**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 UT, Wednesday Nov 17. We stopped for dinner in Page AZ and by 9:00 p.m. we were at Arizona Snowbowl ski area, a six and a half mile drive up Snow Bowl Road from US-180. 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 added to her sleeplessness.

Next morning, we were up at 5:00 a.m. and on the trail at 6:30 a.m. as the morning twilight began to show . Our destination was Humphreys Peak of San Francisco Mountain. 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. The 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. Its highest peak was named after Andrew Humphreys, a 19th-century U.S. Army officer. The Arizona town of Flagstaff lies 14 miles to the south where highways 89 and 180 meet.

The commencement of the Humphreys’ Peak trail was not obvious. As such, we ended up hiking under one of the ski lifts, eventually finding 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. 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, roughly three miles into the hike, offered views of the Inner Basin of the Massif that forms the San Francisco Peaks. Here above tree line, the terrain took on a volcanic appearance. Over the remaining one and three quarter’s miles 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 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 confidenceThe plan had been to summit Mt. Agassiz on our way down. That changed when during our ascent we noticed a sign saying it was closed. The sign offered no reason why but 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 3:00 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.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/tRGp2yHGJxHkjzzv7>

**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. on September 21, arriving in Las Vegas NV 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. Soon thereafter we were climbing over talus, and eventually crossed the creek again where it runs over some granite slabs. By 6:00 p.m. we had found a camp spot near 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 East 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 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, the duo caught up to us at the top of the first pitch.

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. We failed to notice the ramp was spotted in snow and ice due to its northern aspect. Matthew Long led this pitch masterfully avoiding most of the snow and ice. As I followed, my climbing shoes were soon covered in snow. This was a bit nerve rattling, especially when my now wet shoes failed to grip even after smearing them on the rocks. 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 station. They informed us 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 in the lead ahead of all of us. We referred to one of the two members of the front-running party as the "white guy" – as he was dressed in white. Believe it or not his partner was dressed in black! Reaching the top of the peewee block, we and the two other groups overlapped momentarily, with the “white guy” group soon pulling ahead again.

Keeping with leads swinging between “The Matts”, Matthew Long lead the seventh pitch. He chose a flake saying “it was too good to pass up” even though he worried it might be challenging for me to follow given my limited alpine rock-climbing experience. Fortunately, I climbed it without incident.

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. It was 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 proved to be challenging as we were tired and cold.

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 “The Matts”. At this point I decided to trade my "cruel shoes" for my boots, understanding the remaining 300 vertical feet to be mostly class three climbing. As I did so, my partners kept moving and I soon lost sight of them.

As I scrambled up, the terrain turned out to be more challenging than anticipated. Eventually I noticed Matthew Long and angled towards him as he again disappeared. About 30 feet below the summit, I encountered a sheer 10-foot wall which I dared not climb unroped. I looked 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 to easier terrain, when I heard Matthew Long calling out to me. I asked him to get a rope and drop it down to me. With the protection of the rope, I was able to climb the roadblock and finish the scramble to the 14,497-foot peak. The time was three o’clock. There was no site of the other two climbing parties, and amazingly no hikers were present either. We had the roof-top of California to ourselves!

A picture containing mountain, sky, nature, outdoor

Description automatically generatedWe relaxed inside the summit hut erected in 1909. 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 were now behind us!

September 24, we woke up to intermittent hail intermingled with sunshine and 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. Looking back up we noticed the hiker had ignored our warning and was in potential danger. He was way off course 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 hiked up meeting him just a few yards past the creek crossing. He claimed to be fine but seemed uneasy. I asked about his pack and he said it had fallen off the cliff when he tried to lower it down. After confirming a second time that he did not need our help, we continued down arriving at our car in less than three hours.

Following a late lunch at the Lone Pine pizzeria, 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. I felt very fortunate to have two generous friends willing to take a rookie rock climber on such a remarkable, unforgettable adventure.

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. 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.

A person standing next to a glacier

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceThe 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.

A picture containing mountain, outdoor, sky, nature

Description automatically generatedTinged 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.

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, 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 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. 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/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 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 Mt. 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 Mt. 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.

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 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 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 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.

