**My Journey to the Highest Point in Each of the US States**

**“Sa, I’m taking it to the top”**

**“It’s a highpointing journey”**

**What is highpointing?**

By definition highpointing is the pursuit of reaching the tallest point within a specific area. However in practice it is many things – its traveling, exploring, mountain climbing, hiking, fulfillment, planning, exercise, sightseeing, self-discover, and much more.

My pursuit of visiting the highest point in each of the 50 US states is just one example of highpointing. Another example is reaching the top of the tallest mountain on each continent, dubbed the Seven Summits. Comparably, one might choose to reach the highest point of each county in his home state, or whatever region and subdivision is of interest.

As far back as 1909 National Geographic did an article entitled "The Highest Point in Each State" relating to US state highpoint, and according to Wikipedia, “The first person to successfully climb each U.S. state highpoint was A.H. Marshall, who completed the task in July, 1936, when there were only 48 states.”

In the late 1980’s the “Highpointers Club” was formed. This club consists of people with the common interest of attaining the highpoint of each of the 50 US states. By the turn of the century membership of the Highpointers Club had grown to over 2000 members. The founder of the Highpointers Club became the seventh person to achieve standing on the summits of all 50 US states.

The continental United States is 2,800 miles wide (from west to east) and 1,582 miles tall (from north to south). Plus, it is close to 2100 miles from my home in Orem Utah to Anchorage AK, and around 2800 miles from my home to Hawaii. As such, a lot of miles have to be covered in pursuit of reaching the highest point in each of the 50 US states, and typically it takes many years to cover all these miles, along with a good amount of money, and as such a relatively few number of people have reached the highest point of each of the 50 states. From information on the Highpointers club’s website, I estimate that as of September, 2020 likely under 375 people have successfully reached the top of each U.S. state. [Footnote -The number I found on the High Pointers website is from 7/22/2018 and for that date it states 305 have obtained the highest point of each US State.] Also, it seems that on average under 25 people per year reach their 50th (final) US State Highpoint.

**About the US state Highpoints**

The US state highpoints range from landmarks as low as 345 feet to mountains as tall as 20,320 feet. I classify 33 of the 50 as mountains another 10 as hills and the remaining 7 as landmarks. Some highpoints can be driven to, requiring little or no walking effort, whereas others take skilled mountain climbers’ days or even weeks to scale on foot. As such, highpointing the 50 US states offers a range of challenges, and a variety of experiences.

Too often people incorrectly equate the effort of reaching one state highpoint to that of reaching another; unconsciously assuming that since all are highpoints all amount to equal effort. However, with the state highpoints having such a wide range of geographical makeup there are many factors which influence their individual difficulty.

Traits such as prominence, isolation, type of terrain, vertical gain, weather, distance from a road, and natural dangers all influence the struggle (or lack of struggle) of reaching a highpoint. Likewise factors such as personal fitness, experience level, sensitivity to altitude, preparation, risk tolerance, time available, gear required, team size/dynamics, and mental clarity, just to name a few, also influence difficulty.

One highpointer might avoid walking when a driving option is available, use guides to lead him up the most challenging summits, and/or only venture out in fair weather. Whereas another might tackle highpoints solo or only during winter months, and avoid driving in favor of hiking.

Adding to the confusion, the Highpointers Club offers no hard and fast rules for obtaining a highpoint indorsing “any route to the top” be it by horse, automobile, foot, helicopter, or what have you – leaving the means of ascent to personal choice.

Furthermore, one might also incorrectly assume that a list of the 50 US state highpoints ordered by elevation would suffice as a list of difficulty. Unfortunately, that too falls short. For example, Mt Marcy of New York stands shorter than Nebraska’s Panorama Point with the latter being nothing more than a spot on a prairie requiring no uphill walking and the former being a mountain rising over 3000 feet from the trailhead.

**About me**

I considered myself to be an outdoors enthusiast. Very few activities provide me with as much joy as hiking, camping, skiing, mountain biking, rock climbing, ice climbing and exploring.

