

Kings Peak, UT, 13,528 ft. – September 2, 2006, HP #5: I Met My First Highpointer

I first heard about Kings Peak in August 2005 when I was climbing Chief Mountain in Glacier National Park. I was told it was a multiple day hike and the tallest mountain in Utah. Since I was moving to Utah later that month, I decided I would climb it. A little over one-year later, on a wind-free and sunny September day, I found myself at 13,528 feet overlooking the spectacular Henrys Fork basin from the highpoint of the Beehive State.

I had trouble falling asleep the night of Thursday August 31, 2006 as I anticipated, with both concern and excitement, what I was about to set out alone to do the following morning. Sleep finally came, and before I knew it morning had arrived, and I was leaving Orem and on my way to the Henrys Fork trailhead in the High Uintas. The 130-mile drive took me up Provo Canyon, through Heber, and past Park City where I joined I-80 and continued into Wyoming.

In Wyoming I drove past Evanston and exited at Fort Bridger traveling through Mountain View, and into the Wasatch Cache National Forest of Utah. Around 11:30 a.m., after three hours of driving I arrived at the Henrys Fork trailhead from where the thirty-mile round-trip adventure would begin. No concerns remained as I ate a light lunch and double checked my loaded backpack. By 12:15 p.m. I was ready to go, and I asked a family, who were preparing for the same hike, to snap a hiking-opening picture of me. Then off, alone, I went on my three-day adventure.

Most of the information I had read suggested walking in about seven miles the first day and camping near Dollar Lake. I knew the trail was relatively flat up to Dollar Lake and even a mile or two further to the base of Gunsight Pass where it would leave the basin and begin climbing.

Anticipating a strenuous day two, when I would summit, I thought it wise to cover as much of the flat ground on the first day as possible. As such, I hoped to find both water and suitable camping at the mouth of Gunsight Pass. I mentioned this idea to a couple of return hikers I encountered in the Henrys Fork parking lot, and a second time to two return hikers I chanced upon on the trail. Both times I was given the good news that water, and tolerable camping could be found at the base of Gunsight Pass.

Studying the trail map, I had broken my first day of hiking into three segments or landmarks. The first landmark would be an intersecting trail to Alligator Lake about three miles into the hike. The next landmark would be another two and a half miles further along where I would encounter the Elkhorn stream crossing. The final landmark of day one would be the base of Gunsight Pass about nine miles into the trek. Imagine my pleasant surprise when only about two hours into my hike I crossed paths with a return hiker who informed me I was almost at the Elkhorn stream crossing. The going was so quick I had disregarded the first intersecting trail as my initial landmark.

As I crossed the stream at my second landmark, I caught up to a group of five - four young men, two of who appeared to be in the military, and one young woman. At this same time, I noticed

a solo hiker who was attempting to ford the creek rather than cross on the bridge lower downstream. I hurried on hoping to stay ahead, and out of sight, of the other hikers. After a while I decided to rest in a camping area which on the return trip, I learned was in sight of Dollar Lake. While I rested the lone hiker passed by seeming not to notice me. Shortly after I continued, I encountered him as he rested. We chatted, and I asked him if we were near Dollar Lake, but he was not sure. Kings Peak, however, was visible in the distance so I troubled him to snap a picture of me with it in the background.

Meanwhile the group of five passed by us, only to also rest just a few yards further up the trail. As I approached them, they asked me if I knew where Henrys Fork Lake was. All I could offer was my best guess that we were near Dollar Lake, and this seemed to be confirmed as we noticed a man and a woman leave the trees opposite us. We were at the base of an incline so I decided I would climb up it to see if I could see the lake. On my way I passed two older men returning from the peak, and I asked them if we were close to Dollar Lake, but they also were unsure. However, they did confirm a small lake existed at the bottom of Gunsight Pass.

Near the top of the incline, I left the trail and headed left hoping to spot the Dollar Lake but what I saw instead were some domestic sheep roaming around. Deciding I could find it on the return trip, I returned to the trail and headed toward Gunsight Pass, soon catching up with, and unintentionally surprising the lone hiker. As we again chatted, I learned he too was planning to camp at the base of Gunsight Pass, and I recognized him as the owner of a white pick-up I had over-taken on the gravel road leading to the trailhead.

Soon after, around 5:00 p.m., I caught a glimpse of the lake near Gunsight pass and pointed it out to my fellow hiker who was now trailing me. I remained on the main trail planning to approach the lake on its south side while my fellow hiker began bushwhacking through the shrubs and marshy ground to the north-side of the unnamed lake.

