



# What's Happening in JEFFERSON COUNTY

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*June 2020*

## Ninety Cent Gulch leads to million-dollar views

By Vaia Errett

Every trailhead holds the promise of delivery: an honest trail whisks you away, and returns you. The drive into Ninety Cent Gulch approaches a passage both physical and primal. The trail itself is a conduit. The hike up a low flank of the Elkhorn Range shunts you on a scenic capillary from the heart at Turnley Meadows, the source of departure and arrival.

Following Elkhorn Creek, the main road that penetrates the historic Elkhorn mining district branches left one mile below the Elkhorn townsite. This unnamed diversion delivers you up Turnley Creek instead into the lush palm of confluence at the head of Turnley Meadows. Named for a judge who brought the first quartz mill to Montana near Helena in the late 1860s before setting up a sawmill in his namesake meadows, the creek corridor probes the overgrown fringes of Elkhorn's past. Willow bottoms open gradually over a mile and a half onto the converging mouths of gulches (Greyback, Sourdough, Turnley, Ninety Cent, and Seven Up) that once harbored the lives of prospectors, miners, and woodcutters.

The end of the road kinks left to deposit you at the trailhead. You might end your day here. In this meadow cradle carved by water from wooded depths unseen, there is a sense of destination. Or rebirth: A two-mile climb up Ninety Cent Gulch will usher you from parkland womb into the light of an unassuming divide. The summit perch northeast of Boulder offers a bridge, from tectonic uplift back down toward civilized spread by way of Rawhide trail.

Climb gently to moderately on a clear two-track along a creek, leaving grassy hills of sage and Missouri iris, Douglas fir and juniper, for wetland clearings adorned with deadfall. Near the one-mile mark cross a small bridge into a narrow meadow brimming with buttercups by midsummer. In a quarter mile more the meadow widens before diverging from the watercourse. Currants line the trickle through boggy grass. Fractured shoulders of granite batholith hunker amidst trees and deadfall.

As slopes close in, trunks draw closer. Through standing dead trees the sky dominates, until switchbacks lengthen and tighten along upper reaches of drier, denser lodgepole woods.

Crest the ridge to break into a small clearing, and enter a space more elemental: The trail's modest summit is gatekeeper of the Elkhorn Range. Bracing the domain of rocky uplift at your back, behold below the valley splay beckoning you out of the geologic and back toward something more human.

Before you, the track continues 2.3 miles down Rawhide trail. Explore this shaded aspect presenting more fir, more aspen and alder, more mid-story maple, more batholith. Or, descend back to Turnley Meadows the way you came. Distant views of the Elkhorn range's crested hulks draw you back into the grassy surround at the mouth of Ninety Cent Gulch. You are ready for home. But your heart ricochets between conclusion and commencement as you gaze upon drainages fingering toward their ultimate source, water pooling in a meadow harboring the promise of origin.

Distance: 2 miles one-way; option to link to Rawhide

Elevation gain: 700 feet



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Getting there: From Boulder follow Highway 69 south for 7 miles and turn left at the Elkhorn sign onto White Bridge Lane. Cross the Boulder River and continue right on Lower Valley Road. Keep left at your first junction in 2 miles onto Elkhorn Road then left again in 0.8 miles at a sharp curve to stay on Elkhorn Road. Drive 7.5 miles to an unsigned left turn. Two-wheel drive is not recommended beyond this point. Just past an immediate rock cut, cross a shallow creek then turn right. Go 1.5 miles to the trailhead at the road's end. The trail is closed yearlong to road vehicles but open to ATVs, motorcycles, and snowmobiles from Dec. 2 to Oct. 14, with limited access for retrieval during big game general season.



*Jefferson County has "something for everyone". This column will appear the first issue of each month with a schedule of What's Happening in Jefferson County. Countywide events can also be found on the Jefferson County tourism/recreation website [discoverjeffersonmt.org](http://discoverjeffersonmt.org). Send your request to post event information on the website or in this column to Bruce Binkowski, Events Coordinator at [bbinkowski@jeffersoncounty-mt.gov](mailto:bbinkowski@jeffersoncounty-mt.gov).*