

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

I had been living in Utah for four years, when I climbed Gannett Peak. Over those years most of my leisure time had been spent in the mountains. In fact, by then, I had completed a 150 mountain climbs, spanning all four seasons. 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 California's Mount Shasta with a couple of them in May 2009. Outside of their club, a few of my newfound friends had plans to tackle Wyoming's tallest mountain, and I was invited to join them.

The trip was planned for the end of August trusting the summer bugs would be on the decline by then. August 16 the seven of us - Dave, Lana, Brent, Anne, Jans, Rich, and myself - met 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, one-way, from Elkhart Park to the top of Wyoming, 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.

Our first day of hiking, August 17, we assumed a leisurely pace starting out after nine o'clock. Four and a half miles later, 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 their way. Being comfortable in the outdoors alone, I was not at all concern about it, but upon catching up with them it seemed some felt I should not have been separated from the group.

By 1:40 p.m. we had covered seven and a half miles having reached the Seneca Lake outlet. About halfway between the outlet and the lakes' northern end we encountered a bloated horse carcass, and we hoped someone would soon return to dynamite it into small compostable pieces as there was little chance it was going to be removed from the area. Upon reaching the north end of Seneca Lake we stopped for the day and set up camp. The time was 3:00 p.m. and we had hiked nine and half miles.

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 route 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, and we continued around its east side traversing its sandy

beaches. Leaving the lake, we followed the Titcomb Basin trail. At noon we paused for lunch. 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, and from there continued to the Upper Titcomb Lake. The entire hike I was enchanted with the spectacular backdrop, ranking it as the most beautiful I had come across in the United States of America.



Northeast of the Upper Titcomb Lake at around 10,600 feet we selected a spot for our basecamp, located two and a half miles from 12,800-foot Bonney Pass, and approximately seven miles from the 13,804-foot summit of Gannett Peak. We had covered six and a half miles for the day. When the comfortable breeze would stop, we were inundated by mosquitoes. We arrived 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 scaled the 2,200 vertical 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.

Crossing 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; gambling we would not need them to cross it. Fortunately, with care the "schrund" (as Mountaineers often shorten the name to) was passable without gear. The crux of the climb proved to be the steep slope above the "schrund" often exceeding 40 degrees.

By 10:45 a.m. our entire party had safely navigated the crux. Within another 15 minutes we reached the point where the Gooseneck Ridge turns from west to north and overlooks what we called Glacier Pass. From there we soon reached the Gooseneck Pinnacle, and before noon all seven of us stood upon the rooftop of 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 bergschrund 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. Had he not, he would have been badly hurt and we all would have been in serious trouble. 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 – were all we wanted and needed that evening.

Our fourth day in the mountains was a reverse journey of days two and one. We began the remaining sixteen-mile return hike at 8:00 a.m., passed Little Seneca Lake inside an hour and a half, re-encountered the 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, still I was in favor of spending another night at the campground before making the journey home. However, the majority consensus was to drive to Pinedale, dine at a restaurant, and spend the night at a motel. Come to find out Brent had his motel room already reserved!

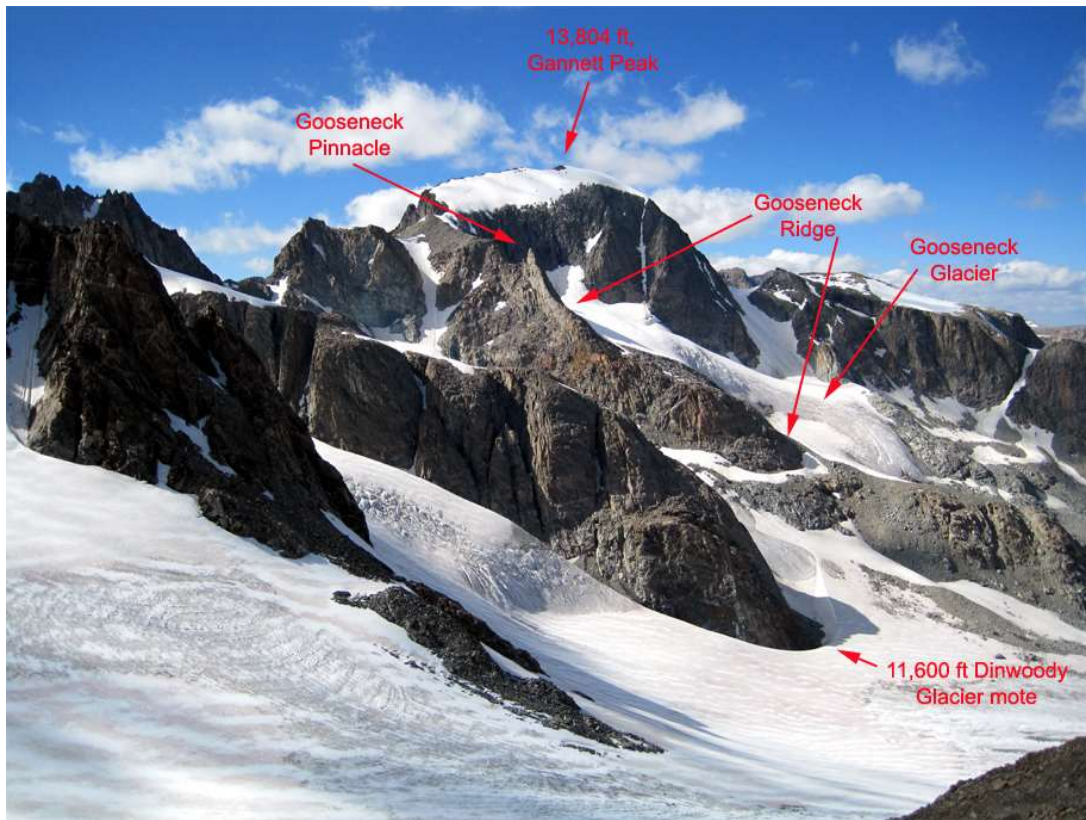


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