Fendler sandwort**, with leaves that look like stiff grass. This flower is found from the foothills to the fourteeners. **Alpine sandwort**, mainly a tundra resident, hugs its white blossoms close to mats so dense they feel hard.

At the base of a rockfall, look for bright pink **moss campion**. A hand-span-wide cushion of this member of the pink family may be a century old. Its long tap root and aerodynamic shape help make it a pioneer plant on the tundra. Along this eased grade, keep a sharp eye out for the solitary blooms of **alpine** or **single harebell**, with its small purple-blue trumpets facing out. Here too is more soil-binding **mountain dryad**, which is at home in rock crevices and on open ground.

Passing momentarily between sheltering banks, the trail starts dropping toward a herd of **little pink elephants**, which are quite short at this elevation

and are gathered in a moist spot. Not far away, **paintbrush** and **alpine avens** are showy in yellow. Not showy by nature but still interesting is **snowlover**. Growing where snowdrifts accumulate, the brown-edged ivory flowers of this penstemon relation emerge on one side of the short sturdy stalk. Another lover of this snowbank habitat is lacquer-yellow **snow buttercup**. On the left, a bib of spring flowers decorates a swale, indicating more late-lying snow. Here **bigroot** or **alpine spring beauty**, **mountain candytuft**, **snowball saxifrage**, and **greenleaf chiming bells** are accented with bits of **marsh marigold**. Spring, revisited here, also presents **blueleaf cinquefoil** and **Parry primrose**.

The trail rises to a substantial rock cairn at 12,414 feet, pointing the view west to distant Mount of the Holy Cross. Quandary Peak anchors the south end of the Tenmile Range, home to Breckenridge Ski area. Keystone's carved slopes dominate the foreground.

The trail turns north now to follow the Divide. Shining knight of the wind-lashed tundra, **mountain dryad** armors the gravelly soil with its leathery, dark leaves, large creamy flowers, and invaluable creeping woody stems.

