

Gannett Peak, WY, 13,804 ft. – August 19, 2009, HP #6: The Most Beautiful Natural Place

The first two winters living in Utah were big snow seasons, and the skiing was excellent. Outside of ski season I began doing a fair amount of hiking but unlike when I lived in Virginia my hiking was focused on climbing mountains. Between arriving in Utah in 2005 and my climb of Kings Peak just over a year later, I climbed six additional mountains, and I was trying to figure out how to get into mountaineering so I could explore snow covered peaks. This desire, along with my love of skiing, lead me not only into mountaineering but also into backcountry skiing, and eventually into rock and ice climbing.

Fast-forward to 2009 when I climbed Gannett Peak. I was by then an experienced mountain adventurer having completed 150 mountain climbs spanning all seasons of the year. Through my frequent excursions into the mountains, I had started rubbing shoulders with a few members of the Salt Lake City based Wasatch Mountain Club, and had skied the Trinity Chutes of Mount Shasta, CA with a couple of them in May 2009. Outside of their club, a few of my newfound friends had plans to tackle Gannett Peak, and I was invited to join them. I took it on as a mountaineering challenge, and for the beauty and thrill of climbing it, and the fact Gannett Peak is a state high point was not the driving force behind my desire to face it.



The trip was planned for the end of August trusting the summer bugs would be on the decline by then. August 16, 2009 the seven of us - Dave, Lana, Brent, Anne, Jans, Rich, and myself - meet up in a suburb of Salt Lake City, loaded into three cars and drove northwest 240 miles to the small Wyoming town of Pinedale. From Pinedale a fifteen mile drive along the eastern shore of Freemont Lake took us to Elkhart Park where Skyline Drive ends. A campground and a parking area are located there, as is the Pole Creek trail trailhead which is the first of a series of trails which combined take trekkers into the breathtaking Titcomb Basin. We arrived in the

evening and spent the night at the campground at an elevation of 9,280 feet with temperatures dropping below freezing.

It is close to 23 miles from Elkhart Park to the top of Wyoming, making it over 45 miles roundtrip with over 9,000 feet of elevation gain. We did not want to overexert ourselves so we budgeted two days to backpack into upper Titcomb Lake, where we would set up our basecamp. Taking on Gannett Peak is a considerable quest.

Allowing two days for the approach we were not rushed and did not begin our first day of hiking, August 17, until after nine o'clock. Four and a half miles into our journey, at around lunch time, we reached Photographer Point at 10,350 feet. After snapping a few photos, I decided to eat lunch, only to find the rest of the group suddenly in a hurry and on there way. Being comfortable in the outdoors alone, I was not at all concern about it, but upon catching up with them it seemed at least one of them was upset with me.

By 1:40 p.m. we had covered seven and a half miles having reached the Seneca Lake outlet giving us an average of 1.7 miles per hour – not bad with full backpacks on uneven ground. Two miles further along at just before 3pm we stopped for the day and set up our camp at the north end of Seneca Lake. About halfway between the lake outlet and its northern end we had encounter a dead horse just below the switch backs west of the lake (around inbound mile 8.5). We wondered if the owner, or someone, would return to dynamite it into small compostable pieces as there was little chance it was going to be removed from the area.

