

Black Elk Peak, SD, 7,242 ft. – May 30, 2015, HP #19: A Jumble of Granite Spires

Having arrived in Hot Spring South Dakota the evening prior, we checked-out of our motel room by 6:00 a.m. and drove into Custer State Park parking near Sylvan Lake. En route we were lucky enough to see bison, turkeys, deer, and antelope. On the Needles Highway we passed through two one-way tunnels with the narrower of the two being only about eight feet wide.

Black Elk Peak lies in the southwest corner of South Dakota among a jumble of granite spires sticking out above the dark green, almost black, ponderosa pines. The summit is the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains, and close to the geographical center of the United States. The Native people referred to the area as Paha Sapa which translates to hills that are black. The name Black Elk honors the prominent Lakota Sioux medicine man of the same name. When we visited Black Elk Peak it was still officially named Harney Peak, being renamed August 11, 2016.



The hike to Black Elk Peak began at an elevation of 6,145 feet. The first three quarters of a mile gained close to 300 feet while traveling northeast along a former dirt road (turned into a hiking trail) until reaching the south edge of the Black Elk Wilderness Area. At the wilderness boundary trail number 9S, which we were following, remained in Custer State Park by turning southeast. Following some elevation gain trail 9S next turned northeast while descending about 260 feet along a forested path to the valley floor below. Along this descending section, about one and a half miles into the hike, the trail left Custer State Park entering the Black Elk Wilderness Area. A half mile later the trail left Custer County entering Pennington County. The remaining mile and a half proved to be the most strenuous of the three-and-a-half-mile hike, gaining 900 vertical feet with switchbacks bending their way up the slope. During the final push, we encountered manmade rock steps created by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s to make the summit more easily accessible. At one point the rock steps were connected by a steel staircase spanning a gap. While at another point the steps passed through a natural tunnel formed by a large slab leaning against another.

The steps led to an intriguing fortress-like stone structure atop the highpoint of the Mount Rushmore State. Even before the creation of this fire lookout tower, American settlers used Black Elk Peak itself as a fire lookout point as far back as 1911. During the make-work projects of the Great Depression this stone structure, perched on the edge of a cliff, was constructed being completed in 1939. The structure contains several rooms below its lookout tower and even has a basement. The fire lookout was staffed until 1967. Today the structure is on the

register of historic places yet is still open to the public. Interestingly the building has even been the home to an official US Post Office back in the 1940s.

Inside the building we encountered another set of steel steps; these led to the second-floor lookout area. From this top level we encountered panoramic, jaw-dropping views reaching as far as Wyoming and Montana. Everywhere we looked were remarkable granite spires. To the east and slightly north, only four beeline miles distant, resides the famous Mount Rushmore.

Adjacent to the main building, to the southwest, is a manmade reservoir and pumphouse. From the vantage point of the tower we spotted mountain goats wandering the summit likely there to drink from the manmade pond. When needed the reservoir supplied water to the living quarters which had been in the lower level of the building.

After exploring the summit structure, we wandered to the north side of the reservoir and found a private location to enjoy the lunch we had packed in. Including the hour spent on the peak, the whole outing was completed by noon in a total of four hours.

In the afternoon we visited Mount Rushmore and were impressed with it. From Rushmore we had an early dinner in Hill City SD and then drove up to Deadwood SD where we found primitive camping at the Mount Roosevelt Picnic Area. It rained most of the night and was windy.

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