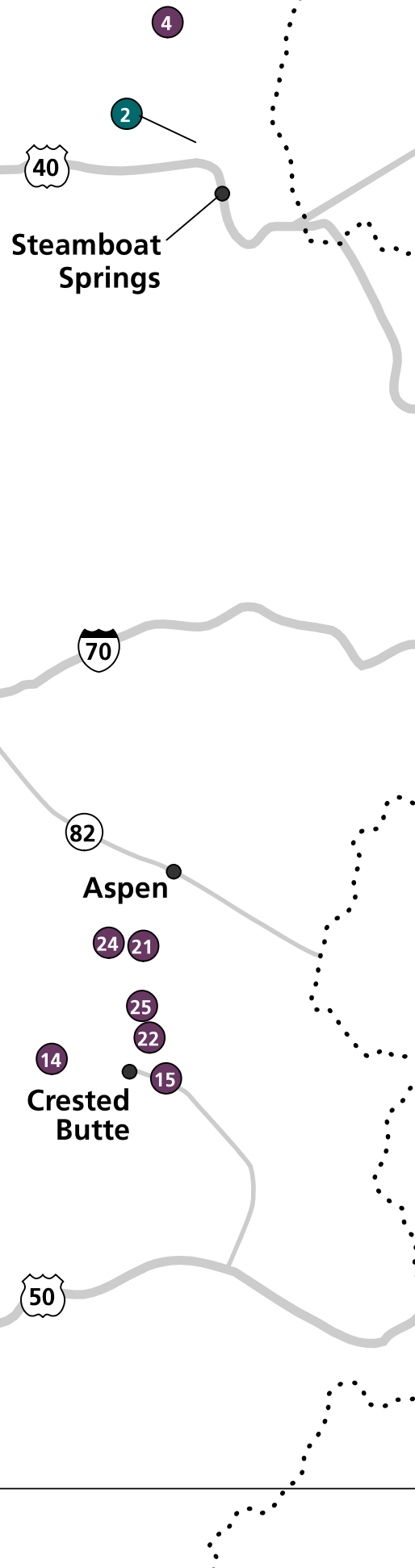
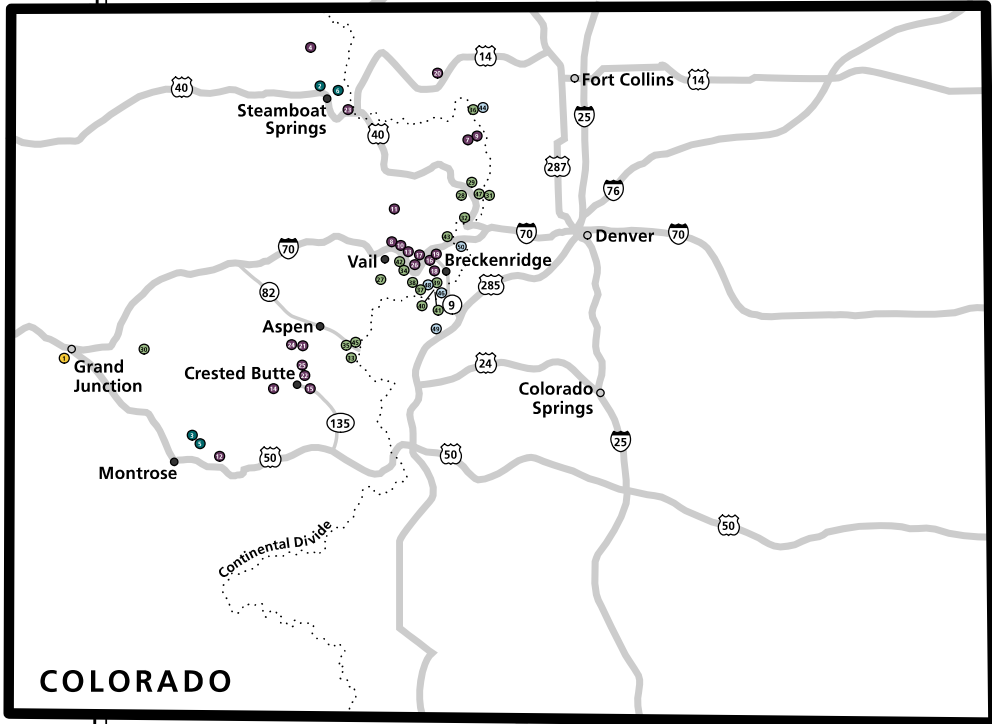
Continue to another pocket bowl, this one replete with woolly-chinned **black-headed daisies**. Ahead, Pettingill Peak at 13,553 feet and Hagar Mountain at 13,195 feet form part of the Continental Divide.

Follow the cairns and you'll pass tundra dwellers such as **old man of the mountains**, **moss campion** and stubby, but beautiful **blue columbine**, whose blossoms tend toward washed pastels at this elevation. The way is level until an initial pitch brings it up to a spa-sized ring of rocks. Surrounding it are **bistort**, **snowlover**, and **Parry clover**. Another pitch takes hikers up to a 360-degree panorama. A change arrives with a drop that evens out coming into a patch of spruce *krummholz* and willow. Hot-yellow **alpine sulphurflower**, its gray-green leaves and bright flowerheads not more than a couple of inches high, forms a wide patch on the right.

The exposed ridge is often windy, but this doesn't deter electric blue cushions of **alpine forget-me-not** nor star-struck **alpine phlox**; they just keep wafting their wonderful perfume.

