

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

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, through often scenic areas, with each passing mile. 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 than the pictures I had seen. 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 set a rather 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 the voice 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 when in fact it turned out to be the head lamps 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 liking my privacy, but bearing in mind the voice 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 and 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 past 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 chatty but I was energized and wanting to move forward, so on I went, hoping I would now be the first on the peak.

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 foot print, making me question my pole position. Once the false peak was reached after 2.5 hours and about 3,800 vertical feet of climbing I was a bit let down to see how far away the next summit was which I incorrectly assumed was the highpoint.

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. Three hours were slightly past so I decided not to hurry, and instead I took 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. A new personal height record, the highest point in Colorado and the second highest spot in the lower 48 had been reached. It appeared I was alone, much to my delight.

Several rock walls had been stacked up as wind barriers but 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 and he pointed out some PVC pipe. Inside I found the pipe to be stuffed with crumpled moist papers -- it was a mess so I cleaned it out discovering only one well maintained paper which was a sign

listing the mountain name and elevation. As I was sorting out the summit log, a solo hiker arrived and I was surprised that it was a young man and not the lone woman I had passed. 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 so I saw no need to hurry down. More pictures were taken and I even made a short summit video.

After about 30 minutes the lone female hiker arrived, asking if I minded if she took a break near me. Just before 11:00 a.m. another lone male hiker arrived. As I took a picture of him with his disposable camera, and listen to him talk, I soon wondered if he was not the owner of the UFO-speaking voice of the night before but thought it best not to ask.

About the time I decided to begin my descent the father, without his son, who I had seen at tree-line, arrived. I started down, with the fellow and his dog not far behind and with a young

man and young woman approaching the peak. I followed a path which angled down a bit to the east, instead of the northeast, noticing the dog and owner diverging from me; I thought that was good as I preferred not to have company. Giving them a bit of room before long I veered back to the main trail and watched them moving down, as at least five more people were making their way up. At the lower false summit, I encountered the two older gentlemen steadily working their way up, one of them mentioned his GPS as he did when I passed him on my ascent, making me realize he didn't recognize me from a couple hours earlier.

Just below the lower false summit I decided I should tighten my boot laces to avoid hammer toe, and as I did so I was soon overcome with hunger. I paused to eat and was quickly overtaken by the suspected UFO voice, lone female hiker, and father. As I ate, I watched the suspected UFO voice rapidly move down, often jogging. Also, I saw the dog and owner resting a hundred feet or so below me. Just as I got up to continue my descent the young couple who were just arriving at the peak as I started down spotted me and asked me if I was descending or ascending. The question annoyed me, and I snapped back that I was descending hoping they did not notice the irritation in my response. I soon past the lone female hiker, and shortly thereafter the young couple jogged past me.

The father and I were moving at about the same pace, and as such I preferred he stay a distance in front of me. It was not until well into the trees that I eventually overtook him, as we exchanged a few minutes of conversation, and I learned he had climbed Mt. Elbert as a goal to summit a Fourteener at the age of 60 – he was younger looking and seemed fit and I told him as much. From that point on I did not see any more people until just near the end of the Colorado Trail where I crossed paths with a fellow carrying his mountain bike.

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 that I now had a neighbor. Desiring solitude, I moved to another spot, closer to the creek which I cleaned up in before making my lunch. Following lunch, the inescapable afternoon 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.