**Humphreys Peak, AZ, 12,633 ft. – November 18, 2010, HP #11: Expansive Never-Ending Views**

We were supposed to leave at 9:00 a.m. but it was almost 10:30 a.m. by the time we headed south on I-15 from Orem, Wednesday Nov 17, 2010. We stopped for dinner at Denny’s in Page AZ and by 9 p.m. we were at Arizona Snowbowl ski area, a 14 mile drive up US-180 from Flagstaff. We slept in the parking lot at over 9,300 feet on a cold night, with no one else around. I had told Ana to bring a warm sleeping bag and an extra blanket or two, but whatever she had was not warm enough and I ended up giving her my down bag. Ana had never experienced resourceful accommodations like this before, and that probably added to her sleeplessness.

Next morning, we were up at 5:00 a.m., and on the trail at 6:30 a.m. with the sun somewhat up. Our destination being the highest peak on San Francisco Mountain, named Humphreys Peak - the highest natural point in the U.S. state of Arizona. Yet another mountain peak with a boring name, paying tribute to an Army officer. Perhaps an officer is a bit better then honoring a politician - another common heedless way to name a peak. San Francisco Mountain, also known as San Francisco Peaks or simply The Peaks, is a group of dormant volcanic peaks along a horseshoe shaped Massif located in the Coconino National Forest. San Francisco Mountain is situated between highway 89 to the east, and highway 180 to the west, and houses Arizona Snowbowl ski resort on its western aspect with the town of Flagstaff east of the mountain.

The commencement of the Humphreys’ Peak trail was not obvious, so we ended up hiking under one of the ski lifts eventually crossing the trail a few hundred yards beyond the end of the lift. Following the trail, we were guided into a conifer and aspen forest, on the west side of the mountain, and up a set of long switchbacks. Near tree line, just below the saddle between Humphreys and Agassiz Peaks, the forest turned into bristlecone pines bent and twisted by wind and frost. A short push up to the saddle offered us views of the Inner Basin of the Massif that forms the San Francisco Peaks. Up to this point we had cover roughly three miles, with one and three quarter’s miles remaining. Here, above tree line, the terrain took on a volcanic appearance as the route steepened passing three false summits before reaching the highpoint.

A person standing on a mountain

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWe made it to the roof of the Grand Canyon state in three and a half hours. A dusting of snow, here and there, coated the mountain but volcanic rocks showed through everywhere. This was my eleventh state highpoint, and my 179th mountain climb. The 360-degree views were expansive seeming to never end almost as though one is looking into space. Out there somewhere was the Grand Canyon, along with a lot of seemingly empty land some of which surely belongs to the Painted Desert – it was remarkable. We had the summit to ourselves making the views that much easier to enjoy. After forty-five minutes on top of Arizona we began the return trip down.

A person and person standing on a mountain top

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceI wanted to summit Mt. Agassiz on the way down but on the ascent from the saddle we noticed a sign saying it was closed. I have no idea why it was closed but the sign seemed serious threatening a $500 fine. I had just begun a seven-month un-jobbing phase and did not like the idea of spending $500 to reach another peak.

Around 3 p.m. we returned to the car, having covered nine and a half miles and over 3,300 vertical feet.

On the drive down from the ski resort we stopped before Flagstaff and ate dinner on the side of the road, then headed to the Kaibab forest near Jacobs Lake where we found a free spot to camp for the night.

**Mount Whitney, CA, 14,497 ft. – September 23, 2011, HP #12: East Buttress**

The Matts and I left Utah County around 8:00 p.m., September 21, arriving in Las Vegas five hours later. The next morning we were on the road by 9:00 a.m., heading west toward Pahrump, NV and into Death Valley. Passing through Death Valley the road dipped as low as 190-feet below sea level, and the temperature was over 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

It was noon when we arrived in Lone Pine, CA. Our first stop was the Ranger Station where we picked up our backcountry permits and rented a couple of bear proof canisters. Next, we stopped at a pizza joint and had lunch. After lunch we drove the 13 miles from 3,727-foot-high Lone Pine to 8,365-foot-high Whitney Portal.

By 2:30 p.m., we had our gear and backpacks organized and had started hiking on the main Mount Whitney trail. Within a mile or so we left the main trail, where it crosses the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek, and headed up a wooded slope into a willow-choked valley, roughly following the creek. After the second creek crossing, we arrived at the base of the Ebersbacher Ledges. Traversing the ledges involved some third class scrambling where a slip could be fatal. Once over the ledges we reached Lower Boy Scout Lake at an elevation of 10,300 feet, having walked approximately two and a half miles. We crossed the creek and traversed around the lake on its left (south) side, and were soon climbing over talus, eventually crossing the creek again where it runs over granite slabs. Within a mile from the lower lake, by 6:00 p.m., we had found a camp spot at 11,300-foot Upper Boy Scout Lake. We managed to get our tents set up before the sunset. For dinner I ate a freeze-dried dinner called “Pasta Primavera” which was surprisingly tasty.

A person sitting on a rock by a body of water

Description automatically generated with low confidenceThe next morning, September 23, we left camp early just after 5:00 a.m., heading toward Iceberg Lake at the base of Mount Whitney’s Eastern Buttress. Iceberg Lake is approximately a mile and a quarter east of Upper Boy Scout Lake and over 1,200 vertical feet higher. The sun was fully up when we reached it at 6:30 a.m. At the lake we stocked up on water, then scrambled up a 1,000 vertical feet of talus and third-class terrain to a notch below what is known as the First Tower where the roped climbing of the East Buttress would begin.

The first two pitches have the hardest ratings of the climb at 5.8 and went straight up to the top of the Second Tower. They required about an hour and a quarter to climb. Matthew Long led the first pitch, and Matthew Jesperson led the second pitch. Although we started out before another group consisting of two climbers, they caught up to us at the top of the first pitch. Sharing the route with them ended up being the story of the day.

The third pitch is where things got difficult. We had the option at this point to go over a short arête rated 5.7 or to drop down a big step to a ramp rated 5.6. With speed in mind, and hoping to pull ahead of the other party, we decided on the ramp, but we did not realize it was spotted in snow and ice due to its northern aspect. Matthew Long led this pitch, and masterfully avoided most of the snow/ice, but as I followed, I soon had my climbing shoes covered in snow, and my hands frozen. This was a bit nerve rattling, especially when my now wet shoes failed to grip even as I tried, unsuccessfully, to smear them on the rocks to dry them. Arriving at the belay ledge at the base of a prominent right-facing corner was a great relief, and my shoes eventually dried out. The other party used the arête option converging at the same belay area and informed us that their line was easier climbing, but limited protection gave it the higher difficulty rating.

A person standing on a rock

Description automatically generated with low confidenceIt was after 10:00 a.m. when we began the fourth pitch, led by Matthew Jesperson. He ran the rope almost completely out on this 5.6 step like section known as the "red corner". Matthew Long led the next pitch which took us up to a large ledge just under the "peewee" block.

The sixth pitch which runs along the right-hand side of the peewee block was led by Matthew Jesperson, and the three of us topped out on that by noon. All this time there was one other party of two ahead of our two parties. This front-running party were often referred to as the "white guy" because one of the fellows was dressed in white. Believe it or not his partner was dressed in black. At this point, the top of the peewee block, all three groups overlapped momentarily, with the lead group soon pulling ahead again.