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. 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>

**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. Following 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 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. On the way I encountered an Inland Checkpoint (aka Interior Checkpoint) 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 a strange feeling I was crossing the border. As I stopped the car an officer approached. I asked if I was at a border crossing. I was told Federal regulations allow Border Patrol to operate check points within 100 miles of the Country’s borders. I was asked where I was going, and the officer seemed a bit surprised due to the late hour. He also inquired where I would be staying. I answered, I would sleep in the car. After a while, another officer with a dog walked behind the car. I assumed the dog was sniffing for drugs. Before leaving I was asked to state my country of citizenship. Pleased with my answer I was sent on my way.

By 3:00 a.m. I arrived at the Pine Springs Campground, and spent some time 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 definitely cover that in three hours up and two and a half hours down. At the latest, I wanted to have it completed and 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.

With dawn still an hour and a half away, I laid back the car seat and dozed off. As if on cue, I woke up an hour later. I put on my boots and anticipating dawn’s imminent arrival I put away my headlamp as I grabbed my pack and started up the trail. The time was 5:15 a.m. Soon the eastern sky, behind me, began to fill with tones of yellow and orange, as I scampered up a series of switchbacks. The temperature was pleasant, permitting me to feel comfortable in a t-shirt.

A mile and a half into the hike, I calculated I was covering a half mile every 15 minutes. Nearly three miles into the trek my first glimpse of Guadalupe Peak was had. Shortly thereafter the trail veered northwest along a ridgeline before being intersected by a spur trail to a backcountry camping area at just over 8,000 feet. I notice a purple sleeping bag in the campground but I did not see its owner.

Next, I came to a bridge as the trail turned abruptly to the southwest. The bridge does not span a gap but instead widens the path along a cliffed-out section allowing for the passage of horses. Once again the trail began another section of switchbacks, becoming steeper while awarding expansive views. Rounding a corner, a few minutes past seven, a stainless-steel pyramid decorating the peak presented itself. I had reached the top of Texas in under two hours. Along the way I did not drink any water, very unusual for me.

According to Wikipedia the stainless-steel pyramid, “was erected by American Airlines in 1958 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Butterfield Overland Mail [Carrier], a stagecoach route that passed south of the mountain.” Placed on the summit when the mountain was privately owned, it was allowed it to remain after the area became government property in 1972.

The monument stands about six feet tall, with the American Airlines eagle logo on one side. Another side remembers the Pony Express riders contracted to the overland mail outfit. The third side displays a compass with the Boy Scouts fleur-de-lis symbol representing north. To honor pioneer mail service flights, in the center of the compass is an old-school pilot donning an aviator hat and goggles.

I encountered no one during the hike up, and the summit was unpopulated as well. At this early morning hour, the sky in all directions was a cloud-free brilliant blue.

At the base of the monument sat a green ammunition box. Inside I found a summit registry, browsing it as I ate my breakfast sandwich. Several entries mentioned the lack of views due to hazy conditions - not the case this morning.

Around 7:40 a.m. I mistakenly thought I heard voices coming up the trail, which prompted me to prepare to leave. With time to spare, I decided to visit a sub-peak to the south. Known as El Capitan, the sub-peak is positioned 664 feet below the Texas highpoint. Due to the nature of the landscape, to get to it requires descending 900 feet and then climbing up to it. There was no trail to follow through the arid terrain, and I worried about encountering rattlesnakes.

A picture containing mountain, rock, outdoor, sky

Description automatically generatedWithin an hour, I came across another green ammunition box, exactly like the one on Guadalupe Peak. Inside was the El Capitan summit registry. I was expecting the summit to be closer to the sheer drop-off of the south face instead of this location along the west face. Looking around, the terrain did not appear higher elsewhere. I added my name and the current date to the registry, noticing the next most recent entry dated back a few months. The views off the west facing cliff face were breathtaking, and the view back to the north, made Guadalupe Peak more impressive. I could see two hikers had arrived at the stainless-steel monument a beeline mile away.

Starting out in the morning, the trailhead sign had listed an El Capitan Trail, along with the Guadalupe Peak Trail I had used. As such, I hoped I would encounter a trail leading from El Capitan back to where I had parked the car. I later learned the El Capitan Trail leads through Chihuahuan desert to the southern base of El Capitan, but not to its summit where I stood. Instead, I retraced my steps back up to the Texas highpoint, being less watchful of rattlesnakes.