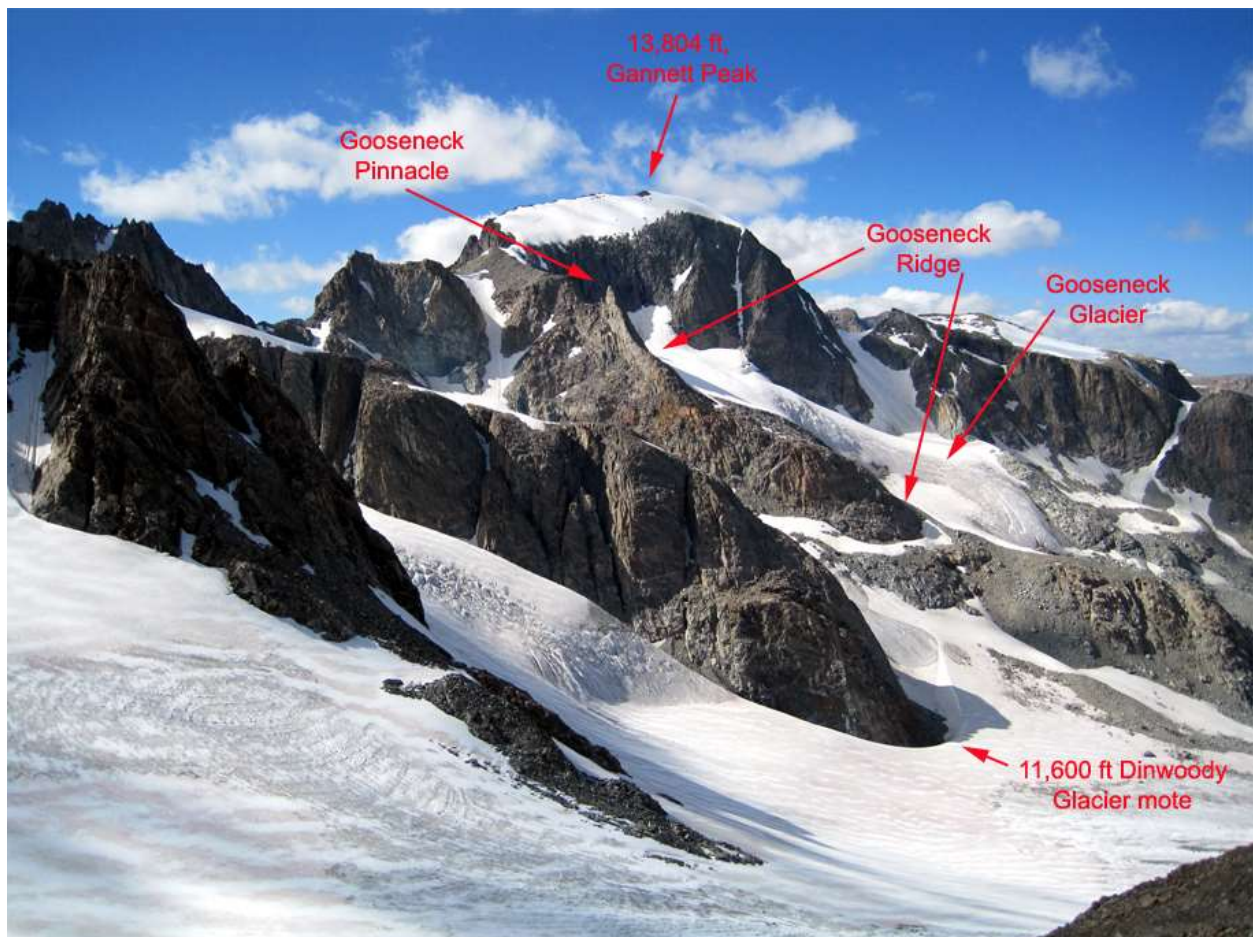
August 18, we broke camp, again at a leisurely pace, heading north on the Seneca Lake trail by ten o'clock. After just one mile our destination put us on the Indian Pass trail still traveling north. The scenery of granite mountains like Freemont peak, along with boulders everywhere and multiple lakes was incredible. On the rise above Island Lake, we caught a glimpse of our goal, Gannett Peak, and the pass, Bonney Pass, we would have to traverse to reach it. A half an hour later we were at the south end of Island Lake still enchanted with the spectacular backdrop. I will go out on a limb here and say the Titcomb Basin area could very well be the most beautiful natural place I have been in the United States of America. We continued around the east side of Island Lake traversing its sandy beaches. As we left Island Lake, now on the Titcomb Basin trail, we paused for lunch at noon, and a half an hour later we encountered our first section of snow, but not enough to warrant crampons. Less than three hours into the day's journey we reached the lower Titcomb Lake.