Keeping with leads swinging between Matthew Long and Matthew Jesperson, Matthew Long lead the seventh pitch, choosing a flake which was too good to pass up even though he worried it might be challenging for me to follow as my alpine rock-climbing experience was very limited. Fortunately, it ended up being fine for me to follow.

We ran into a little bit of trouble on the eighth pitch when we decided not to wait for the climbers in front of us to finish the pitch. Matthew Jesperson attempted a variation only to run into a difficult ceiling causing him to be lowered back to the belay station. By now, around 1:00 p.m., the other climbers were gone, and we were able to climb the standard pitch they had used. Matthew Long also led this one, which looked relatively easy but turned out to be challenging as tired and as cold as we were.

At the top of the eighth pitch, I put in one more piece of protection, climbed up a large boulder and unroped followed by the two Matts. At this point I decided to remove my "cruel shoes" and put on my boots understanding the remaining 300 feet to be mostly class three or moderate class four. As I did so, my partners kept moving and I soon lost sight of them.

Eventual, as I scrambled up, without the protection of a rope, what turned out to be fourth class and moderate fifth class terrain I noticed Matthew Long, and decided to angle towards him. In doing so, about 30 feet below the summit, I encountered a sheer 10-foot wall which I dared not climb unroped. I scrambled around a bit looking for an easier alternative only to come up short. I had just decided to sit down and eat my lunch before trying to work my way down and south to the third-class terrain, when I heard Matthew Long calling out to me. I asked him to get a rope and drop it down to me and he did. On rope I was able to climb past the roadblock, in my boots, and then finish the scramble to the 14,497-foot peak. From the time we roped up almost seven hours had passed making it three o’clock in the afternoon when we reached the roof-top of California. There was no site of the other two parties who had been on the east buttress with us, and amazingly we had the highpoint to ourselves.

A picture containing mountain, sky, nature, outdoor

Description automatically generatedWe relaxed inside the summit hut, erected in 1909, and after forty-five minutes we located the Mountaineers route, and started down it. We found it coated in ice which we were not prepared for being without crampons and axes. With careful route finding, sticking to the fourth-class boulders on the left side, we were able to negotiate our way around most of the slick spots. Eventually we crossed over on a sugary snow section and continued down the right side. Just above the saddle where the route turns right and heads down to the west, we were forced to down climb a fifth-class section about 20-feet high, that had limited hand holds and spots of ice. It was quite unsettling, especially after all we had been through up to that point. Fortunately, we all made it down without incident and continued down the "never ending" west aspect couloir of the Mountaineers Route reaching Iceberg Lake by 6:00 p.m. Within an hour we were back at our camp at Upper Boy Scout Lake. Fourteen hours of hiking, climbing, and scrambling was now behind us!

September 24, we woke up to hail, that would come and go intermingled with sunshine or rain. Enjoying and needing the rest, we forfeited our plan to scramble up Mt. Russell. By 11:30 a.m. in steady hail we headed down. As we headed down the hail soon stopped, and the sun came out. At the lower lake I removed my jacket and paused to look back noticing the peak of Mt. Whitney above the lakes eastern wall, it looked a long ways away!

At the Ebersbacher Ledges we got off track by following a lone hiker in an orange hat. We soon discovered our error and notified the hiker as well. Once we got down the ledges and across the creek, we stopped for a drink and I noticed the hiker had ignored us and was way off course, in potential danger, and without his backpack. I whistled at him, caught his attention, and we were able to yell directions to him, allowing him to get off the ledges. I left my pack and hiked up to him, meeting him just a few yards past the creek crossing. He seemed uneasy but claimed to be fine. I asked about his pack and he said it fell off the cliff when he tried to lower it down a section. Hearing he was alright and confirming a second time that he did not need help, we continued down arriving at our car in less than three hours. I weighed my pack at the trailhead, and it was only two pounds lighter than when we started out, and I had no water left. A liter of water weighs 2.2 pounds, so essentially my pack was unchanged in weight from the hike in.

From Whitney Portal we returned to Lone Pine and the pizzeria. Following our late lunch, we returned the bear canisters and drove back through Death Valley to Las Vegas. Sunday morning, we were up at 5:15 a.m., allowing us to return to Utah County in the early afternoon. What an awesome, unforgettable adventure, and how lucky for me that two good friends were willing to allow an inexperienced rock climber, namely me, join them!

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/DERSibTMDvKgSCKR7>

**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 then 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. Where we parked seemed to be an abandoned sawmill, and there was a lot of scrap metal parts etc. 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 and it seemed like there might be a blue spot under the blue trail line, so we kept on walking to the north. As we rounded the east side of the unidentified lake, we encountered another hiker and he 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 alter route to Granite Peak. We tried going north east, but we could 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 just 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, and then across the river, and 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!

A person standing next to a glacier

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceBy 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, only heightening 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. By 3:00 p.m., with lighter loads, 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, we just hoped they had some insights for us. We shrugged off her rudeness, and the man proceeded to chat with us. We hoped to reach the slab, on the face of the mountain, by 5:00 p.m., but the walking was slow over miles and miles of boulders.

Peter stared to feel the altitude and by 5:00 p.m. he told me to just go ahead and try to reach the peak, and that he would follow along at his own pace. We arranged a meeting place in case he opted to not continue. Feeling guilty about separating I recognized I had to go for it.

A picture containing mountain, outdoor, sky, nature

Description automatically generatedI 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 and 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.

A picture containing grass, outdoor, person

Description automatically generatedBy 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, were we instantly realized how we missed the right turn the day before. The right fork of the trail had been blocked with some logs and so 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 tried 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. Meaning, in and out, 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/GVUL9gqLKNZ37YaM6>

**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 New Mexico where I supplemented my food supplies.

Along Highway 64, after passing through the Apache Nation Reservation, I encountered an Earthship home. Ten mile 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 and I took advantage of it sleeping in the back of my SUV. The next morning, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. and by 5:00 a.m. I was hiking the Bull of the Woods trail on my way to the two highest peaks in New Mexico; 13,133-foot Mt. Walter and its neighbor, Wheeler Peak 28 feet taller making it the tallest in 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 Mt. Walter. Near the first 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.

A picture containing snow, outdoor, sky, person

Description automatically generatedIt was only another twenty minutes to the pinnacle of the Land of Enchantment, and I arrived at a few minutes after 10 o’clock . Wheeler Peak, used to be called Taos Peak, meaning “place of red willows” but in 1950 it was changed to its current name in honor of the leader of the Wheeler Survey. There is a plaque on top, 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 peak. 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 south east 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 hours walk on the 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.

A picture containing snow, sky, outdoor, mountain

Description automatically generated

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

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

**Guadalupe Peak, TX, 8,749 ft. – June 8, 2013, HP #15: Watching for Rattlesnakes**

Friday morning, I got up at my regular time of seven o’clock. After spending nine hours at work, I drove from Springville, Utah to the Salt Lake City International Airport to catch a flight to El Paso, Texas via Phoenix Arizona. I arrived in El Paso a just before midnight, feeling sleepy, and picked up a rental car.