This passion began in my childhood. At the young age of 10 years, I climbed Chief Mountain in Glacier Park, MT. At the age of 12 years, with my scout troop, I did a 26 mile back-packing trek from Chief Mountain Customs (USA/Canada border) over Stoney Indian Pass to Goat Haunt at the head of Waterton Lakes Alberta. In 1981 & 1982 I camped and hiked in Kananaskis country Alberta, first at the Canadian Boy Scout Jamboree and again for the World Jamboree Hike Master Camp. As a teen I fished a lot of the lakes and streams in Southern Alberta, and Northern Montana. In college, I took a High Country Backpacking class.

Over the years I estimated I have hiked thousands of miles, and during these hikes I have encountered black bears, crossed paths with grizzly bears, met cougars, foxes, wolfs, and coyotes. I have even been charged by a moose.

In 1993 I biked the 330-km Golden Triangle solo from Banff, Alberta through Radium and Golden BC. I have rock climbed at Stone Hill, MT, ice climbed in Ouray CO, scaled the Grand Teton, explored the Grand Canyon of Arizona, and visited the Copper Canyons of Mexico. My mother, brother and myself, at the stroke of midnight, and during a snow storm, welcomed in the 21st century from the platform on Mount Crandell known as Bear's Hump in Waterton Lakes Alberta. I have white-water rafted on the Gauley River in WV and the Youghiogheny River in PA. In 2003 I completed biking the 184.5 mile long C&O canal trail from Washington, DC to Cumberland, MD. Between August 23, 2007 and August 11, 2008 I climbed 52 peaks exceeding my goal of 40 peaks in one year! It is pretty typical for me to get in more than 30 ski days each ski season. I have accomplished over 350 mountain climbs to date, and I have even been sky-driving.

Growing up in a small town I learned to do things myself. As a child I used to repair and modify my bicycle. As a teenager I worked in the summers as a construction laborer mainly in stucco, drywall, and painting. In high school I took the industrial arts class of wood shop and mechanics. In college I started out studying engineering and found that I prefer hands-on engineering over theoretical textbook engineering. I have remodeled two houses, and got to rebuild both following a fire in 2014. I am constantly doing home improvement, and DYI projects. Along with my love of the outdoors I enjoy building, creating, repairing things, and I considered myself to be a handyman.

As the Internet was just starting to take off in 1997 I taught myself how to do web development. In 2000 I went into this line of work full time, and twenty years later I'm still hard at it. The creative side of it, and the problem solving are what I enjoy.

I was born in the USA, but had the privilege of being raise in Alberta, Canada –where I spent 18 years. After high school I lived in Adelaide Australia for two years, and following my graduation from University I was blessed to work and live in South Korea for a full year.

From the time I left home, in 1985, until the time I purchased my first home in 2006 I lived what is termed today a “minimalist” lifestyle. With the difference being that I never went from having an excessive amount of things to downsizing – instead I simply just never owned a surplus of things. My way of living over those 21 years was to limit my possessions to only what was essential and to never own more things than I could fit into my car all at once – meaning I could pack up and move anytime with just an hours’ notice.

I have always been finically responsible and as such I have managed to work in phases of un-jobbing into my adult life - meaning I leave a permanent career job and go for extended periods of time (6 month or more) without major, full-time employment. During un-jobbing episodes I have traveled, lived and worked in foreign counties, remodeled houses, and explored the great outdoors. Temporary employment during these times has bounced me from short-term work at UPS, to being a house painter/drywaller, to doing warehouse production work, and even to teaching English as a second language.

I have had the privilege of traveling to many countries world-wide, which has taken me to the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China, the monuments of Washington DC, the sights of Macau, Stonehenge, Sydney Harbor, Itaewon, Waikiki, Victoria Peak, the Statue of Liberty, Death Valley, Teotihuacan, Redwood National and State Parks, The Tower of London, and many more places.