Once back on the Guadalupe Peak trail, I made good time as I descended. All five groups heading up whom I crossed paths with 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 less time than I had budgeted for the 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 noticing the sky had filled with dust; gone were the clear views I had enjoyed in the early 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 just filled up the car with gas in preparation for returning it. It was close to 2:00 p.m. when I walked across the parking lot to the airport having dropped off the car. 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 found that to be uncomfortable, so I moved to a couch near one of the TVs. 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 sight.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/mmxFea7wveB9FnB77>

**Denali, AK, 20,320 ft. – June 7, 2014, HP #16: The High One**

~~A picture containing sky, outdoor, person, standing

Description automatically generated~~“Denali” is a Native American word meaning “The High One.” Those lucky enough to have seen it will tell you it towers above its neighbors. In fact, it is the highest mountain in North America by over 750 feet. Its difference in height from base to peak is 18,000 feet – more than any other mountain residing entirely above sea level.

From 1917 until the eve of the National Park Service’s 100th anniversary on August 25, 2016 North America’s tallest mountain was officially named “Mount McKinley.” A gold prospector is given credit for the name change from the Koyukon language  when in 1896 he began calling it after then President-elect William McKinley – a man who would go on to be the 25th President of the United States.

Most of Denali is permanently covered in snow and ice and could as aptly be named “The Cold One”. With a record low of minus 77 F (-61 C) and wind chill down to minus 148 F (-100 C), the mountain's extremely cold temperatures freeze exposed human skin in an instant. Strong winds are common and have been estimated to gust as high as 300 miles per hour. By some measurements it is considered the coldest place on earth. Even during the summer Denali’s temperatures routinely dip lower than winter temperatures of the other 49 US States. The mountain is totally visible on average just four days a month during June, July, August, and September due to incessant weather issues. Many large glaciers cover its slopes. The Kahiltna Glacier on its southern side is the longest in the entire Alaska Range at 44 miles in length. Its Ruth Glacier is nearly three quarters of a mile thick.

In search of Denali climbing partners, March 16, 2014 I reached out to thirteen strangers. Only Art Delgado of Texas replied. He informed me the “Kicking Buttress” team had an open slot, saying I should contact his team lead, Calvin Harmann, at the email address provided. March 19 Calvin offered me the open slot, and I accepted.

With May 24 being the day the team was meeting in Anchorage, I had only 65 days in between to arrange things on my end. First, I purchased a climbing permit, and next I booked a flight – as such I was one hundred percent committed. For five years I’d had my sights set on climbing Denali and now I was finally getting my chance. Over the years I had earned the needed background, plus physically and mental I was ready. Anxiously, I finalized my gear list and began to purchase outstanding items.

Less than two weeks after I joined the “Kicking Buttress” team disaster stuck when I woke up from a nap to learn my house was on fire! I warned my wife, and immediately began saving my climbing gear. The house was ruined; however, I was able to keep my climbing plans in place.

Time passed swiftly and I found myself in Anchorage. It was after midnight, May 25, when I woke up Art at the motel where our team of four had arranged to meet. Soon after Calvin along with Donald Tapia arrived. Previously strangers, they had flown together from Denver. After catching a few hours of sleep we used the rest of the day to pick up the remaining food items. As the evening approached, I was filled with anticipation thinking about what we four strangers were about to take on together.

May 26, Talkeetna Taxi shuttle service picked us up at 6:30 a.m., taking us and three Russian climbers 114 miles north to Talkeetna. After dropping off our gear at K2 Aviation we located the Walter Harper Ranger Station to attend a mandatory climbing orientation.

Following orientation, we made our way back to the K2 Aviation hangar to catch our flight to Base Camp.  Prior to boarding the Cessna, each of us along with his gear was weighed ensuring the combination did not exceed 300 pounds. The 55-mile scenic flight to the Kahiltna Glacier landing strip at a 7,200 feet took 30 minutes.

A picture containing snow, outdoor, person, skiing

Description automatically generatedBy 2:00 p.m. our gear was unloaded, and we had checked in with the Base Camp manager who issued us five gallons of white gas for our camp stoves. The weather was clam. After digging the required food and fuel cache, we set off for Camp One five and a half miles further north up the Kahiltna Glacier. Having to move four weeks’ worth of food, fuel, and gear meant each of us was carrying at least 50 pounds on his back and pulling an additional 60 pounds on a sled. To reduce the possibility of falling into hidden crevasses all four of us along with our four sleds were attached to a single rope.

Arriving at Camp One, 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 – allowing us to alternate nights in the single tent to provide a break from the team. By the time we set up camp, melted water, and prepared dinner it was 11:00 p.m. At this time of year darkness never reaches the mountain; 23 hours of sunlight are granted along with one hour of twilight.