Leaving the airport, I located an open store and bought some groceries. Next, I found Highway 180/62 and drove east 110 miles to Guadalupe Mountains National Park. En route I encountered an “lnland (aka Interior) Check Point” operated by the US Border Patrol – something I was not aware existed. As I approached, I assumed it was a weigh station, but as I entered I had this strange feeling that I was crossing the border. Supposedly border agents have the right to set up check points anywhere within 100 miles of the Country’s borders. The on-duty officer asked me where I was going and seemed a little surprised due to the late hour. He also wondered where I would be staying. I told him I would sleep in the car. After a while, another officer with a dog arrived, and the pair walked behind the car. I assumed the dog was sniffing for drugs. Once the main officer’s apparent curiosity was satisfied, he asked me to state my country of citizenship, and pleased with my answer he sent me on my way.

By 3:00 a.m. I arrived at the Pine Springs Campground, and spent the next hour looking around, getting food ready, and organizing my pack for the pending hike to the highpoint of Texas. The hike rises just over 3,000 vertical feet in 4.25 miles. I figured I could cover that easily in three hours up and two and a half hours down. I wanted to leave the National Park before 2:00 p.m., allowing plenty of time to get back to the airport for my return flight that same day. Having the time and not wanting to hike in the dark, I decided to try to catch an hour of sleep in the car. I did doze off, but as if on cue I woke up at 5:00 a.m., to a hint of dawn. I grabbed my pack, adding my headlamp to it, as there was enough light to not warrant it, and was on the trail by 5:15 a.m. As I wandered up several switch backs, the sun was soon fully up, and the temperature became comfortable enough for a t-shirt.

A mile and a half into the hike, I calculated I was covering about a half mile every 15 minutes. At that rate I reasoned I would likely be on top by 7:30 a.m. The walking was easy, the trial was direct and by 7:10 a.m. I reached the top of Texas, not having stopped for a drink of water or anything. I had both the trail up, and the summit, to myself. At this early morning hour, the sky in all directions was a cloud-free brilliant blue.

On the peak stands a triangular pyramid maybe six feet tall, made of stainless steel. According to Wikipedia, “it was erected by American Airlines in 1958 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Butterfield Overland Mail, a stagecoach route that passed south of the mountain.” American Airlines has their eagle logo on one side. Another side remembers the Pony Express Riders contracted to the overland mail outfit. The third side displays a compass rose with north replaced by the fleur-de-lis Boy Scouts of America symbol, and in the center of the compass is an old-school pilot donning an aviator hat and goggles.

I ate my breakfast sandwich as I read entries in the summit log which I found in an ammunition box at the base of the monument. Several entries mentioned the lack of a view due to hazy conditions - not the case this morning. Around 7:40 a.m. I mistakenly thought I heard voices coming up the trail, so I grabbed my pack and started down.

With plenty of time, I decided to wander down to El Capitan a sub-peak to the south. The off-trail travel, over arid terrain, caused me to be keenly cautious of potential rattlesnakes.

Traveling from the Texas highpoint, one must first drop down 900 feet and then regain over 200 feet to obtain the top of El Capitan. Within an hour of leaving the highpoint I encountered a green ammunition box (exactly like the one on Guadalupe Peak). Looking around nothing appeared higher, so I acknowledged it as the El Capitan summit, and added my name to the logbook found inside. The next most recent entry dated back a few months. The views off the cliff face to the west were breathtaking, and the view back to the north, made Guadalupe Peak more impressive. I could see two hikers at the stainless-steel monument a beeline mile away.

I hoped I would encounter a trail leading from El Capitan back to where I had parked the car, but I there did not seem to be one. Playing it cautious I retraced my path back up to the Texas highpoint. This required just under an hour, and I was a little less cautious in watching out for rattlesnakes. Once back on the established trail, I made good time. All five groups heading up, that I passed on my descent, were friendly. I glanced over at El Capitan a few times and questioned if the summit register was really on its highpoint. The temperature remained pleasant, with the occasional strong wind gust typical of the area. By 11:15 a.m. I was back at my rental car having reached two peaks in as much time as I had budgeted for state highpoint alone.

Unaware of what else around might be of interest, I decided to head back to El Paso, where I could get some more food and hopefully catch a nap at the airport prior to my 6:30 p.m. flight. As I headed west on highway 180/62, I looked back at the peaks, and noticed that the sky was filling with dust, gone were the clear views I had enjoyed that morning.

On the outskirts of El Paso, I stopped to purchase some fruit and juice before continuing into the city. Tired and not really interested in looking around I filled up the car with gas and return to the airport. It was close to 2:00 p.m. when I dropped off the rental car and walked across the parking lot. Entering the airport, I stopped at the first restroom to change out of my hiking gear. By the time I checked-in, cleared TSA, and found my gate it was after 3:00 p.m. I tried to sleep sitting at the gate, but that was uncomfortable and so I moved to a couch near one of the TVs, and I managed to doze in and out for the next 45 minutes.

Eventually it was time for my flight to Phoenix and from there to Salt Lake City. I arrived in Salt Lake City close to 11:00 p.m. and was home a few minutes after midnight. After 41.5 hours of no real sleep, I was exhausted, and my bed was a welcome site.



Photo Album: s

**Denali, AK, 20,320 ft. – June 7, 2014, HP #16:** Coincidentally, we reached the south peak summit on a Saturday, the same day of the week as the first expedition did, and exactly 101 years, to the date, after the first.

A full year past from the time I stood on the highest natural point in Texas, until I reached another state highpoint. The wait was worth it, as the next one was the grandest of them all.

Since at least 2009 the seeds of one day climbing Mount McKinley (as it was still officially named back then) had been growing in my mind. By 2010 having climbed both Mt. Hood and Mt. Rainer the itch had gotten pretty serious. Even so it wasn’t until 2014 when I finally got the chance to do so. Over those four years I practiced sled hauling, did a lot of winter camping, and climbed a lot of mountains including 18,490 foot Pico de Orizaba in Mexico. I also improved my rock and ice climbing skills as well as my glacier travel skills as such I was qualified when my chance arrived.

On March 16, 2014 I contacted thirteen people on Summitpost.org in search of climbing partners for Denali. That resulted in getting in touch with Carl of Colorado who invited me to join his “Kicking Buttress” team becoming its final member. None of the four of us knew each other but we all had good climbing resumes making the gamble worth it. We would all meet in Anchorage in 65 days.

Climbing permits needed to be purchase, for $360, no less than 60 days prior to the climb start date, so I immediately took care of that and next arranged a flight to Anchorage.

Less than two weeks later disaster stuck when I woke up from a nap to learn my house was on fire! I warned my wife, and then immediately set out saving my climbing gear before the police escorted me out of the smoke filled building. Initially I feared that now I would have to cancel the Denali trip. Fortunately, I was able to make arrangements and my climbing plans remained.

Time passed quickly and soon I found myself in Anchorage arriving at close to midnight to a well lite night sky. At the Hampton Inn I woke up Adam meeting him for the first time. Shortly after I meet Carl and Ron as they arrived. The next morning we made our way to REI, A.M.H, and Wal-Mart to pick up our remaining food and gear items. As the evening approached I was filled with anticipation thinking about what we four strangers were about to take on together.

