

Wheeler Peak, NM, 13,161 ft. – April 27, 2013, HP #14: In the Sangre de Cristo Mountains

On the way to New Mexico's Taos ski resort, I swung by the four corners monument where I did my best inverted crab pose allowing me to be in four US states at once. One hand was in Colorado, the other in New Mexico, and my feet were separately in Utah and Arizona. Next stop was Farmington NM where I supplemented my food supplies.

Along Highway 64, after passing through the Apache Nation Reservation, I encountered an Earthship home. Ten miles or so before reaching Taos I crossed over the Rio Grande River on the second highest bridge of the U.S. Highway system.

The ski resort allows over-night parking in their Coyote parking lot. I took advantage of it, sleeping in the back of my SUV for the night. The next morning, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. An hour later I was hiking the Bull of the Woods trail on my way to the two highest peaks in New Mexico - 13,133-foot Mount Walter and its taller neighbor, by 28-feet, Wheeler Peak the tallest of the state.

Along the way I had to do some route finding, and I made the occasional stop, as such it took over four and a half hours to cover the 3,660+ vertical feet and eight miles to Mount Walter. Near the summit, I spooked some bighorn sheep. A sign marking the peak read, "MT. WALTER, ELEV. 13,141 FT., NAMED FOR H. D. WALTER, WHO LOVED THESE MOUNTAINS." It made me smile, after all it is not every day you get stand on a mountain that shares a name with you! Too bad it was not his first name.



It was only another twenty minutes to the pinnacle of the Land of Enchantment, and I arrived at a few minutes after 10 a.m. Wheeler Peak used to be called Taos Peak, meaning "place of red willows." In 1950 it was renamed in honor of the leader of the Wheeler Survey. There is a plaque on the summit, mounted above a cannon type pipe set in a rock base, stating he led the survey for ten years. Walter and Wheeler lie in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (Spanish for "Blood of Christ").

Perhaps alpenglow led to the name of this range which extends into Colorado.

As I headed down, I decided to make my excursion into a loop hike, turning left (west) between the two peaks. With everything still covered in snow I down climbed and glissaded to 11,040-foot Williams Lake in about 45 minutes. At the snow-covered lake, I took a photograph looking southeast toward Simpson Peak with just the south shoulder of Wheeler Peak showing in the photo. Wheeler and Walter are to the north on the same ridge line as Simpson. In another 30 minutes, traveling north, I arrived at the south end of the ski resort; the time was 11:30 a.m. I had not encountered anyone else on the hike.

To get back to my vehicle at the north end of the resort, I had an hour's walk down Twinning Road. Marching down the gravel road lined with cabins, a few cars passed me, and they all ignored my extended thumb asking for a ride.

Later that evening I drove to Taos, and then through Durango Colorado to the outskirts of Cortez where I camped in the National Forest. The next morning, I arrived in Moab and rode the slick rock trail on my mountain bike. Afterward, I drove my SUV over Baby Lions Back.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/HXka642pLkJbXXV29>