As a matter of interest, I never use electronic navigation systems as I have been blessed with a keen sense of direction and a love of paper maps. In 1988 I stopped wearing a watch yet I’m never late for anything as I can typically estimate the current time to within fifteen minutes. It was 2013 before I finally broke down and get my first mobile phone and to this day I’m still not a fan of them, as such I often don’t carry one around with me. I was a bachelor until the age of forty-six. I love to laugh and to make others laugh. During my school days I was the class clown, along with being the top math student of my senior class in High School and an overall good student.

**How did I become a highpointer?**

With a lifelong interest in the outdoors, a sense of adventure, and the love of traveling/exploring, it was an utterly natural step for me to take on the challenge of reaching the highest point in each of the 50 US states, however it was a gradual process that evolved into a series of plans and goals. Initially I more or less just happened upon the first few US state highpoints that I visited. Others, early on, I sought out because of their highpoint status but not as a formal goal of highpointing each state.

It was on my first hike/climb of Utah’s King Peak (my 5th US state highpoint) in September 2006 when I meet a fellow solo hiker, who was there as a US state highpointer, and the seed of doing 45 more of these was planted in my brain.

Nearly three years later when I climbed Gannett Peak WY, my 6th US state highpoint, I was by then a pretty serious mountaineer (or at least an experienced mountain adventurer) and the fact that it is a state highpoint didn't figure much into my desire to visit it. I was just there for the thrill and challenge of climbing it. Yet the following month I reached the highest point in Idaho seeking it out because of that label. Two weeks later, when I choose to climb Colorado’s Mt. Elbert as a noteworthy mountain to be my 100th unique peak I’d say the fact that it is a US state highpoint figured into the choice.

By 2010, I was quite interested in visiting each US State highpoint but I still had no defined plan nor time frame by which to complete them. My attitude was if a mountain was the highest in its state, and I had a chance to climb it, I would. Eventually (before I died of old age) I anticipated I’d reach the top of each state. Being really into mountaineer, at this point in my life, the tallest, most difficult state high points were the only ones that really interested me. As such, I figured the non-mountainous high points could be saved for my golden years making my highpointing plan a long drawn out causal approach. That year I achieved three US state highpoints, namely Mt. Hood, Mt. Rainer, and Humphreys Peak. Over the next five years I obtained nine more highpoints taking my count up to twenty by mid-year 2015. As was my informal plan I tag mostly big highpoints during those years, including Montana’s Granite Peak and the grandest of them all 20,320 ft. Denali.

More than four years slipped by from the time I reached my 20th until the time I sought out my 21st state high point. During that time I had finished rebuilding my home following a 2014 fire, and I had returned to work as a Software Engineer after a two year hiatus. I completed 62 mountain climbs, and several other adventures over those four years but I didn't have much of a desire to travel and so my state highpointing objective unintentionally slipped into hibernation. However in August 2019 when I realized I was in danger of reaching the use or loose point of my accumulated personal time off (PTO) at work, the reluctance to travel was forgotten. The last quarter of that year I made some quick plans and ended up tagging 11 highpoints for the year.

By that point in time eighteen years had already slipped by from the time I reached my first US state highpoint, and I determined it would be neat to accomplish all 50 within a twenty year time frame. So, I planned to make a big push, for the remaining nineteen, following the winter 2019/2020 ski season. However, Mother Nature surprised us by introducing the COVID 19 virus to the USA in late winter of 2020. Many thought the pandemic would go away come summer, and so I prudently postponed making any highpointing arrangements for the spring.

Nevertheless, come summer 2020, with the virus as strong as ever, if not stronger than ever, I decided to take a calculated risk, and use up some airline miles before the airline filed chapter 11. As such I increased my total count to thirty five in July 2020.

**A Note about Companions**

I did not share my US state highpointing goal with anyone else, and I reached many of the highpoints solo (add a count here), nevertheless various companions did joined me on several of my adventures to the top of each US state. I pondered whether or not mention them by name, and I decided if someone was writing a book about an experience they had which involving me that I would appreciate remaining anonymous if I hadn’t given consent. As such I am extending that courtesy to my highpointing companions. Any partner’s names mentioned are pseudonyms. Strangers who I meet and interacted with during my adventures, if I caught their names, I have mentioned by first name only.