Before leaving Talkeetna, we had been warned of an approaching storm. As predicted, in the morning we awoke to falling snow. We decided to move up to Camp Two while we still had the chance.

The two and a half miles from Camp One to Camp Two involves going up Ski Hill to an elevation of 9,700 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. We labored up to Camp Two in four and a half hours as the snow continued to fall. Arriving, we had to level out tent platforms in the snow. We also cut blocks of snow and stacked them around the tents as a wind barrier. It was after 1:00 a.m. when we finally found the time to sleep. Along with us at Camp Two was a large British military team, a group of Black Diamond employees, a troop from Columbia, and two Russian teams.

Over the next three days the storm did not let up, and we dared not move higher. All day long, and especially during the nights, we were forced to dig out our tents to prevent the aluminum poles from breaking under the extra load of the accumulating snow. During the day there was plenty of work to be done with melting snow for water, cooking, and improving the camp. In spite of being pinned down I wrote in my journal “I love this experience.”

Our fourth day at Camp Two the weather broke momentarily prompting us to move up to Camp Three located at the base of Motorcycle Hill one and a half miles away. The elevation between the camps gains 1,300 feet, and again we traveled in a storm. As we went up, we passed groups coming down several of which had been stuck at the 14,200-foot camp for as many as 10 days without a chance to attempt the summit. We arrived at 11,000-foot Camp Three at 7:30 p.m., yet it was close to midnight before we crawled into our sleeping bags having once again had to erect protective walls and level out spots in the snow for our tents.

A picture containing snow, outdoor, transport, nature

Description automatically generatedThe next morning started out extra windy and cold. But around 10:00 a.m. the clouds cleared out and soon folks were heading up Motorcycle Hill. By 1:30 p.m. we too were hauling a cache up the hill, having replaced our snowshoes with crampons. We were carrying small enough loads that we did not need the sleds. Thankfully, we encountered no wind at Windy Corner. After covering one and three-quarter miles taking us to 13,500 feet, we dug a hole in the snow and buried a cache of food and fuel.

Food caches are being buried in the snow to prevent ravens from invading them. Also, they must be marked with wands so they can be found after a snowstorm. Mountain regulations required the markers be labeled with team identifying stickers issued during orientation. As such, should a cache not be recovered the violators can be fined.

Our eighth day on the mountain turned out to be mostly clear. We took advantage of it by moving up to the Basin Camp (aka Camp Four) located at 14,200 feet; passing by our cache on the way. A pattern had emerged, at Camp Four we found all the established spots to be full so once again we had to dig snow and build walls. Temperatures were around 0 F (-18 C) at 9:30 p.m. I donned my summit parka over my other five layers – two wool shirts, a fleece, a down coat, and a Gortex shell. At 14,000 feet and higher, during the month of June, Denali nighttime temperatures are routinely -30 F (-34 C) or lower.

An estimated thirty teams were staying at Camp Four. At any given time, during the summer climbing months it is very possible to have around 500 climbers on the mountain at one time. 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 five seasons has the summit reaching percentage fallen below 40%.

The next day we learned how lucky we had been to have flown to Base Camp when we did as following May 26 no planes had been able make the journey for five days. Sure, we had been pinned down at 9,700 feet for several days but at least we were on the mountain and acclimatizing rather than being stuck at nearly sea level in Talkeetna.

June 4 was another sunny and clear day, identical to the previous one. Later it was rumored as many as 100 people had obtained the peak that day. Until then the summit percentage for the season was under 20% with only 15 people having reached the summit. Taking advantage of the weather we sacrificed part of our scheduled rest day moving some items from our 13,500-foot cache up to the top of the Headwall at 16,200 feet. Art did not join us as he had decided the 14,200-foot camp was the end of the line for him.

Climbing the Headwall is the steepest part of the West Buttress route. This gradient necessitates ascending fixed lines with the protection of an ascender. It was fun to go up, however coming down the fixed lines was dangerous as ascenders do not work for descents.

We stayed true to our schedule for June 5th and used it as a rest day. The following day we moved to the High Camp at 17,200 feet – from where we would make our summit bid. The three of us started out toward the Headwall at 12:45 p.m.

From our cache at the top of the Headwall it took three more hours to cover the one and a half miles, and 1,000 feet of vertical gain across the narrow West Buttress ridge. Crossing the ridge, the terrain dropped away sharply on both sides - to the left (north) a deep basin border by Wickersham Wall, and to the right Camp Four 2,000 feet below. Along the crest, rocks now and then protrude from the snow exposed by wind. To pass Washburn’s Thumb, a prominent rock outcropping, we worked our way up a short steep section offering a well-worn fixed line. In the process we gave each other running belays as we skirted the thumb on its left side.