The next morning the Talkeetna Taxi shuttle service picked us up at 6:30 a.m. taking us 114 miles north to Talkeetna. Arriving at 9:15 a.m. we had plenty of time to first drop off the Russian climbing team, at Talkeetna Air Taxi, who were sharing our shuttle prior to our 9:45 a.m. orientation meeting at the Walter Harper Ranger Station. Denali’s Harper glacier and the Talkeetna Ranger Station are both named after Walter Harper an Alaskan native and the first recorded person to stand on Denali’s tallest peak. Harper was 20 years old at the time, and the date was June 7, 1913.

Denali, is a Native American word meaning “The High One” and it is the tallest mountain in North America towering even above its neighbors. When measured from base peak, with a vertical relief of 18,000 feet, it is the tallest (even though it is not the highest) mountain in the world. The mountain’s extreme cold has a record low of minus 77 F (-61 C) with wind chill down to minus 148 F (-100 C). Strong winds are common, and have been estimated to gust as high as 300 miles per hour. It is by far the coldest of all the mountains in the United States. In fact, during the summer Denali is still colder than any location in the other 49 states during the winter. By some measurements it is also considered the coldest place on earth. The mountain is always covered in snow and ice, but below that the mountain is formed of granite. On average the mountain is only totally visible four days a month during the summer months meaning there is nearly constant weather issues.

Following the orientation we walked down Talkeetna Main Street carrying our issued Clean Mountain Cans (CMCs) making our way to K2 Aviation, where we had previously left our gear. As my teammates went into the office to obtain our flight schedule, I entered the hangar to change into my climbing clothes and to prepare my gear for flight. Prior to boarding the Cessna that would fly us to base camp each of us with his gear was weighed ensuring the combination did not exceed 300 pounds. By 1:10 p.m. we were in the air looking fresh and full of excitement.

Soon we left all signs of the green landscape behind, as we enter a world of jagged mountains and wide, glacier-filled valleys. The 55 mile scenic flight to the Kahiltna Glacier landing strip at a 7200 feet elevation took 30 minutes. It is here that the West Buttress route begins. The mountain has other routes but today eighty percent of climbers use this route.

By 2:00 p.m. our gear was unloaded and we had checked in with the base camp manager. The weather was clam, so after we dug the required food and fuel cache we set off for Camp I. Having to move four weeks’ worth of food, fuel, and gear requires each team member to carry a 50-60 pound pack, while pulling a 60 pound sled.

Traveling over glaciers necessitates tying the team and sleds to a rope which if keep tight limits the danger of falling into hidden crevasses. Our rope order was Carl in the front, followed by me, then Adam, and then Ron. Being in the back is the toughest position as leaving Base Camp entails descending 400 feet down Heart Break Hill. Pulling a sled downhill without rigid polls, when there is no one behind you to control it, is an inconvenience. Also if the last person falls into a crevasse he risks being hit by his sled as again there is no one behind him to stop it from following him into the crack.

It took us 4 hours to cover the approximately five and a half miles to Camp I. The camp was in the shade of the surrounding mountains when we arrived and so we immediately bundled up to avoid catching a chill. We set up our two tents, a two man tent to be used by one person, and a four man tent to be used by the other three. The idea with the tents was that we could all take turns in the small one thus providing us with some alone time. By the time we set up camp, and melted water, and prepared dinner it was 11:00 p.m.

Tuesday, May 27 we woke to snow falling. It was cold enough and windy enough that the tent poles were covered in rime ice indicating the wind was from the south. Before leaving Talkeetna we had been warned of an approaching storm, knowing that it might last multiple days we decided to move up to the second camp in case conditions further deteriorated.

The 2.5 miles from Camp I to Camp II involves going up Ski Hill to just below Kahiltna Pass to an elevation of 9700 feet. This leg is often done as a double carry meaning loads are taken up with two trips. With concerns about the weather and still full of energy we decided to tackle it as another single carry. In low visibility due to the snow falling, we broke camp at 3:25 p.m. and labored up to Camp II in 4.5 hours. It’s astonishing how much time it takes to go such a short distance when loaded down with heavy packs and sleds.

At Camp II it was cold enough that I put on my summit parka even as we shoveled snow and erected walls for our campsite which took an hour and a half to complete. It was midnight before we ate and after one a.m. when we went to bed. Bear in mind that at this time of year darkness never reaches the mountain – 23 hours of sunlight are granted and just one hour of twilight. I didn’t even bring a headlamp onto the mountain.

Along with us camped at Camp II were members of the British military known as the 1 Rifles Alaskan Bulge team, a group of Black Diamond employees, a troop from Columbians, and a two Russian teams.

Over the next three days the storm did not let up, as such we stayed put. Overnight the tents would become buried in snow and we’d have to wake up and dig them out to prevent the aluminum poles from bending or breaking under the extra load. As we waited on the storm we had plenty of work to do improving the camp walls, keeping the area inside the walls dug out, melting snow for water, and cooking. Free time was spent playing cards, or resting. In spite of being pinned down I wrote in my journal “I love this experience”.

Our sixth day on the mountain, and our fourth day in Camp II, I was the first one out of the tent and the weather broke momentarily causing me to notify the others and prompting us to start packing. I was eager to start up even when the snow shower resumed but we decided to wait to see what the Brits did as they had sent out a reconnaissance team to scout out the path and conditions. When the Brits returns saying the trail was heavily wanded our team prepared to move up to the next camp.

Camp III is located at the base of Motorcycle Hill 1.5 miles away. The elevation gain from Camp II to Camp III is 1300 feet. We traveled in a storm again. As we went up we passed groups coming down the mountain many who had been stuck at the 14,200 foot camp for as much as 10 days, without a chance to attempt the summit. I notified one of the descenders that his nose was white indicating the possibility of frostbite.

We arrive at the 11,000 foot camp at 7:30 p.m.. Under the labor of the ascent I was down to a polyester shirt over a wool shirt when we arrived. Once we stopped moving it became very cold and being sweaty we felt it even more. We were not luckily enough to find a vacated camp spot as there were many teams staying at Camp III. As such we had to get to work preparing a spot by digging and sawing snow to erect wind block walls, and to level out spots for the tents. It was after midnight before we crawled into our sleeping bags.

The next day I woke with a stomachache and was out of the tent by 7:00 a.m. No one in the camp appeared to be up yet. By 7:30 a.m. Carl joined me, and him and I improved the camp walls and added a large kitchen area. It was windy and cold till about 10:00 a.m. when the sun came over the ridges and soon folks were heading up Motorcycle Hill. By 1:30 p.m. we too were hauling a cache up the hill. Thankfully, we encountered no wind at Windy Corner. We were carrying small enough loads that we didn’t use the sleds this day. After covering 1.75 miles and arriving at 13,500 ft. we dug a hole in the snow and buried a cache of food and fuel. Food caches necessitate being buried in the snow to prevent ravens from getting into them. Also they have to be marked with wands so they can be found after a snow storm. Mountain regulations required the markers be labeled with stickers issued to each team during orientation, that way if caches are not recovered the violators can be fined.

Our eight day on the mountain turned out to be mostly clear, and we took advantage of that by moving up to the Basin Camp (aka Camp IV) located at 14,200 feet, passing by and leaving our cache on the way. I was in favor of leaving two of our four sleds behind at our Camp III cache and sharing the remaining two sleds but we ended up taking just one. As such we had full back packs. Carl was a real champion this day as he single handedly pull the overloaded sled all the way to the Basin Camp.