**Mount Mitchell, NC, 6,684 ft. – May 19, 2001, HP #1: Assault on Mitchell**

At this time in my life I was living in Arlington Virginia, and working in around Washington DC as a web developer. I had not yet married, and I was blessed with a wonderful group of likeminded friends who enjoy hiking in the nearby forests fairly regularly. We spent many weekends, and the occasional “sick-in” (our word for calling in sick to work and then going out hiking for the day) in the George Washington Forest, as well as in and around Shenandoah National Park. The Old Rag Mountain hike and the hike from Shenandoah park boundary to White Oaks Falls were two regulars and favorites we liked to do.

Looking to broaden our hiking horizons one friend suggested we head down to North Carolina for a few days and tackle the then privately own Grandfather Mountain. At Grandfather we found stunning scenery along with marvelous ecological diversity, and we enjoyed a full day of hiking, which involved more than one peak, and multiple ladders up the steepest sections. We also walked the mile high swinging bridge, America’s highest suspension footbridge, over to Linville Peak.

That night we camped out in the surrounding mountains, and the following morning the trip organizer suggested we drive the less than 60 miles along the Blue Ridge Parkway to Mount Mitchell the state’s highest point. The views from the parkway are impressive, as is the engineering of the road itself, but as we made the hour and a half journey some of us scoffed at the idea of driving to the top of a mountain. Nevertheless we didn’t want to pass up the opportunity.

As we left the parkway and turned right on to NC-128 North, we were slowed down by what seemed like thousands of road-bikers in spandex with signs pinned to their backs announcing their “assault” on Mitchell. I had never heard of the “Assault on Mount Mitchell” bike race, and my friends and I had a good laugh at what we deemed a ridiculous name. Come to find out the race starts in Spartanburg, South Carolina and ends at the summit of Mount Mitchell, a distance of 102 miles with over 11,000 vertical feet of climbing, making it a noteworthy, stout, century ride. According to Wikipedia, “most riders finish in less than 12 hours; the leaders finish in under 6 hours”.

Eventually we drove past the park headquarters, soon passing the parking lot for the Mount Mitchell State Park Restaurant, and on to the parking lot at the base of the summit. Miraculously on what is probably the most congested day of the year on Mt. Mitchell we managed to obtain parking. From the parking lot to the summit is approximately a quarter of a mile stroll on a paved trail to a viewing platform located at 6,684 feet above sea-level. Mount Mitchell is not only North Carolina’s highest point but is also the highest peak east of the Mississippi river. In those days the summit platform was much taller and better looking, being bricked with natural rocks and topped with a square concrete platform, as compared to the shorter rounder platform of today with it disproportionally, and extra-long, curved and gently sloping accessibility ramp.

I have since visited Mt. Mitchell for a second time, camping on the mountain itself October 6, 2019, and hiking to the summit the next morning. Without the bike racing crowds, Mitchell is a splendid mountain with amazing 360 degree views. During my first hurried and crowded visit I over looked that next to the viewing platform, on its south side, sits the grave site of Elisha Mitchell, a geologist, explorer and Presbyterian minister for whom the mountain is named. In the 1830s, his measurements proved the 6,684-foot peak was the highest in the East, surpassing Grandfather Mountain 60 miles northeast. As a result of questions about Elisha’s elevation measurements of the mountain, he was on a return expedition in 1857 when he fell to his death. Originally buried in nearby Asheville his body was interred in a tomb on the mountain in 1858.

**Spruce Knob, WV, 4,863 ft. – September 3 2001, HP #2: Them are Internet Papers**

On the Labor Day weekend 2001 a couple of friends - from the group I mentioned in the Mount Mitchell write-up - and I decided to once again venture out from our familiar Shenandoah and George Washington Forests and travel to the Monongahela Forest home of West Virginias most known natural landmark namely Seneca Rocks.