Exploring the south side, I found the ground to be too marshy for camping, so I headed over to the opposite side. There the ground was dry, and so I asked my fellow hiker if he minded if I also camped on this side of the lake and he seemed almost glad that I might do so. At this point we finally exchanged names with his being Charlie whom I guessed was in his sixties. I ended up setting up my tent next to a rock about 30 yards from where had his bivy bag laid out.

Next, I turned my attention to cooking, excited to try out the new Jetboil stove I had purchased the day before. I had brought along a couple of freeze-dried dinners, instant oatmeal, and instant noodles, all of which could be quickly prepared by adding only boiling water. I had just poured the boiling water into the freeze-dried beef stroganoff when Charlie stopped by. He had already eaten and was happy to chat as I ate. I learned he was on a highpointing trip and had just come from the Idaho highpoint with 38 of the 50 US states checked off. He was the first Highpointer I had ever met, and perhaps he planted the seed in me to one day also reach the highest point in each US state. Close to 7:00 p.m., we watched a party of two set up east of

“our” lake and right next to the trail. We expected they would come to the lake for water, but we never noticed if they did.

Just before dark we climbed a hill west of our camps to look over the Henrys Fork basin. From the vantage point we watched a cowboy on horseback, and his three dogs, round-up and drive a herd of domestic sheep toward the toilet bowl. The toilet bowl is a 1,000 feet high and quarter mile long scree covered chute next to Anderson Pass which is often used as a return trip shortcut by hikers who camp at Dollar Lake.

Soon the sun began to disappear below the horizon with each of us returning to his own camp. I sat on the big rock next to my tent for a while and watched two hikers with flashlights walk by, losing them as they entered Gunsight Pass. Around 9:00 p.m., I entered my tent, but sleep eluded me and, in its place, came sickness. Likely the 11,000-foot elevation was to blame for my headache, and on top of that the freeze-dried meal was not agreeing with my stomach. It was not until after 1:00 a.m. when I finally fell asleep only to awake a couple of hours later due to wind and below freezing temperatures.

Slightly before sunrise, around 6:00 a.m., I woke-up, still with the headache and upset stomach. I opted to skip breakfast and began hiking the five remaining miles to the top of Utah. At around 7:00 a.m., as I started up Gunsight Pass, I looked back toward camp and waved good-bye to Charlie who had emerged from his bivy. At the top of the pass, I rested and looked for a cairn marked shortcut I had heard about. Spotting it I followed it up and over two ridges where I observed, from north to south, the top of the toilet bowl, Anderson Pass, and Kings Peak, below all of which was a basin that reminded me of pictures I had seen of Everest. Descending the second ridge I followed the shortcut into the basin, where it joined the main trail and head up in a westerly direction toward Anderson Pass. Here I noticed four other hikers converging on to the main trail, and I directed my path to intersect with theirs.

They were not very chatty, so I followed a bit behind them. At places, a tiny stream shared the trail, and it was still frozen solid at this time of the day. Close to Anderson Pass, around 8:30 a.m., I paused as they continued up. I was still feeling nauseated, but I knew I needed to eat and drink, so I braved down a granola bar and some beef jerky, followed by a drink of water.

It is worth noting that the water of the lakes and streams around Kings Peak must be purified before consuming it. This is a side effect of the public land being used to graze domestic animals, such as the sheep I had seen. Water filter pumps are used by many hikers, but I prefer the ease of iodine tablets. When cooking I boil the water for a little extra time to kill off any harmful microorganisms. Since dinner the day before, I was now drinking iodine treated water. Its taste is a bit strange, but it does not upset my stomach.

As I continued hiking, I watched four more hikers emerge to my right having climbed up the toilet bowl. Before I reached the top of Anderson Pass, they crossed it, and started up the remaining 900 vertical feet climb to the peak; it seemed they were trying to catch the other four hikers I had encountered earlier.

With my upset stomach, and throbbing headache I made my own push to the top. At this point there was no trail to follow, only boulders and broken pieces of rock to hop to and from. I was unsure where my exact destination lay so I tried to keep an eye on my predecessors, but they soon disappeared behind one of the several false summits. At one point I was so surprised I could not see them that I called out “hello” hoping they would hear and answer, but to no avail.

As I continued up, my headache increased with the altitude, and I felt a blister developing on my foot. At around 10:00 a.m. on a big boulder, which turned out to be only 200 vertical feet below my goal, I paused to check my foot and ate a bit more. With the pause my stomach finally settled, and I was able to eat and drink even more, while I applied moleskin to my tender foot.

During this break two older men approached, and we discussed how further away the peak was. I mentioned that the four hikers, I had encountered in the basin, had estimated reaching the peak by 11:00 a.m., meaning we likely had another 45 minutes ahead of us. As I was ready to continue up, down came the two groups of four, as one group, and from them I learned how close the highpoint actually was – just 10 minutes away.