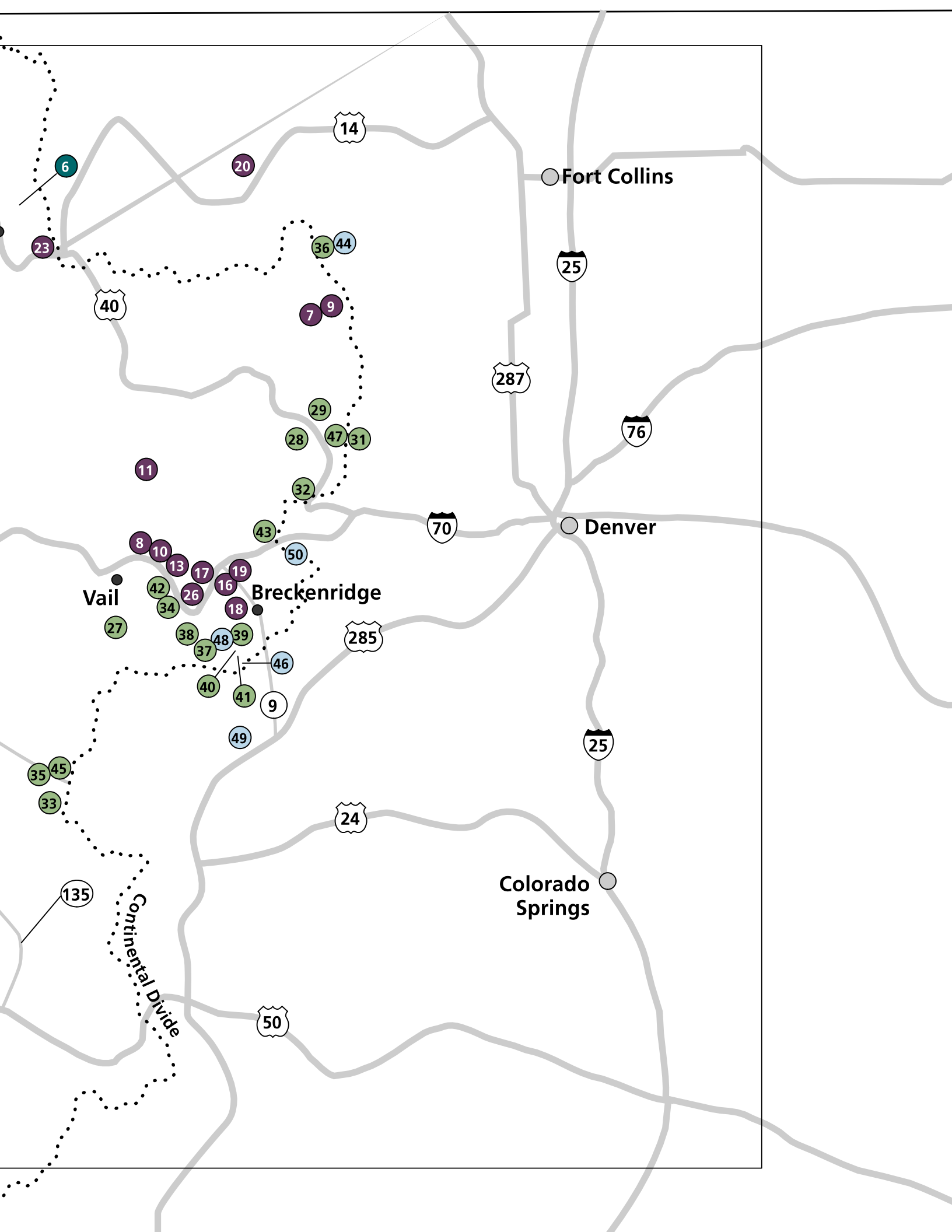
Trail-flanking, knee-high willows signal the last climb, this one reaching the goal. The best way appears to be around to the left. Tackle it by picking your way up through jumbled rock on an almost nonexistent trail. On top, the view overlooks Loveland Ski Basin—which you can enjoy from a stone wind shelter. Lovely **sky pilot** welcomes you. The high point of the hike is here at 12,479 feet above sea level.

The tundra character of Loveland Pass and the hike along its ridge to the west offer a convenient window on the world of flowering gems and their ability to survive. Awesome vistas of any number of proud Colorado peaks make this hike a special one.



Symbols in this legend are used in the maps for each hike.

Border	Lake
Trail	Point of Interest
Adjoining Trail	Trailhead
Road	Ranger Station
Dirt Road	Parking
River	
Continental Divide	
Wildflower Hike	



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Risk is always a factor in backcountry and high-mountain travel. Many of the activities described in this book can be dangerous, especially when weather is adverse or unpredictable and when unforeseen events or conditions create a hazardous situation. The author has done her best to provide the reader with accurate information about backcountry travel, as well as to point out some of its potential hazards. It is the responsibility of the users of this guide to learn the necessary skills for safe backcountry travel and to exercise caution in potentially hazardous areas, especially on glaciers and avalanche-prone terrain. The author and publisher disclaim any liability for injury or other damage caused by backcountry traveling, mountain biking, or performing any other activity described in this book.