We got up early Labor Day morning to begin the three hour drive west from Arlington, VA. Route 66 took us 75 mile to where it meets, I-81 and US-48 passing by Front Royal en route. This 3-way intersection at Strasburg, VA requires about one-third of the three and a half hour, 180 mile, drive. After another 16 miles on US-48 we entered the state of West Virginia, and 30 miles into West Virginia we turned south onto highway 220 following that highway and eventually WV-28 to Seneca Rocks. The drive from the VA/WV border was like traveling along the lateral undulation track left by a snake, and upon arrival at Seneca Rocks we were all very eager to get out of the car and begin hiking.

To reach the top of Seneca rocks we used a less traveled route coming up from the back side of the nearly 900 foot tall cliffs on the face of Seneca Rocks. The approach gained a significant amount of elevation over a short distance often traveling up natural almost stair-like formations. Commenting on the natural steps, one of my friends mentioned that we were climbing a “staircase of steps”, and the other two of us laughed and laughed about that, pointing out that obviously a staircase consisted of steps. When we obtained the razor back ridge, we ventured past the sign warning us “here ends the realm of the hiker”, and informing us that to proceed we should have rock climbing ability. Approaching the south peak over the sheer drop offs we stopped to watch the rock climbers and to take in the impressive views.

We back tracked to return to our parked car, and after looking over some information one of us had printed from a website about Smoke Hole Canyon we decided to ask some local looking guys about the canyon to see if they could give us better directions. As the locals were approached, one of them in coveralls, nonetheless, noticed the papers in my friend’s hand, and before directions could be asked for the local said “I know what them are, them are Internet papers”! As sharp as he was to recognize “Internet papers” he was of no value in our quest for Smoke Hole Canyon. At least now we all had something to laugh about in addition to just the two of us laughing at “staircase of steps”. For years after, and even to this day, I still get a smile on my face, and a chuckle when I think of “Internet papers” as ludicrous as the name is for a printout from a website.

Striking out on Smoke Hole Canyon, we decided to head south west 20 plus miles over to Spruce Knob also located in the Monongahela Forest. The highpoint of the mountain state is located along a huge ridge that is part of the Allegheny Front – an escarpment arising in south central Pennsylvania, cutting across western Maryland and into the eastern panhandle of West Virginia dividing it from the rest of that state. The southern end of the front is a series of ridges one of which include Spruce Knob. Part of the crest forms the Eastern Continental Divide.

Spruce Knob at 4,863 feet is not only the highest point in West Virginia but also the highest point in the Allegheny Mountains. The area is known for its strong winds, and the one-sided red spruce trees around the peak bear testimony to that - deformed by constant exposure to strong westerly winds.

We were able to drive up to a sizable parking area at the terminus of route 104. From there it is only 900 feet to a stone and steel observation deck at the top of the mountain state. The observation deck lifts visitors above the tree line offering views in all directions, with my favorite being looking toward the east as the crest drop rather sharply at that aspect. Neither my friends nor I packed around cameras (nor phones with cameras) in those days so I don’t have any photos from my initial visit. However, shy of four years later, at the end of May 2005 I was once again in the Monongahela forest vicinity and I revisited Spruce Knob. This time I was armed with a camera and took a few shots.

**Backbone Mountain, MD, 3,360 ft. – May 29, 2005, HP #3: A Last Minute Holiday-Weekend Trip**

Friday May 27, 2005 I got off work at 2pm and just that very morning a friend I had decided to go camping for the Memorial Day long-weekend. Our intended destination for that evening was the George Washington forest near Wardensville, WV. From there we planned to venture over to Blackwater Falls State Park located in the Allegheny Mountains of Tucker County, West Virginia, and find the highest point in Maryland. Friday long-weekend traffic, of course, was a problem by the time we were ready to leave my place in Herndon VA so we decided an early Saturday morning start would be easier. I had moved from Arlington VA to Herndon VA about 13 months prior shortly after landing a better paying job located there.