We reached Camp Five at 7:30 p.m. It was cold, but calm and sunny and it seemed like the shadow that covered Camp Four below would not reach the High Camp for a while. Prior to setting up camp, we wandered over to the top of the Rescue Gully and took a few pictures of the ridge we had just traversed. The views down to the Basin Camp below with Mt. Foraker looming behind were some of the most aesthetic of the entire route.

By 9:30 p.m. we had camp set up. Unlike the Basin Camp, the High Camp contained very few teams. Due to the reduced levels of oxygen at this high elevation during the night Donald awakened expressing concern about having trouble breathing.

Saturday June 7, it was 11:45 a.m. before we set off for the summit. Melting snow to have enough water for three men for a full day had delayed us. We tried to pack reasonably light and still be prepared for emergencies. Between us we carried a sleeping bag, an insulated mat, a stove, three pickets, an extra pair of crampons, a snow saw, and a shovel. Additionally, we each carried a summit parka, extra mittens, camera, food, and water. For the first time, we donned our insulated pants, and over-boots, as the temperatures were the coldest we had encountered and expected to drop more as we climbed higher.

From High Camp the route heads northeast (mostly east) along the steep “Autobahn” toward 18,200-foot Denali Pass. The Autobahn has a steep dangerous fall line to climbers left and has been the site of many Denali accidents. 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 18,000 feet where we turned south toward Arch Deacons tower. With the lack of oxygen, speed of thought and general mental capacity can be reduced by as much as fifty percent. The higher we went, the more noticeable those effects became. At the apex of Denali Pass we had a view of the Harper Glacier directly to the east.

I was aware that in the vicinity of Denali Pass was where the 1967 Wilcox expedition had their High Camp. On July 18, 1967 after splitting up, with five descending, while the remainder lingerer to make their summit attempt, one of the fiercest storms in the mountain’s history ravaged this locale. By the time the storm subsided, the group of five had reached Base Camp, but the other seven members of the expedition had perished. 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.

Crossing the Football Field and reaching Pig Hill we encountered a guide short roping his Japanese client down the mountain, while another guide was helping down some Russian patrons. Recognizing us from the High Camp, the first guide offered some words of encouragement. Gaining the summit ridge, only a quarter mile separated us from our final goal. We trudged along on the left side in strong winds, aware (but unable to see) that the right side drops over 8,000 feet down to the east fork of the Kahiltna Glacier.

Nine hours and fifteen minutes after leaving Camp Five we reached the top of North American at 20,320 feet. The time was 9:00 p.m. and no other teams remained at the highpoint. Coincidentally, we reached the peak on a Saturday, the same day of the week the first expedition did, and exactly 101 years, to the date, after the first.

Text

Description automatically generatedThe amazing views were hidden from us obstructed by clouds and blowing snow. All we could think about was getting down before the already bad weather worsened. I snapped a picture of the summit benchmark stamp “Mt. McKinley Expedition 1989”, and one of Calvin at the marker. I had Calvin take a photo of me. I also got a photo of Donald approaching the summit, as well as a picture of Calvin’s watch to document the time. We could not 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 did not even take the time to don our extra summit parkas as we started down without resting, leaving no time for our body temperatures to drop.

The winds were gusting fiercely as we descended, blowing up a lot of snow and reducing visibility to 20 feet or less. Fresh snow was falling. Shortly, my mask froze up and I had to switch it out for my neck gaiter. To avoid frostbite, I often place my gloved hand over my nose and cheeks. At one point Donald had trouble with his goggles. Upon removing them, rime ice immediately began to grow from his eye lashes.

We hoped once we turned west to go down the Autobahn, we would leave the brunt of the wind behind but in fact it only worsened. Becoming worried, I prayed we would make it back to High Camp without incident. Soon after we noticed descending tracks in sheltered spots along the trail now and then. Much to my relief eventually we caught up to one of the other descending parties.

At 1:00 a.m. we rolled back into High Camp dehydrated and hungry but 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 laid down exhausted; soon fast asleep.

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 where Art awaited us. We broke camp at 2:30 p.m. and one and a half hours later we retrieved the remainder of our cache at the top of the Headwall. Within an additional 30-minutes, with the blue ice of the Headwall behind us, we arrived at the relative comfort of our established encampment at 14,200 feet. Light snow was falling. Art was pleased to learn of our success, even as our tiredness soon overtook us. Donald fell asleep with his sunglasses on.