Wandering into Camp IV we found all the established spots to be full so once again we had to dig snow and build walls. I would guess that around 30 teams (or more) were camped here. At any given time, during the peak climbing months it is very possible to have around 500 climbers on the mountain, in fact when we checked in there were 489 climbers on the mountain. Typically fifty percent will reach the actual peak. The Annual Mountaineering Summary by the National Park Service reported that for 2014 only one in three climbers reached the summit. Between 1967 and 2014 (inclusive) only in 5 seasons has the summit reaching percentage fallen below 40%.

Temperatures were around 0F (-18 C) at that time of day, 9:30p.m., and I donned my 390 gram 850 fill summit parka over my other five layers – two wool shirts, a fleece, a 150 gram 850 fill down coat, a Gortex shell. Having become a pattern we didn’t eat until 11:30 p.m. and we went to bed about 12:30 a.m.

At 26,200 feet on the south col of Everest the lowest October temperature recorded is -17 F (-27 C), in comparison in June on Denali at 14,000 feet, and higher, night time temperatures are routinely -30 F or lower.

The next day we learned that no one on had gotten onto the Kahiltna Glacier after May 26 for about 5 days, as such it was very lucky that flown when we did. Sure we had been pinned down at 9700 feet for several days but at least we were on the mountain and acclimating rather than being stuck at nearly sea level in Talkeetna.

June 4 was another clear, sunny day identical to the pervious one and we speculated that a lot of folks were finally reaching the summit. Later it was rumored that as many as 100 people summited this day. Until now the summit percentage for the season was 20% or lower with only 15 people having reached the summit the day we had our orientation. We too decided to take advantage of the weather and moved a cache up the headwall. Adam did not join us as he had decided the 14200 foot camp was the end of the line for him.

Climbing from 14200 feet to the 16,200 foot col at the top of the headwall is the steepest part of the West Buttress route we were following. This steepness necessitates ascending fixed lines on an ascender. It was fun to go up the lines, however coming down the fixed lines was dangerous as protection of an ascender will not work then traveling down.

That night we ate spaghetti. Our meals were arranged on a three day repeating schedule, which was helpful for buying the food but which we didn't necessarily stick to on the mountain. Our three breakfast choices were freeze dried bacon and eggs with freeze dried yogurt and dehydrated apples, or instant oatmeal with freeze dried pineapple, or granola. Herbal tea, and/or hot chocolate was also part of breakfasts. For lunches we had bagels, wraps, salami and cheese, or snack food such as trial mix or potato chips. Our dinner menus were either pre-packaged freeze dried meals, or Rice-a-Roni, or angel hair spaghetti with pesto and parmesan cheese. Granola bars, chocolate, hard candy, and similar snacks were also part of our diet. We also had a few limited variety items like couscous, Ramon, beef jerky, freeze dried desserts, and fig newtons. Our diet was satisfactory, but supplementing and varying it with items traded for from other teams was appreciated.

June 5 was a rest day and the following day we moved to the high camp at 17,200 from where we would make our summit bid. The three of us started at toward the headwall at 12:45 p.m. At this point the snowshoes we had worn up to the Basin Camp were left behind, and we attached crampons to our boots. This time it took us 3 hours and 15 minutes, 45 minutes longer than our caching trip, ascend the fixed lines as there were more people using the lines which slowed us down as did our heavier packs.

After digging up the cache we decided to just take enough food for that night, and for the next day, and for the following day’s breakfast, even though in the cache we had four days’ worth of food for three people. As such we were really banking on making the summit on June 7 and being able to get back to either the 16K cache or the 14K camp June 8.

From the cache it took 3 hours to cover the 1000 feet up the 16 K ridge, over Washburn’s Thumb, and into Camp V at 17200 feet. I had read that climbers should plan on covering only 300 vertical feet per hour at the higher elevations and that was about our speed. It was cold but calm and sunny and it seemed like the shadow that covers 14K camp at 7:30 p.m. would not reach Camp V for a while, so we wandered over to the top of the rescue gully and took a few pictures of the 16 K ridge, as well as Basin Camp below with Mt. Foraker behind it.

Unlike the 11,000 ft. and 14,200 ft. camps the high camp contained very few other teams. By 9:30 p.m. we had camp set up, it went quite quickly as we were able to modify an existing spot. During the night Ron woke up and complained about having trouble breathing. I explained to him that that was to be expected as at our high elevation there is only 50 percent the amount of oxygen as there is a sea level – the air was thin! At that elevation it one must inhale twice to obtain the same amount of oxygen of one breath taken at the sea. Denali’s latitude is 63 degrees north. Being so far north of the equator results in lower barometric pressure and thus less oxygen – the oxygen level at 20,000 feet in Alaska is comparable to 23,000 feet in the Himalaya.

Saturday June 7, we were up at 8 a.m. yet it took until 11:45 a.m. before we set off for the summit, mostly because it takes a long time to melt snow to have enough water for three men for a full day. We tried to pack reasonable light and still be prepared for emergencies. Between us we carried a sleeping bag, an insulted matt, a stove, 3 pickets, an extra pair of crampons, a snow saw, and a shovel. Additionally we each carried extra clothing, a camera, food, and water. At these high elevations we donned our insulated pants, shell pants, over boots, and multiple layers on the top half of our bodies. My upper body clothing was a toque on my head, a neoprene mask for my face, two wool shirts, a fleece jacket, a down jacket, a water proof wind proof layer (Gortex), goggles, and double layer mittens. In my pack I also carried my large down parka, -40 degree mittens, and a neck gaiter protection I anticipated needing on the summit.

From high camp the route heads northeast (mostly east) along the steep “Autobahn” toward 18,200 foot Denali Pass. This section does not get sun until the afternoon and so it is extremely cold, as such most avoid early starts out of Camp V, however our start was unusually late.

The Autobahn has a steep dangerous fall line to climbers left and has been the site of many Denali accidents so as we went up we took advantage of pickets in place and clipped our rope to them.

It was stimulating to reach the top of Denali Pass at over 18000 feet where we turned south toward Arch Deacons tower. Above 18,000 feet on Denali a person is reduced to roughly 50% of his mental capacity due to the lack of oxygen, and one could really feel a difference. At the apex of Denali Pass we had a decent view directly east of the Harper Glacier - which on first sight I thought looked like the football field but that was still a long ways off.

The Denali Pass vicinity is where the 1967 Wilcox expedition had their high camp from which they made their submit bids. On July 18 after splitting up, with five descending and the remainder lingerer to make their summit attempt one of the fiercest storms in the mountains history ravaged the locale. By the time the storm subsided and the group of five reached base camp the other seven members of the expedition had died. To date this may be considered the severest mountaineering disaster in North America. Since then over one hundred more have perished on Denali, averaging out to about one death per year.

On Pig Hill we met the guide camped next to us at 17200 ft. who was short-roping down one of his Japanese clients. Another guide was bringing down what I assumed where Russian clients. Gaining the summit ridge we trudged along on the left side, in strong winds, aware (but unable to see) that the right side drops over 8000 feet down to the east fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. Nine hours and fifteen minutes after leaving Camp V we reached the top of North American at 20,320 feet. The time was 9 p.m. and no other teams remained at the high point. Coincidentally, we reached the south peak summit on a Saturday, the same day of the week as the first expedition did, and exactly 101 years, to the date, after the first.

