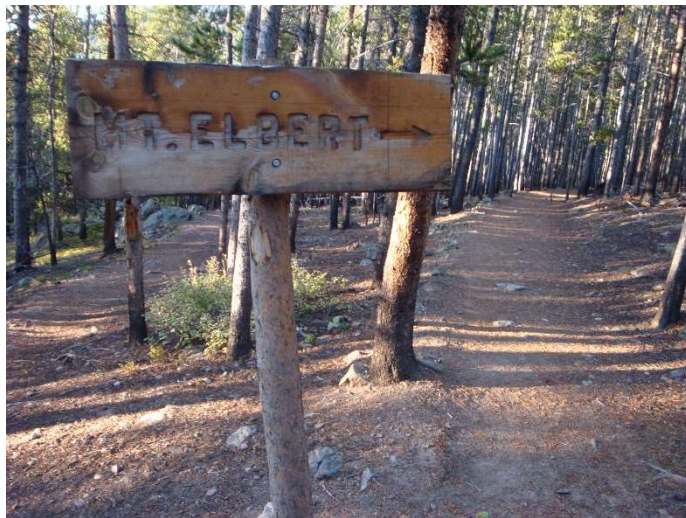


Mount Elbert, CO, 14,433 ft. – September 18, 2009, HP #8: It Appeared as Though I Was Alone

It was a quick and easy decision to make, when I learned the Mt. Elbert trailhead was only about a one hundred mile longer drive than what I had driven the week before to get to Borah Peak, Idaho. Mt. Elbert it would be then – my one hundredth distinct mountain and a new personal height record to boot. Prior to climbing Mt. Elbert, I had completed 152 successful mountain climbs on 99 separate mountains. Not wanting to rush it, I planned it for a week out. I would leave next Thursday afternoon, sleep in my SUV at the trailhead and climb it the following day.

Thursday arrived, and I set off anonymously after lunch. The miles passed uneventfully and soon I found myself in Grand Junction, Colorado with my odometer indicating roughly half of the drive was behind me. Four o'clock seemed a bit early for dinner, but after I filled up the gas tank, I realized I might as well eat too. Soon enough I was back on I-70 heading east, covering new ground with each passing mile often through scenic areas. Near the small town of Minturn, I exited the freeway turning south onto US-24 to wind my way up to the two-mile high town of Leadville.

As I neared Leadville, I spotted Mt. Elbert to the southwest and thought it looked more impressive in person than in pictures. Reaching Leadville just as the sun had set, I topped off my gas tank before heading off in search of CO 11 which would lead me into the San Isabel National Forest and the trailhead of Mt. Elbert about 12 miles distant.



It was around eight o'clock when I pulled up at the northeast ridge Mount Elbert trailhead where only one other vehicle occupied the parking lot. The vacancy, coupled with the darkness and an unfamiliar place, contributed to an eerie feeling as I stepped out of my vehicle to examine the trailhead sign. Confirming I was in the right place, next I had to decide if I would spend the night here as planned or in the campground across the dirt road. This decision became obvious when a faceless male voice from

the other vehicle suddenly informed me to keep my eye on the eastern sky where he claimed to have seen strange lights and unidentified flying objects.

At the campground I approached a string of lights thinking it was the trailer of the campground host, but it turned out to be the headlamps of a group of four campers. They informed me the campground was closed for the season, so there was nowhere to pay a fee. Not wanting to bother anyone and also liking my privacy, but bearing in mind my uneasiness when across the

road, I prudently picked a secluded spot within shouting distance of the other campers. I had few preparations to make for the morning so I was soon stretched out comfortably in the back of my SUV with an alarm clock set for 6:00 a.m. The plan was to hit the trail by 7:00 a.m. with the sun just up, but with plenty of hours ahead to make the climb and descent before the inevitable afternoon thunderstorms arrived.

Five fifteen the clock read, and already someone was pulling into the Mt. Elbert trailhead parking lot. Obviously, I was not going to be alone on the mountain. Shortly my alarm went off, and I was up and crunching down some homemade granola and a boiled egg. I hit the trail at 6:50 a.m., and within half an hour I had climbed several switch backs on the Colorado Trail and was at the turn off to the Mt. Elbert trail 1.3 miles into the 9-mile round trip.