Saturday morning instead of stopping at our Friday night intended camp spot near Wardensville we continued west on highway 48 toward Black Water Falls. At Moorefield, with a whole day ahead of us, we detoured off the direct line to Black Water Falls, and followed the same roads I had use when I visited Seneca Rocks and Spruce Knob almost four years earlier. Needing a break from the serpentine drive we decided to stop at Seneca Rocks as my friend had never been there. This time we got some nice photos from within the “realm of the climber” area, and again we saw people rock climbing on the impressive cliff faces.

As I had done four years prior, once again, since we were in the neighborhood, we popped over to Spruce Knob, the highest point in West Virginia, just 20 or so miles away. After checking out the views from the summit platform, and taking a few photos, we drove to Spruce Knob Lake and from there took a gravel road to Job, on to Harman, and through the Canaan Valley to Black Water Falls about 70 miles to the north. It was rainy when we arrived and already too late in the evening to look around so we drove into the Monongahela Forest to find a free remote camp spot. Finding one wasn’t easy but we eventually found a suitable spot. Auspiciously, the rain broke long enough for us to catch an amazing sunset as the sun settled behind the wooded mountains of Tucker county.

Sunday morning we climbed up Olsen’s tower, and then drove into Davis, WV for lunch. Our next stop was the beautiful Blackwater Falls, named for its amber waters tinted by red spruce needles and the tannic acid of fallen hemlocks. The falls are an impressive 57 feet tall.

From Blackwater we headed toward the WV/MD state line and Backbone Mountain. The trail to the highpoint of Backbone Mountain is a rough logging type road just over a mile in length from highway 219. Since my SUV was equipped with four wheel drive we drove up it most of the way until it got extra rough and then we walked the remainder to the highest spot in Maryland at 3,360 feet. The highpoint is called Hoye Crest and contains a large sign on a metal post. Hoye Crest is named in remembrance of the First World War Captain Charles Hoye, a descendant of early settlers to the area, and founder of the Garrett county historical society. Hoye was also a veteran of the Spanish-American War. Backbone Mountain crosses the border of Maryland and runs into West Virginia, earning its name because the 39 mile ridge which it crowns is often rugged and rocky. The summit is covered in too many trees to allow for any long distance views. In 2005 the Highpointers club had not yet set up a summit register mailbox nor installed one of their benches seen at many of the minor elevation highpoints.

Because Hoye Crest is the highest point in its State I was attracted to hiking Backbone Mountain. Yet at the time I still didn't have the idea of, or any strong interest in, reaching the highest point in each state.

Heading back down, someone had parked on the logging road, but we were lucky enough to be able to just barely squeeze past the unthoughtful persons car, as we returned to highway 219 and drove 70 plus miles to the George Washington Forest at Wardensville, WV where we camped for the night.

Memorial Day we enjoyed the solitude of our remote camp spot as we hung out and cooked on the fire. We were even lucky enough to see a rafter of wild turkeys. It was 4pm in the afternoon when we got back to Herndon.

Eventful and fun long-weekend, and my third highpoint reached.

**Mount Marcy, NY, 5,344 ft. – July 4, 2005, HP #4: A Two Day Hike up Mt. Marcy via South Meadows**

We had left Washington, DC two days before on this -my first- trip to the Adirondacks. This was the third day of our trip, and the first day of our overnighter up Mt. Marcy, the highest point in the state of New York.

Following a drive through Lake Placid and a stroll down the main street, as the afternoon was rapidly disappearing we decided we better drive to the starting location for our hike. The plan was to begin the hike from South Meadows, where we would leave the car, and backpack 2.8 miles along an old fire road to Marcy Dam. At Marcy Dam we would camp, and then pick up the classic VanHoevenberg Trail to the peak the next morning. The advantage of starting at South Meadow as compared to the VanHoevenberg Trailhead at Adirondac Loj is that we could park the car for free.