The next day, Monday, June 9, was scheduled as a rest day but by 2:00 p.m. the day was turning from calm to stormy. Hoping to get down to the 11,000-foot camp before the full force of the storm arrived, we packed our gear. Before starting down, to lighten our loads we gave away much of our food knowing we had more in three caches below. Arriving at our remaining 13,500-foot cache the weather worsened. As we dug up the cache a guided group ascending informed us that there were a lot of snow pillows after Windy Corner implying that we would have to break trail.

As we continued down it began to snow steadily. Positioned as the third on our rope, behind Donald and Art respectively, many times I could not see Donald. We relied on the trail marking wands to find our way down. At one point, having the side zippers of my shell pants unzipped to the knees to allow ventilation, I thought to myself “you are literally freezing your butt off.”

Near Squirrel Point one of my crampons detached itself. To reattach it I had to remove my gloves leaving my fingers frigid. The adjustment on the crampon was frozen so I was unable to tighten it, but with luck it stayed on for the rest of the descent.

After three hours of traveling in the storm we reached the camp at the base of Motorcycle Hill. The spot we had built eight days earlier was occupied, but gratefully we found a vacant site with existing walls.

The next day the storm continued making further descent an unwise option. Ready to return to civilization, 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, with the skies clearing I packed up expecting to take advantage of the weather and head down to Base Camp. However, our team decided it might be less complicated to stay in camp all day and leave at 1:00 a.m. The idea was to avoid setting up again at Base Camp should we arrive too late for a flight out. By 10:30 p.m. when Art and I were preparing our customary late dinner the other occupants of Camp Three had mostly cleared out. The temperature had dropped significantly. That night, morning of June 12, we did not 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 donned all four of my coats.

Our rope order became Donald and his sled, trailed by Art’s sled, then me and my sled, followed by Art and Calvin’s sled, and lastly Calvin. During the descent, the last on the rope does not pull a sled as without rigid poles there is no efficient way to prevent it from running into its forerunner.

The late-night travel started out a bit sloppy with snowshoes coming off and one of the sleds tipping over multiple times. Donald commented on the seriousness of the situation say, “if we have to keep stopping, we risk getting frostbite.” After repacking the problem sled the voyage changed, becoming incredibly enjoyable. With steady uninterrupted travel we soon warmed up; our packs and sleds, however, remained covered in frost. We walked toward a full moon even as the night sky remained lit. With no one else traveling if felt magical, as though we were the only ones on the mountain. The absence of shuttle planes in the sky accentuated the divine quietness and tranquil stillness. At one point, along with the full moon, alpenglow covered the mountains; I wondered if that could happen at locations where the sun actually sets.

The final stretch of the nine-and-a-half-mile trek to Base Camp necessitates climbing Heart Break Hill which alone required one hour; overall the journey took six and a quarter hours. Arriving, we pulled the sleds up near the door of the Base Camp manager’s hut. She asked our group name and which air shuttle we were with. A few minutes later she announced K2 Aviation would be landing shortly to pick us up; our timing had worked out perfect. In the meantime, I grabbed a shovel and began retrieving our cache which was now under a lot more snow.

On the 30-minute return flight the lack of sleep caught up with me, and I dozed off. Back in Talkeetna we checked in at the Ranger Station and reported our success. Following lunch, we located the K2 Aviation bunkhouse where we set up clothes lines and hung out our gear to dry. After showering we headed back into town for dinner. Donald ordered the biggest calzone I have ever seen while Art, Calvin and I shared two large pizzas.

Photo Album: <https://goo.gl/photos/Dm4UXe6kd9HDBGaB8>

**Boundary Peak, NV, 13,140 ft. – October 6, 2014, HP #17: No Easy Ridgeline**

A car parked on a dirt road

Description automatically generated with low confidenceOctober 5th, I left Provo UT 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 nine hours to get there, and since my plan was to climb the peak the next day, I had plenty of time on my hands. Having sat for those many hours my back was sore. I decided a walk might loosen my back, so I wandered up the trail for about 50 minutes to just shy of where the Trail Canyon route joins the Queens Mine route. In so doing I got a feel for what I would be up against the next morning. I did not 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, I moved it to a flatter spot as I planned to sleep in it. As I finished, a pick-up with two brothers 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 hike the John Muir Trail to its peak the next day. As they prepared to start up a couple other hikers could be seen 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 down to the van.