Northeast of the Upper Titcomb Lake at around 10,600 feet we choose a spot for our basecamp. We had covered six and a half miles for the day. Located two and a half miles from 12,800-foot Bonney Pass, and approximately seven miles from the 13,804-foot summit. When the comfortable breeze would stop, we had a lot of mosquitoes to deal with. We arrive in the early afternoon, so to pass the time we relaxed in our tents, filtered water, and prepared for the next day's summit bid. After dinner some played cards until dark. Layered clothing, and even ski hats, were needed to stay warm.



Day three was summit day and we got a moderately early start leaving camp at six o'clock. At the bottom of the snow-covered Bonney pass, with the sun starting to come up, we donned our gaiters, strapped on our crampons, and pulled out our ice axes. From this point on we would travel on snow. We gained the 2,200 feet to the top of Bonney Pass in two hours, next dropping down to 11,580 feet and on to the Dinwoody Glacier with its absurdly deep moot by 9:00 a.m. From the Dinwoody Glacier over to

Gooseneck Glacier required locating a thin band of snow that leads to Gooseneck Ridge, this strip of snow would have been very hard to find without Brent's knowledge of the route. He was the only member of our group who had climbed the peak before, and his familiarity was appreciated.



Within an hour and a half from the Dinwoody Glacier we reached what we hoped was not going to be a major obstacle namely the notorious bergschrund. We had taken a bit of a calculated risk when we elected to leave behind pickets, harnesses, and ropes trusting that we would not need them to get over it. Fortunately, with care the “schrund” was passable without gear. As hoped, rather than the crossing of the “schrund”, the 40-degree slope above it proved to be the crux of the climb. By 10:45 a.m. our full group of seven had safely navigated the crux, and within another 15 minutes we reached the point where the Gooseneck Ridge turns from west to north and overlooks what I believe is known as Glacier Pass. From there we soon reached the Gooseneck pinnacle, and before noon all seven of us stood upon the highest spot in Wyoming with blue skies all around and breath-taking views in all directions.

Lana had brought along a cloth banner on which she had written Gannett and below that 13,804' - we took turns posing for pictures while holding it. We relaxed on the top soaking in the sun and the views, found and signed the summit registry, and within an hour began the return trip to basecamp climbing over the seemingly bottomless “schrund” by 1:30 p.m. We retrace our steps to the top of Bonney Pass arriving by 4:30 p.m.

I was the first of our group to start down the 2,000 plus vertical feet of Bonney Pass, and after some time a commotion caused me to pause and look back up, only to see Brent uncontrollably sliding on his belly, feet first, rapidly gaining speed as he plummeted toward me. I could see he had lost his ice axe, and so I yelled at him to spread out his arms and legs, hoping that would slow him enough so he could regain control. It was a frightening scene to witness, but mercifully he heard my instructions, followed them, and recovered control. He suffered only scrapes, along with some bumps and bruises, being blessed to have not snagged a crampon and to have stopped when he did. He told me that as he started down, he stopped to get something out of his pack and in doing so released the leash of his axe from the waist band strap, only to next slip with his axe left above stuck in the snow. On a steep slope like we were descending self-arresting without an axe was an unlikely affair which he pulled off. He would have been badly hurt, and we all would have been in serious trouble otherwise. I for one thanked my Heavenly Father for his protection.

It was a twelve-hour day by the time we all securely returned to basecamp, and we were exhausted having covered fourteen miles and climbed just shy of 7,000 vertical feet. Water, food, and rest – in that order – was all we wanted and needed that evening.

Our fourth day in the mountains was essentially a reverse of days two and one. We began the sixteen-mile return hike at 8:00 a.m., passed Little Seneca Lake inside an hour and a half, encountered the bloated dead horse twenty minutes before noon, and reached the parking lot at Elkhart Park by 4:30 p.m. I finished the last of my food on the return trip meaning I had packed no extra. Nevertheless, I was in favor of either spending another night at the campground or making the journey home. However, the majority consensus was to drive to Pinedale, get some motel rooms, and dine at a restaurant. Come to find out Brent had a motel room already reserved! We returned home August 21, 2009.