The old fire road was basically flat gaining only 100ft to the dam, making the backpacking relatively easy. The mosquito’s, however, made the flat walk rather unpleasant. We took it slow and made it to the dam within 1.5 hours. By the time we settled on a camping spot and set up the three tents it was dark. After a snack, we played a game of "tie the food bag up in the tree." Each of us was given two tries to throw a 5-50 cord, with a stick attached to one of its ends, 20-feet up and through a fork in some tree branches. All our laughing, at missed attempts, got the dog camping across from us quite excited. On the eighth throw we finally succeeded.

This was our easy day, having covered less than three miles and only 100 vertical feet.

Monday morning, 4 July 2005, we woke up early, and by 8 am were on route to the highest point in New York, via the VanHoevenberg trail. After about 1-mile the trail passed a turn off for Phelps Mountain, and another 1.5 miles further along it crossed Phelps Brook by means of the three-pole-bridge. About two miles into this second day of our hike we came to the beautiful site of Indian Falls, and since the last half mile had been quite rocky and steep we decided this was a great place to relax and take in the views. Rested, on we went up the trail that resembled a stone staircase. About a half mile from the peak the trail passed the Hopkins trail to Keene Valley, on the left, at a plateau elevation of 4,420 feet.

The last 900 feet of vertical climbing are quite steep, so we stopped on some big rocks for lunch and decided to leave our day packs there to be picked up on the descent. Near the peak we passed a large cairn, and on the peak we asked someone to take a photograph of our group of four in front of the plaque commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the first recorded ascent in 1837. We also located the geological survey marker. With our moderate pace, it had taken us four hours, from the dam below, to cover the five miles up to the 5,344 foot peak. In those five miles we gained over 3200 vertical feet.

On the summit we were greeted by the so-called Summit Steward (some college kid who’s summer job it was to ensure no one walked on the roped-off fragile artic vegetation areas), and he informed us that we were the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th peak-baggers that day.

The descent to Marcy Dam required about as much time as the ascent, however we did take a much longer rest at Indian Falls where we dared a dip in the ice cold water only to be foiled by the clouds covering the sun as soon as we got in (oh the luck). While at the falls a guy and his girlfriend offered to filter some water for us. The unfortunate fellow had a big red circle on his shoulder indicating a tick was under his skin.

By the time we got back to camp we were rather tired and hungry and not looking forward to mosquito-thirty (the time of day the mosquito’s attack). Plus we realized we had another 2.8 miles of hiking to do with the added weight of our camping gear. So we ate and rested before we packed up the gear. On the bright-side, Pratt had by now used up most of the 11 liters of water he had packed in; at 2.2 pounds per liter he had packed in 24 pounds of water!

Back on the fire road to South Meadows the mosquitoes were even worse than the day before. They made us forget how tired we were, as well as how heavy our packs were, and caused us to make it back to the car in less than one-hour.

It was a long day, having covered almost 13 miles, which went up over 3200 vertical feet and then came down the same plus another 100 foot descent to the car. Tired or not, we all felt pleased having "bagged" the highest peak in New York!

**Kings Peak, UT, 13,528 ft. – September 2, 2006, HP #5: I meet my first US State Highpointer**

I first heard about Kings Peak in August 2005 when I was climbing Chief Mountain in Glacier Park Montana. I was told it was a multiple day hike/climb to the highest spot in Utah. Since I was moving to Utah later that month, I decided then that I would climb that mountain. A little over one-year later, on a wind-free and sunny September 2, I found myself at 13,528 feet overlooking the spectacular Henry’s Fork basin from the highpoint of the Beehive State.

I had trouble falling asleep the night of Thursday August 31, 2006 as I anticipated, with both concern and excitement, what I was about to set out alone to do the following morning. Nonetheless, sleep finally came, and before I knew it morning had arrived and I was leaving Orem and on my way to the Henry’s Fork trailhead in the High Uintas. The 130 mile drive took me up Provo Canyon, through Heber, and past Park City where I connect up with I-80 and continued on into Wyoming. In Wyoming I drove past Evanston and exited at Fort Bridger then traveled through Mountain View, and into the Wasatch Cache National Forest of Utah. Around 11:30 AM September 1st, after almost exactly 3 hours I arrived at the Henry’s Fork trailhead from where the 30 mile round-trip hiking adventure would begin. No concerns remained as I ate a light lunch and double checked my loaded backpack. By 12:15 PM I was ready to go, and I asked a family, who were preparing for the same hike, to snap a hiking-opening picture of me. Then off, alone, I went on my three day adventure.