I proceeded with cooking my dinner and arranging my SUV to sleep in the back. Before dark the brothers returned admitting the peak was out of reach so late in the day. They soon drove off leave me again all alone. When darkness arrived, the early morning caught up with me. I laid down to sleep with my alarm set for 5:10 a.m. just then realizing I was no longer in the Mountain Time Zone meaning it was really only 7:30 p.m. I was soon asleep however I woke up multiple times throughout the night before my alarm sounded.

The next morning thanks to being on Pacific Time, I was able to turn off my headlamp at 6:15 a.m. as I left camp.

The hike to Boundary Peak consists of three sections. Section one leads from the trailhead to the ridge where the Trail Canyon path and the Queens Mine trail intersect; this took 65 minutes to cover. Next is a steep section up loose scree to the top of a false summit. This section was dusted with snow and also required about one hour of time. The final section is from the false summit to the true summit. Here the going became even steeper with just enough snow on it to make it dangerous. One and a half hours elapsed as I negotiated section three. Overall the one-way trip from the trailhead covered approximately three and a half miles while gaining close to 3,500 feet.

A picture containing sky, outdoor, snow, nature

Description automatically generatedAt the top of Nevada, tucked inside the summit register I found a paper with “Boundary Peak” print on it along with its elevation and a date of July 6, 2014 exactly three month prior. I set up my mini tripod and photographed myself holding the sign. The sky was clear, and the weather was calm. Even at over 13,000 feet the temperature was pleasant especially for October. The view of the desert below was expansive. Stretching from the south to the northwest the Sierra Nevada Range was visible, with Mount Whitney (the tallest US mountain outside of Alaska) being just 88 miles away.

Off to the south, about a mile away and 300 feet higher stood Montgomery Peak in California. The ridge between the two peaks did not look difficult, and I was doing great on time, so I decided to make the trip to Montgomery Peak. The traverse was tougher than I had anticipated with a lot of loose rock and rock pinnacles to down climb and skirt around. In the end I had to gain close to 1,000 vertical feet to reach the 13,441-foot peak requiring over an hour from Boundary Peak.

On the return trip I decided to stay lower than the summit of Boundary Peak hoping for easier terrain. In so doing I down climbed too far, forcing me to regain the lost elevation and adding a half hour to my return time.

As I descended Boundary Peak, between the true summit and the lower false summit I noticed a solo hiker approaching however our routes never intersected. By 4:00 p.m. I returned to the trailhead. Just as there had been on both my hikes up, a lot of mule deer were present along the lowest section.

From the Queens Mine trailhead, I returned to Highway 6 and made my way to Lee Vining CA. The next day I travelled to Yosemite Valley National Park to enjoy a few days of rock climbing.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/wkdqQqRDwX1LLGzeA>

**Panorama Point, NE, 5,424 ft. – May 29, 2015, HP #18: A Slight Rise on the Vast Plains**

After months of hard work, in January 2015 we were able to move back into our home in Orem UT following the fire of April 2014. Notwithstanding, we still had a long “to do” list. By May I had made a dent in the list and having just installed the lawn irrigation system and laid the sod, I was at good stopping point to take a much-needed break. As such I convinced my wife to join me on a highpointing road trip to Nebraska and the Dakotas.

May 29 Ana and I drove 500 plus miles to the south west corner of the Nebraska panhandle where we stopped at the tristate corner of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming. A plaque there states, “corner common to Nebraska and Wyoming on the Colorado state boundary” – which seemed more correct to me then calling it a tristate corner. Additionally, the plaque states 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.).” As a matter of interest, 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.

A picture containing fence, sky, outdoor, grass

Description automatically generatedNext to the plaque stands the preserved original monument; a white stone column about three feet tall, with a cadastral survey marker on top of it. The marker is fenced in protecting it from cattle. Legend has it the original monument actually missed the true mark but nevertheless became the legal official meeting point of the three states.

I had read the original marker had a new base, but it did not look very new with the paint peeling and rust showing. Nevertheless the “new” base labels the locations of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming with respect to the marker and to each other. Besides the plaque and the marker there really was nothing but prairie to see yet we found it intriguing to be able to be in three US states simultaneously.

From the tristate marker it is only a few miles to the highest natural point in Nebraska. However, the highpoint does not stand out and as such many have found it challenging to find. The entire area is mostly flat ranch land, with very few people around. In fact, the highpoint is privately owned and located on a Bison Ranch.