The amazing views were hidden from us obstructed by clouds and blowing snow, and all I could think about was getting down before the already bad weather worsened. I snapped a picture of the summit marker, and one of Carl at the marker, then had him take a photo of me, followed by a selfie. I also got a photo of Ron approaching the summit, as he was the third one on the rope, and a picture of Carl’s watch to document the time. We couldn’t have been on top for more than five minutes and all my photos were taken within the same minute (9:02 p.m.) before my camera could freeze. We didn’t even take the time to don our extra summit layers as we started down without resting leaving no time for our body temperatures to drop.

The winds were gusting extremely strong as we descended, blowing up a lot of snow and reducing visibility to 20 feet or less; likely it was also snowing. On the way down my face mask froze up and I had to switch to my neck gaiter. To avoid frostbite I’d often place my gloved hand on my nose and cheeks. At one point Ron was having some trouble with his goggles so he removed them, and rime ice immediately began to grow from his eye lashes.

I hoped that once we turned to go west down the Autobahn that we’d get out of the wind but in fact it only worsened. I worried we could really be in trouble and prayed we would make it back to High Camp without an accident. Fortunately the other teams we had seen coming down were in front of us and now and then we could still find their tracks and very rarely we caught a glimpse of them.

Much to my relief eventually we caught up to another group and at 1 a.m. we rolled back into High Camp dehydrated, hunger, and too tired to solve either. The drinking water in one of my bottles had frozen so I put the bottle in my sleeping bag to warm it up, popped a hard candy into my mouth, and lay down to sleep thankful to be back at camp and delighted we had made the summit.

The cold and wind gusts of the evening before continued the next day - our fourteenth day on the mountain. All the same our objective was to get back down to the more protected Basin Camp at 14,200 feet where the fourth member of our team awaited us. We broke camp at 2:30 p.m. and one and a half hours later we retrieved our cache at the top of the headwall. As we had experienced ascending the headwall the fixed lines were more difficult and time consuming to descend with our loaded packs taking us two hours to get back to Basin Camp from the 16,200 foot col.

Arriving, with light snow falling, to the relative comfort of our established camp at 14,200 feet felt really nice. It was good to see Adam and he was pleased to learn of our success. Our tiredness soon overtook us as Adam melted us some snow for drinking water. Ron feel asleep with his sunglasses on.

Monday, June 9 our plan was to take a rest day but by 2:00 p.m. the day was turning from warm to stormy so we decided to pack up hoping to get down to the 11K camp before the full force of the storm arrived. Arriving at our 13,500 foot cache the weather really started to deteriorate, and a guided group ascending informed us that there were a lot of snow pillows after Windy Corner which turned into trail-breaking for us. As we continued down it began to snow steadily. I was the third guy on our rope, behind Ron and Adam respectively, and many times I could not see Ron. Luckily there were wands in place and we relied on them to find our way down. I had the side zippers of my pants unzipped to the knees for ventilation and without stopping and using both hands it’s not possible to zip them up so I was getting a lot of cold air circulating around my backside, and I thought to myself “you are literally freezing your butt off”.

Right around Squirrel Point one of my crampons came loose and fell off. To get it back on was a big ordeal as it required removing my pack, securing that to avoid it sliding away, then cleaning snow and ice off the boot, and removing my gloves to reattach the crampon. The adjustment on the crampon was frozen and so I was unable to tighten it, but luckily it stayed on for the rest of the descent to Camp III.

Before arriving at Motorcycle Hill I was worried that it would be loaded with snow and as such a major avalanche concern (it has slidden in the past and caught and killed climbers in 2011), but luckily the hill was on the windward side and the new snow was blown off it. It took us 3 hours to travel from Camp IV to Camp III a distance of 2.75 miles. Once again Carl singlehandedly managed our only sled.

As might be expected the camp spot we had built eight days earlier was taken, but this time we were fortunate to find a vacate one, with existing walls, on the north end of camp. The next morning I slept late until 10:00 a.m. at which time I looked out to find it was still snowing and very windy and knew then that we would not be traveling. In the afternoon some Russians came down from Camp IV and asked if they could rest in our kitchen. They told us they had come down to get their food cache as they had run out of food at the higher camp. We still had a lot of extra food so we let them take what they wanted of ours. In the early evening the Russians returned, as we played cards in the big tent, and asked if we had any extra sleeping bags and/or pads. Turns out the Russian couldn’t make it back to 14K due to the storm and so they were stuck at 11K.

Getting pinned down on the descent was wearisome and the Beach Boys song “Sloop John B” with its “Let me go home, I wanna go home” lyrics kept going through my mind.

Day 17, the skies cleared with many groups heading. I packed up expecting we’d all want to do take advantage of the weather and head down too. However our team decided it might be easier to stay in camp all day and leave at 1 a.m. The idea was to avoid having to set up camp again at Base Camp should we arrive too late for a flight out today. A reasonable idea but I felt it was shrewder to travel while we knew the weather was good and also during the day when the temperature is warmer.

By 10:30 p.m. when Adam and I were preparing our customary late dinner the camp had mostly cleared out, and the temperature had dropped significantly. That night, morning of June 12, we didn’t make it out of camp until 1:45 a.m. in the very crisp cold air. I had on my wool long Johns under my insulated pants which were under my shell pants, as well as hand warmers on my ankles (to assist in keeping my feet warm). I also wore and all four of my coats.

Our rope order became Ron and his sled, trailed by Adam’s sled, then me and my sled followed by Adam and Carl’s sled, and lastly Carl. On the downhill the last on the rope doesn’t pull a sled as without rigid poles there isn’t any efficient way to prevent a sled from running into him. It might seem like being behind two sleds, on the downhill, would be a lot of work to hold them back but since the gradient of the terrain we were on wasn’t extremely steep, and with new snow on the path to slow the sleds down, the sleds only required occasional attention from their follower. Conversely being in front of the two sleds was probably the toughest position as it required some extra pulling effort when sections of the terrain were either flat or from time to time uphill (especially going up Heart Break Hill).

The journey down started out a bit sloppy as members of the rope team were losing snowshoes and one of the sled kept tipping over. Ron realized the seriousness of the situation when he mentioned that if he had to keep stopping that he risked getting frostbite. And so, not long after we left Camp III, we stopped to repack the problem sled and from then on the voyage down changed to incredibly enjoyable. With steady uninterrupted travel we soon warmed up even though the packs and sleds remained covered in frost.

It felt great to be the only ones out, as though we were the only ones on the mountain. We walked toward a full moon, and of course it stayed light all night. At one there was also alpenglow on the mountains along with the full moon and I wondered if that can happen at lower altitudes where the sun actually sets. It was so still and quiet with no one else around and no shuttle planes flying. So even though I was initially against traveling at night, it ended up being an amazing experience.

Upon arrival at Base Camp we pulled the sleds up near the door of the Base Camp managers hut, she opened her door and asked our group name and what airline we were with, and a few minutes later she announced K2 would be by to pick us up at 9:30 a.m. , an hour and a half away. Our timing had worked out perfect even if we were exhausted from the lack of sleep.