Up and on I went arriving at 13,528 feet at 10:30 a.m. I was greeted by the two older gentlemen and we all agreed what a welcome surprise it was to have reached the top much sooner than anticipated. I asked one to snap a few pictures of me then off they went, leaving me alone on top.

Not long after two other climbers joined me staying only for a few minutes. Left alone again I searched the top for an elevation marker, in vain, when along

came a man and women whom I recognized as the couple I had seen leaving the trees, the day before, where I had looked for Dollar Lake. They asked me to snap a couple of pictures of them, and I had them take another of me.

I was in no hurry to descend so I relaxed and took in the views. To the east, large Lake Atwood was seen. To the south, South Kings Peak at 13,308 feet (once believe to be Utah’s highest natural point), and on the horizon endless mountains. To the west a sheer drop-off, a large basin, more mountains, and a few high-altitude lakes. To the north, the Henrys Fork basin, in which I finally saw Dollar Lake much more to the right of where I had assumed it to be, with Henrys Lake to the west.

After a sunny and windless hour on the summit some teenagers arrived and I learned they were part of a larger group, so I decided to descend. Almost immediately I encountered several

people on their way up, and one woman asked me where I was camped and then informed me she had seen sheep stampeding toward my camp.

It took less than an hour to descend to Anderson Pass which now was cluttered with hikers. In the basin east of Anderson Pass I felt another blister coming on, so I stopped to examine it. When along came the two hikers who camped near the trail across from my camp. I informed them of the shortcut to Gunsight Pass and they decided to use it by following me. Arriving at Gunsight Pass, a bit before 2:00 p.m., I paused to rest as my followers continued down. As I started down the pass, I crossed trails with a young man from Seattle who was hiking with a dog carrying some of his gear. He pointed out to me the clouds forming over the peaks and I warned him of the potential for lightning. Near the bottom of the pass, I encountered a woman Forest Ranger on horseback with a pack horse. I asked her about the sheep, but she was not aware of them.

By 2:15 p.m., I was back at my camp, and relieved to find the sheep had not been around after all. First thing I did was treat some water, then retire to my tent giving the iodine time to do its job. Around 3:00 p.m., with the water ready, I ate a late lunch. Then returned to my tent for a bit more rest. In the meantime, two other groups set up camps in the area. I did not mind as I was planning to leave soon. By 5:30 p.m., well rested, I had my gear packed up, and started down headed to Elkhorn Crossing where I planned to spend the night.

After about an hour of walking, the blisters on my feet began to hurt and I was forced to stop and apply more moleskin. In bearable pain, on I went, arriving at Elkhorn Crossing before sunset at 7:40 p.m., relieved to find the camp spot I had in mind was vacant. I quickly set up camp, tied my food up in a tree, noticing another tent hidden behind a group of trees.

By 8:30 p.m., I was in my mummy bag and surprised that in the trees, and at a lower elevation, the temperature seemed colder than the previous night. For the most part I slept soundly for twelve hours, waking up only a couple of times, once as a flashlight passed my tent, and another time as the wind or an animal brushed my tent.

I spent the morning of the third day relaxing, airing out my tent and sleeping bag, organizing my things, and preparing food. Initially no one else seemed to be around, and I supposed the occupants of the other tent had headed for the peak early believing it to be their flashlight that passed my tent in the darkness. Perhaps around 11:00 a.m., I noticed a man fishing in the creek, and I approached him to find he was a fellow I had briefly talked to just above Anderson's Pass on my descent. He did not seem to remember me. He had caught a trout and had it in a plastic bag with water.

By half past noon, with my feet patched up, I began the remaining 5.5 miles back to my truck. About 45 minutes later, my blistered feet began to hurt, and I soon had to stop to give them a rest. I was hoping I was within an hour of my vehicle, but I had not yet past the Alligator Lake trail. Around 2:30 p.m., I crossed trails with my fifth group of hikers of the day, and they asked me where I had been and if I was alone, following my replies they told me I had only a half mile

left. Physically I felt great, having no sore muscles and lots of energy but the blisters were a genuine hindrance, and so I was again forced to rest.

At 3:00 p.m., I was extremely glad to remove my shoes and socks and to put on my Birkenstock sandals having reached the end of my 30-mile adventure. Before driving home, I looked in the logbook at the trailhead to see how many groups had logged in the same day as me. I counted 15 groups which amounted to 36 people.

Despite pushing through sickness, and having to deal with blisters, the adventure was a wonderful experience. I could not have had better weather. Henrys Fork basin is a beautiful, peaceful area, and reaching the highest point of Utah was a magnificent accomplishment.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ggFyuqn41rvmRapc6>