Our directions proved to be good. As such we had no trouble finding the correct gravel road where a large sign at the ranch entrance states, “Welcome to High Point Bison” and askes visitors to pay a highpoint entry fee. Attached to the bottom of the large “Welcome” sign we noticed a much smaller one declaring ranging bison resided in the area and warning they can be aggressive toward humans.

From the signs we traveled approximately a mile on another gravel/dirt road soon reaching the over one-mile-high top of Nebraska which is at best a slight rise on the vast plains. A monument in the middle of a field marks the highpoint. Without that monument we would never would have recognized the spot as a highpoint. Nevertheless, the feeling of reaching a destination and the knowledge of being at the highest point of a state felt like an accomplishment.

A picture containing grass, outdoor, sky, building

Description automatically generatedThe highpoint monument is a granite obelisk standing four feet tall supported on a concrete base. To us it sort of seemed out of place, yet more at home then the black painted piano like metal bench located next to it. To prevent the buffalo from rubbing up against the monument it is enclosed behind a handrail. The handrail made a nice place for me to climb up on for a triumphant highpoint pose with my arms extended toward the clouds above. Inside the metal bench we located the summit logbook, adding our names to it. To the right of both the monument and the metal bench the Highpointers club has placed one of their benches.

Despite the cloud filled sky, we enjoyed extensive views of the prairie in all directions. Some claim on a clear day, with a keen eye, the distance Rocky Mountains can be seen, but that was not the case this day. As is common on the prairies the wind was blowing from the west. We did not see even a single bison roaming around.

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

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/Y2RyGkFdcMScbVWg6>

**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 pasted through two one-way tunnels with the narrower of the two being only about eight feet wide.

A picture containing outdoor, tree, sky, nature

Description automatically generatedBlack Elk Peak, as it is officially named since August 11, 2016 lies in the south west 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.

The hike to Harney Peak, as it was still officially named when Ana and I climbed it, began at an elevation of 6,145 feet. The first three quarters of a mile gained close to 300 feet while traveling north east 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 south east while gaining elevation before turning north east and 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 leaves Custer State Park entering the Black Elk Wilderness Area. A half mile later the trail leaves 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 twisting 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 are connected by a steel staircase spanning a gap. While at another point the steps pass through a natural tunnel formed by a large slab leaning against another.

The steps led right into 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.

A picture containing rock, outdoor, stone, wall

Description automatically generatedInside 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 Mt. 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 Mt. 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 Mt. Roosevelt Picnic Area. It rained most of the night and was windy.

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

**White Butte, ND, 3,506 ft. – May 31, 2015, HP #20: Wet and Slippery Clay**

After spending a rainy night in a tent in South Dakota Ana and I continued north into North Dakota to the state highpoint, White Butte.

White Butte is located 45 miles, more or less, north east 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 highpoint resides within the perimeter of a patch work of United States Forest Service lands called the Little Missouri National Grassland (LMNG). All the same White Butte is privately owned, as within the borders of the LMNG are substantial portions of both state owned and privately owned land. LMNG is 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 LMNG with 95% of the zone authorized for leasing.

A person walking on a dirt path

Description automatically generated with low confidenceWe parked shy of an old dilapidated and abandoned farmhouse 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 top of the hill. The elevation gain is only 400 feet, but since there are virtually no trees on this wind-swept prairie it was enough for some really nice views in all directions. Looking around we felt the other buttes we saw had a badlands like vibe to them. Hiking in, are primary view of White 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 US Department of Interior benchmark which is mounted to the top of a three-inch diameter pipe extending two feet above the ground. Attached to the pipe by a cable was a green ammo box containing a summit registry book which we added our names to. Next to the ammo box sat a long wooden box which we did not open. I have since learned the wooden box contains a hand trowel which I am not clear as to 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.

A picture containing text, rock, outdoor, battery

Description automatically generatedWe snapped several picture from the highpoint before returning to our vehicle. The clay on the hiking path was wet and slippery due to lots of rain the day and night before. As we descended Ana slipped giving her a muddy gray colored backside.

Hikers are often cautioned about the rattlesnakes which are abundant in the area, but we did not 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 10:00 p.m., exhausted from way too much driving. The following day we would return to Orem UT having driven 1908 miles over four days. A plethora of miles, but well worth the effort with three more US state highpoints obtained.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/tKAPr68T4pdrjXnV6>