

Granite Peak, MT, 12,799 ft. – August 18, 2012, HP #13: Maybe We Still Had a Chance

August 17, I woke up at 3:00 a.m., about 45 minutes earlier than I needed to, but sleep would not return. I left the house at 4:30 a.m. and drove to Peter's place. From there we took his truck and drove north 450 miles through Utah and Yellowstone to Cook City, Montana.

Following lunch in Cook City, we found the Lady of the Lakes trail figuring we could hike to Lone Elk Lake by 6:30 p.m. Our goal for the outing was to climb 12,799-foot-high Granite Peak of the Beartooth Mountains -- the highpoint of Montana. We would be in the wilderness for three days and two nights. We parked at what seemed to be an abandoned sawmill with a lot of scrap metal parts lying around rusting.

The walking was quick and before we knew it the trail had faded away, leaving us wondering if we had missed a turn. A quick look at the map showed all we had to do was head due north to a turn for Lone Elk Lake, so we continued north ignoring the feeling we were not on route. By 5:00 p.m. we reached a lake at the top of a steep hill, questioning why it was not on the map. Our map was of poor quality causing us to believe the lake was hidden under the blue trail line, so we kept on walking north. As we rounded the east side of the unidentified lake, we encountered a hiker who suggested Lower Aero Lake was to the north east about an hour's hike away. Lower Aero Lake was not our planned target for the day, but it was along an alternate route to Granite Peak. We tried going north east but did not spot Lower Aero Lake.

Finally, we had to accept that we had messed up, and the prospect that Granite Peak would not be in reach this trip settled in hard on us. What a disappointment! "Where had we gone wrong?" was the question we mulled over and over for hours as we back tracked to the unidentified lake and then down the hill in the dark. By 10:00 p.m. we stopped for the day, having found a good campsite along a creek. Now with the peak out of our reach, we hoped tomorrow to at least find Lower Aero Lake and discover how we had missed the turn to Lone Elk Lake.

The next morning as soon as the sun came up, we were up. The realization came that maybe we still had a chance to get back on track and even make it up Granite Peak today. It was a long shot, and a long ways to go, but we decided to give it a try. The first good sign was when we discovered we had walked far enough back the night before that we were now back on the Lady of the Lakes trail. Within 30 minutes we were back down to the intersection of Zimmer Creek and Broadwater River. Next it was through the trees on the south of the river. Across the river we found a trail along Sky Top Creek, and we felt we were on route. Soon enough we passed Lone Elk Lake – what a relief!



By noon we reached Rough Lake, and there was not a cloud in the sky, and we thought maybe, just maybe, we still had a chance of reaching the peak. So, we continued to hurry. Reaching the Sky Top Lakes, we spotted Granite Peak which only heighten our desire to stand on it! The scenery was magnificent especially the calving snowfields along the edges of some of the lakes.

By 2:00 p.m. we found a camp spot, at roughly 10,400 feet. With camp set up our loads were lighter, and by 3:00 p.m. we were aiming for the peak. It did not take more than 30 minutes to reach the head of the large Sky Top Lake, and shortly after we encountered a man and woman heading down. We asked them about the south west couloir route, and shockingly we were snapped at by the woman who said, "if you don't know where you are going, we shouldn't help you." Well, we did know where we were going, and we were not in need of help; we had just hoped they had some insights for us. We shrugged off her rudeness as the man attempted to cover it up by making small talk with us.

Moving forward the walking was time-consuming over miles and miles of boulders. Around 5:00 p.m. the altitude started to affect Peter. Realizing that he should slow his pace, but understanding time was not on our side he told me to go proceed with the push for the peak alone. He would follow along at his own pace. I was reluctant to separate but he assured me it was fine. I understood he had my interest in mind as for him reaching the peak was less important. We arranged a meeting place in case he end up without enough time to reach the top.



Tinged with guilt over separating, I set myself a turnaround time of 7:00 p.m. By 5:30 p.m. I had traversed the base of the slab and was looking up the south west couloir, and up I went. It was all but snow free, and my ice axe was not needed. At 6:15 p.m., I reached a point that was stout class 4. Worried about the return down climb, I searched for an easier way. After trying three different ways up I just about turned around. But then something told me to give it one more go, and up I went reaching the summit ridge by 6:25 p.m.

and the peak by 6:30 p.m.

Out came the camera, snap, snap. Next, I signed the summit log, and had a bite to eat. By 6:55 p.m. I started down. Just off the ridge a 3-foot-wide chunk of rock broke out from under me (luckily, I had two good hand holds) and went zooming down as I yelled "rock" over and over. I prayed Peter was not below it. I made it back to my trekking pole about 50 feet up the couloir at 7:31 p.m. I had left the pole there with a piece of orange webbing tied to it as a guide for Peter to spot from the mouth of the couloir.

By 7:40 p.m. I was out of the couloir and skirting along the slab. By 8:00 p.m. I spotted Peter at our arranged meeting point on the moraine at the base of the peak, and a few minutes later I joined him. It was not until 10:38 p.m. that we finally wandered into our camp. Finding the camp in the dark had been yet another test. We had been hiking for 14.5 hours! Exhausted I lay on the ground and asked Peter to take my photo. After a few snacks we laid down in the tent and slept.



Next morning, I was up at 6:15 a.m. with an upset stomach, and by 8:15 a.m. we were marching out. By 9:00 a.m. we reached Rough Lake, and by 9:45 a.m. Lone Elk Lake was behind us. There were a lot of mountain goats on the ridges east of Lone Elk Lake. At 11:00 a.m. we stopped along Sky Top Creek, soaking our sore feet as we ate some snacks. By 12:45 p.m. we were back at the intersection of Broadwater River and Zimmer Creek, where we instantly realized how we missed the right turn the day before. The right fork of the trail had been blocked with some logs. As such we had gone left and crossed the creek more to the west where the trail downhill along Broadwater River could not be seen. Our lesson learned - bring a better map and plot a few way points! At 2:15 p.m. we reached the truck, plenty tired and with more than one sore muscle. We still had 450 miles of driving ahead of us, and by the time we got back to Peter's place we had been gone for 66 hours, with very little rest.

In summary, day one we drove 450 miles then walked from 2p.m. till 10 p.m., covering 12 or so miles (2,400 vertical feet -from 8,800 to 11,200 ft.). Day two we walked from 8:00 a.m. till 10:38 p.m. covering around 16 miles and going up at least 4,000 vertical feet – not factoring in the added elevation of ups and downs. Day three we walked from 8:15 a.m. till 2:15 a.m. covering about 11 miles.

The day after returning home, a glance at a terrain map showed where we had wandered off to the unidentified lake, which I identified as Zimmer Lake. We had wandered an additional two and a half miles north from the turn off to Aero Lake, where the trail ended. From Zimmer Lake we had gone up to the 11,000-foot south ridge of Mt. Wilse, wandering both south and east, adding at least another mile and a half. Summing the in and out distances, we walked eight extra miles from the turn off to Aero Lake. Additionally, I estimate from our first night camp spot to Broadwater River was one and a half miles. So over all we added around eleven miles to our trip.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/GVUL9ggLKNZ37YaM6>