As the forest thinned the trail seemed to get steeper, and around 8:00 a.m., at nearly the tree line, I passed two older gentlemen who I learned were from Texas and had been driving the car that woke me up at 5:15 a.m. Shortly thereafter the mountain came into view, a large but plain looking peak. As I left the trees, I encountered a father and his grown son resting, and they commented about eating breakfast as I passed them. A woman hiking alone who I thought might be with them, was a few yards further ahead on the steep barren trail. I continued my march up and soon caught up with her as she informed me that she was alone and hiking as part of her training to climb Mt Kilimanjaro in a few weeks. She was talkative, but I was energized and pressed forward hoping I would be the first on the peak this morning.

A false summit of approximately 13,800 feet loomed in front of me as the wind blew slightly and I stopped to put my fleece back on. As I made my way up, I occasionally noticed a fresh boot print and the odd dog footprint, making me question my pole position. Once the false summit was reached, I was a bit let down to see how far away the next summit was.

In planning, I had figured I could easily complete the whole 4,383 vertical feet and 4.5 miles of non-technical hiking in three and a half hours but hoped to complete it in three hours. Three hours now seemed doubtful. Nonetheless, I was pleased with my progress, and glad I was unaffected by the elevation. Within twenty-five minutes I reached the next elevated point, from which I could finally see the true 14,433-foot peak. I would have to gain about another 50 feet and travel along a small wide ridge to reach the pinnacle of Colorado. By now I had been hiking for slightly over three hours. As such I decided not to hurry, taking a few pictures of myself with the peak behind. Surprisingly, it only took an additional six minutes to complete the ascent, putting me on top at 10:02 a.m. It appeared I was alone, much to my delight. A new personal height record, the highest point in Colorado and the second highest spot in the lower 48 had been reached.

Several rock walls had been stacked up as wind barriers. As I looked around moving from one to another in search of a summit log, I quickly discovered who had made the boot and dog tracks. Well, now I had someone to take my picture! I asked him about the summit log. He pointed out a piece of PVC pipe, inside which I found to be stuffed with crumpled moist papers. Cleaning it

out I discovered only one well maintained paper - a sign listing the mountain name and elevation. Armed with the sign, I asked the dog owner to take a photo of me with the view to the south of the rugged north face of 14,336 foot La Plata Peak in the background.



I relaxed in the brisk air at the top of Colorado, donning my windproof layer to ensure I would stay warm. Content with my accomplishment, I munched on some snacks as I absorbed the spectacular views in all directions. To the east I could see Twin Lakes, and to the northeast the town of Leadville. Colorado's second tallest peak, 14,421-foot Mt. Massive, dominated the view north. In all directions the odd cloud lingered but none of them looked threatening, giving me no reason to hurry down. More

pictures were taken, and I even made a short summit video.

After about 30 minutes the lone female hiker arrived and just before 11:00 a.m. another lone male hiker arrived. While listening to him talk, I soon wondered if he was not the voice warning of UFOs the night before, but thought it best not to ask. He had me take a picture of him with his disposable camera.

About the time I decided to begin my descent, I noticed the father (who I had seen at tree-line) arriving alone without his son. As I started down, the fellow and his dog were not far behind. Intentionally I followed a path which angled down a bit to the east, instead of the northeast, causing the dog and his owner to diverge from me. Once we had some distance between us, I veered back to the main trail with at least five more people were making their way up. At the lower false summit, I encountered the two Texans steadily working their way up, one of them again mentioned his GPS as he had done when I passed him on my ascent.

Just below the lower false summit I decided to tighten my boot laces to avoid hammer toe, and as I did so I was overcome with hunger. As I ate, several of the now familiar faces I had encountered off and on passed by. At tree line I exchanged a few minutes of conversation with the father. He mentioned reaching the summit of Mt. Elbert fulfilled his goal of summiting a "Fourteener" at the age of 60. Being fit, he looked younger and I told him as much.

As I walked into the parking lot at 1:45 p.m., my suspicions were confirmed as I saw who sat in the driver's seat of the lone vehicle of the night before. As I had asked the night before, I felt tempted to ask him again if he was a believer, but decided against identifying myself.

Grateful, hungry, and little bit tired, I crossed the road to my vehicle not surprised I now had a neighbor. Desiring solitude, I relocated to a campsite closer to the creek where I washed up before having a second lunch. Soon the inescapable afternoon mountain shower rolled in as I

relaxed and napped in my SUV bed. It was wonderful to be in the woods, and just as splendid to have reached the highest point in Colorado as my hundredth distinct mountain summit.

I was not stopping at 100, tomorrow would see me on top of 14,421-foot Mt. Massive.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/1CzipV2JJ7tbRMGVA>