Once I got my snowshoes and harness off and my sled unpacked I grabbed my shovel and went to work digging up our cache. The cache was deep plus there was a lot more snow over it then when we buried it so it was a lot of work. With all the marked caches, from all the many teams on the mountain, all in one area I thought it seemed a lot like a graveyard. I had dug down to the cache when Adam and Carl arrived to help and they finished off the removal.

On the 30 minute return flight I was so tired that I dozed off. Back in Talkeetna we checked in at the ranger station and reported our success, returned the CMCs, then found a place to get a burger. In the afternoon K2 shuttled us to their bunkhouse and Carl, Adam, and I set up clothes lines and hung out our gear to dry. After showering we headed back into town for dinner. Ron ended up ordering the biggest calzone I have ever seen, and he finished 90% of it, while Adam, Carl and I shared two large pizzas.

I've been asked, since I got home, if I had fun climbing Denali. Sure, there were lots of moments of fun during the experience, but I don't think it is correct to say that mountain climbing is fun. With that said, I don't mean to imply that mountaineering isn't enjoyable. Of course I enjoy it, in fact I'd go so far as to say it's what I like the most in life, but nevertheless so much of the sport of alpinism is hardship and suffering. That seemingly inverse relationship between enjoyment and hardship seems to be a large part of what draws mountaineers back into the mountains time and time again. There is pleasure in working hard, and mountain climbing is mostly hard work which I hesitate to call fun least I cheapen it.

It's a tough sport, and it certainly isn't for everyone, but its rewards are amazing, and looking back it seems we got to experience a lot of what Denali has to throw at climbers. We had sunny days, multi-day storms, white-outs, alpenglow, views, wind, clouds and everything that goes alone with these things. Every section of the climb had its own charms and challenges. For instance trekking up the Kahiltna Glacier had us crossing open crevasses and offered broad views which were miles long. Getting pinned down at Camp II by one long continuous storm taught us patience and resilience. We learned how to fortify our camps with snow walls, and how to efficiently stay warm and cook in Artic weather. We got to climb blue ice on the headwall while ascending fixed lines. From High Camp we were rewarded with amazing views of the Basin Camp, the Edge of the World, and Mt. Hunter and Mt. Foraker. Each time we’d reach a higher camp I would say “if this is as far as I make it, this expedition has been worth it”.

We got to meet some wonderful people from the Rangers at the Walter Harper Ranger station, to K2 Aviation employees, and fellow climbers from all over the world. But no one was as noteworthy as my three teammates. Carl was an excellent organizer, and always willing to go the extra mile especially with load hauling and camp chores. Adam was pleasant to be around, always willing to offer a helping hand and to learn from his teammates. Ron was quick with a joke, efficient in his methods, knowledgeable of the landscape pointing out the various mountains and routes by name, and a generous teammate.

**Boundary Peak, NV, 13,140 ft. – October 6, 2014, HP #17: It turned out to be no easy ridgeline with a lot of loose rock and rock pinnacles to down climb and skirt around.**

October 5th I left Provo at 6:15 a.m. and drove to the Nevada/California border, mostly via highway 6, to the Queens Mine trailhead of Boundary Peak. Boundary Peak is the highest point in Nevada at 13,140 feet. It took about 9 hours to get there, and since my plan was to climb the peak the next day I had plenty of time on my hands. After sitting for 9 hours my back was sore and I needed a walk so I wandered up the trail for about 50 minutes to just shy of where the Trail Canyon route joins the Queens Mine route, and in so doing I got a good feel for what I would be up against the next morning. I didn’t see anyone else on the trail, but I thought I might as there was a van parked one switch back down from the trailhead.

When I got back to my vehicle, and moved it to a flatter spot to camp, a pickup with two brothers in it pulled up. By now it was about 5:45 p.m., and they talked as though they were going to climb the peak that evening, and then drive to the Mount Whitney trailhead to do the John Muir Trail to its peak the next day. As they prepared to go, we noticed a couple other hikers coming down. Soon after the brothers set off the other hikers arrived at my camp. One gave me his card explaining he had lost his phone and asking me to contact him should I find it. Then they wandered over to their van.

I proceeded with cooking my diner and arranging my SUV to sleep in the back, and before dark the brothers returned, having come to their senses. Soon they left and I was again all alone much to my liking. When darkness arrived I realized how tired I was from the early morning so I set my alarm for 5:10 a.m. planning to start hiking by 6:15 the next morning, and it was then I realized I was no longer in the Mountain Time Zone and that it was really only 7:30 p.m.. Nonetheless I was soon asleep, but I woke up at 10 p.m. (Pacific time zone), then again at 2 a.m., 3a.m., 4 a.m., and 5 a.m..

I had planned to start out in the dark, arriving at where I had stopped the day before at around sunrise, but with the time change, I was able to turn off my headlamp at 6:15 a.m. as I left camp. I was pleased to have the natural light.

The hike to Boundary Peak consists of three sections. First the ridge to the intersection of the Trail Canyon trail and the Queens mine trail, which took about 1 hour and 5 minutes to cover. Next is a steep section up loose scree, with a dusting of snow on it, to the top of a false summit. This section needed about 1 hour to cover it. The last section is from the false summit to the true summit, and it steepens up even more, and again had just enough snow on it to make it dangerous, and it took about 1.5 hours to cover that section. As such I arrived on the peak at 9:50 a.m. (Pacific Time), and I managed to get a text off to my wife.

Off to the south about a mile away and 300 feet higher is Montgomery Peak in California. The ridge between the two peaks didn’t look bad, and I was doing great on time so I decided to wander over to Montgomery. It turned out to be no easy ridgeline with a lot of loose rock and rock pinnacles to down climb and skirt around. In the end I must have had to gain close to 1000 feet to reach the 13441 foot peak, and it took about one hour to arrive from Boundary Peak. I wasn’t happy about how tough it was. On Montgomery I managed to get a text off to Daniel giving him a time estimate for when I would be back at my car and heading to Lee Vining where I was to meet him that evening.

On the return trip to Boundary I tried to by-pass its peak and in so doing I down climbed to far and had to regain the lost elevation which added a half hour to my return time. Between the true summit of Boundary and its lower false summit I noticed another hiker, an older lady, alone, who wasn’t following my tracks so we didn’t cross paths. It got really warm on the descent and I ended up down to just my underwear top. By 4 p.m. I was back at my camp. Just as there had been on both my hikes up, there were a lot of mule deer present on the way down along the lowest section.

Back at my vehicle I attempted to text Daniel but couldn’t get a message to send, and as I drove out I attempted several more times finally succeeding when I reached highway 6. I arrived in Lee Vining before 7 p.m., and looked around a bit before I let Daniel know I had arrived. I was having a Burger at Mono Cone when he arrived at perhaps about 7:30 p.m.. We chatted a bit, having not seen each other for about a year, and then I followed him into the National Forrest and a camp spot he had in mind. At the camp I was flossing my teeth when one of my crowns popped off. I was tired from the long hike, and it was dark so I was in bed by 9 p.m. asleep in the back of my SUV.

**Panorama Point, NE, 5,424 ft. – May 29, 2015, HP #18: The point is merely a slight rise on the vast plains.**

We had been back in our house in Orem since the first of the year, and I had been busy with an endless list of tasks relating to it. Having just installed the lawn irrigation system and laid the sod, I was at point where I both needed and could afford to take a break. As such I convinced my wife Ana to take a high pointing road trip with me to Nebraska, and the Dakotas. May 29 we drove the 500 plus miles to the south west corner of the Nebraska panhandle. Our first stop was the so-called, and incorrectly named, tristate corner of Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming. A plaque there correctly states “Corner common to Nebraska and Wyoming on the Colorado state boundary” and also that a surveyor “established this corner monument August 17, 1869 at the intersection of the forty-first parallel of north latitude with the twenty-seventh degree of west longitude (west of Washington, D.C.)”. For the record many US surveys of the 1800s were based on the Washington Meridian, which was officially abolished in favor of the Greenwich Meridian in 1912. More information let us know the monument had been rehabilitated in 1981 and 1997. Next to the plaque stands the preserved original marker with a USGS benchmark on top of it. The “new” base is sort of a map labeling Colorado and showing the corner of Nebraska and Wyoming. The marker is fenced in protecting it from cattle. Besides the plaque and the marker there really is nothing but prairie to see here however it’s intriguing to be able to be in three US states simultaneously.

From the tristate marker it is only a few miles to the highest point in Nebraska. This is farm and ranching land with few people and so the roads are gravel and require paying attention to find your destination. The highpoint is privately owned and is located on a Bison Ranch. A large sign at the ranch states “Welcome to High Point Bison” and askes visitors to pay a highpoint entry fee. Attached to the large sign is a small one warning about ranging bison residing in the area – as they can be aggressive toward humans. From the welcome sign to the over one mile high top of Nebraska is around a mile on another gravel/dirt road. Upon arrival one would never think they were at a high point as the point is merely a slight rise on the vast plains. Off to the west far away are the Rocky Mountains and in all directions are extensive views of the prairie. As is common on the prairies the wind was blowing from the west. We were not lucky enough to see any of the bison which supposedly roam freely around this area.

To be clear, the highpoint itself is nothing extraordinary; in fact it is simply a monument in the middle of a field at an out of the way place one would likely never otherwise visit if it wasn’t for a highpointing goal. Nevertheless the feeling of reaching a destination and the knowledge of being on the highest natural point of a state felt good.

The high point monument, standing four feet tall is an obelisk of granite supported on a concrete base, seems out of place. However it’s more at home then the black painted piano like metal bench located next to it. The metal bench contained the summit log book which we signed. To prevent the buffalo from rubbing up against the monument it is enclosed behind a handrail, which made a nice place to climb on to for a triumphant highpoint pose with arms extended toward the clouds above. The Highpointers club has placed one of their benches next to the metal table.

From Panorama Point we drove north to the Black Hills where we spent the night at a Motel 6 in Hot Springs, SD. Lots of miles this day, about 700. And another US state highpoint checked off.

**Black Elk Peak, SD, 7,242 ft. – May 30, 2015, HP #19: From the top of the tower we spotted mountain goats likely there to drink from the pond.**

Having arrived in Hot Spring South Dakota the evening prior, we let the motel by 6 a.m. and drove through Custer State park to Sylvan Lake. En route we saw bison, turkeys, deer, and antelope. On the Needles Highway we pasted through two one-way tunnels with the narrower of the two being only about 8 feet wide. From Sylvan Lake we hiked 3.5 miles to the top of Harney Peak, as it was still officially named in those days, the high point of South Dakota.

Black Elk Peak, as it is officially named since August 11, 2016 lies in the south west corner of its state 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 pretty 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.

American settlers used Black Elk Peak as a fire lookout tower as far back as 1911, and during the make work projects of the Great Depression a stone fire tower was erected being completed in 1939. That tower was staffed until 1967. Today the outlook is on the register of historic places, but is still open to the public to climb and take in the outstanding views. Interestingly the summit has even been the home to an official US Post Office back in the 1940s.

From the top of the tower we spotted mountain goats likely there to drink from the pond near the pump house. When needed he manmade pond (aka reservoir) supplied water to the living quarters which were located in the lower level of the fire tower. The lunch we packed in was enjoyed on the summit.

Even with an hour on the peak, the whole hike was done by noon for a total of four hours. In the afternoon we visited Mt. Rushmore and were impressed with it. From Rushmore we had an early dinner in Hill City and then drove up to Deadwood, SD where we found primitive camping at the Mt. Roosevelt Picnic Area. It rained most of the night and was windy.

**White Butte, ND, 3,506 ft. – May 31, 2015, HP #20: The clay on the hiking path was wet and slippery.**

After spending a rainy night in a tent in South Dakota the following morning we continued north into North Dakota to its state highpoint, White Butte.

White Butte is located forty five miles, more or less, northeast of the south west corner of North Dakota. This is a sparsely populated area, in the least populated county of the state, consisting mostly of grasslands. This state high point resides within the perimeter boundaries of a patch work of United States Forest Service (USFS) lands called the Little Missouri National Grassland (LMNG). All the same White Butte is privately owned, as within the borders of the national grassland are substantial portions of both state owned and privately owned land. LMNG is a part of the Dakota Prairie Grasslands - a National Forest unit consisting entirely of prairies. In spite of being a part of a National Forest unit the major portion of the grassland lacks a wilderness designation and mineral development is a major threat to the Little Missouri National Grassland with 95% of the zone authorized for leasing.

We parked shy of an old dilapidated and abandoned farm house, and walked due south along a flat, over-grown, dirt, farm, road. Within a half a mile we went through a gate, to the west, in the barbed wire fence paralleling our track. We crossed a sandy wash in a little ravine as well as a downed barbed wire fence, and soon encountered a steep section to the peak. The elevation gain is roughly 400 feet, but since there are virtually no trees on this wind swept prairie it's enough for some really nice views in all directions. Looking around we felt the buttes had an almost badlands like vibe to them. Hiking in, are primary view of the butte showed it to be a grass covered knoll. However from a further distance, allowing for a panoramic view of the butte’s full massif, much of it is white in color.

On the summit a rock cairn stood to the north of the USGS benchmark which is mounted to the top of a three inch diameter pipe extending two feet above ground level. Attached to the pipe by a cable was a green ammo box containing a summit registry book which we signed. Next to the ammo box sat a long wooden box which we didn’t open, but which I have since learned contains a hand trowel which I don’t know the significance of. Also close to the cairn is a metal marker for the late Lawrence P. Buzalsky (1935-1990) a member of the family that used to own the farm incorporating White Butte.

We snapped several picture from the highpoint before returning to our vehicle. The clay on the hiking path was wet and slippery after lots of rain the day and night before, and as we descended Ana slipped giving her a muddy gray colored back-side.

Hikers are often cautioned about the rattlesnakes which are abundant in the area, but we didn’t encounter any at this time of the year.

This was a quick hike of under an hour round trip covering approximately 2.2 miles total– but I understand that nowadays the trailhead has been moved about 0.7 miles to the north of the abandoned farmhouse making the round trip closer to 3.4 miles.

By noon we were driving south again. We drove by Devils Tower in Wyoming, and then to Casper for dinner. From Casper we continued to Rawlins and checked into a motel there at 10 p.m.. Way too much driving for one day!