Most of the information I had read about the hike suggested walking in about 7 or 8 miles the first day and camping at Dollar Lake. I knew the trail was relatively flat up to Dollar Lake and likewise also a mile or two further to the base of Gunsight Pass. At the pass the hike would leave the basin and begin the real ascent into the Uintas Mountains. Anticipating a strenuous day two, when I would actually climb to the peak, I thought it wise to cover as much of the flat ground on the first day as possible. As such, I hoped I would be able to find water thus allowing me to camp at the mouth of Gunsight Pass. I mentioned this idea to a couple of return hikers I encountered in the Henry’s Fork parking lot, and a second time to two return hikers I chanced upon on the trail. Both times I was told water and tolerable camping could be had at the base of Gunsight pass my target for the day.

Studying the trail, the night before, I had broken my first day of hiking into three segments or landmarks. The first landmark would be an intersecting trail to Alligator Lake about 3 miles into the hike. The next landmark would be another 2.5 miles further along where I would encounter the Elkhorn stream crossing. The final landmark, of day one, would be the base of Gunsight Pass about 9 miles into the trek. Imagine my pleasant surprise when only about 2 hours into my hike I crossed a return hiker and was informed that I was almost at the Elkhorn stream crossing; the going was so quick that I had disregarded the first intersecting trail I crossed as my initial landmark.

As I crossed the stream at my second landmark, I, for the second time, meet up with and passed a group of about four young men, two of who appeared to be in the military, and one young woman. At this same time I noticed a lone-hiker who was attempting to ford the creek rather than cross on the bridge lower downstream. I hurried on hoping to stay ahead, and out of sight, of the other hikers. After a while I decided to rest in a camping area which on the return trip I learned was in sight of Dollar Lake. While I rested the lone-hiker passed by, but did not notice me. Shortly after resting, I caught up with the lone-hiker resting and I asked him if we were near Dollar Lake. He said he wasn’t sure, and I then asked him to snap a picture of me with Kings Peak in the background. During this time the other group of hikers caught up to and past us, only to rest a few yards up the trail. As I approached them they asked me if I knew where Henry Lake was, I comment that I didn’t but that I believe we were opposite Dollar Lake, and this seemed to be confirmed as we all saw a man and a woman leave the trees opposite us. We were at the base of an incline at this point and I decided I would hike up the incline and then head left to see if I could see the lake. On my way up the hill I past two older men on their way down, and I asked them about camping near Gunsight Pass and about the location of Dollar Lake. They informed me of a small lake at the bottom of Gunsight Pass.

Near the top of the hill I left the trail and headed left hoping to spot the lake, but was disappointed to find the only thing over there were domestic sheep. Deciding I could find it on the return trip, I returned to the trail and headed toward Gunsight Pass, soon catching up with, and unintentionally surprising the aforementioned lone-hiker. We chatted about camping at the small lake at the base of Gunsight pass ahead, and I soon recognized him as the owner of a white pick-up I had over-taken on the gravel road leading to the trailhead. Soon after, around 5 PM, I spotted the destination lake and pointed it out to my fellow lone-hiker who was now trailing me. I remained on the trail planning to approach the lake on its south-side even as my fellow hiker began bush-whacking through the shrubs and marshy ground to the north-side of the unnamed lake. I explored the south-side of the lake finding the surrounding ground to be too moist for camping. Leaving my backpack I walked over to the opposite side and spoke with my fellow hiker who introduced himself as Charlie. I asked him if he minded if I also camped on this side of the lake and he seemed almost glad that I might do so. After chatting for a while I learned that Charlie, who as likely in his late 60’s, was quite the avid hiker, having bagged the highpoints in 38 of the US states. Around 6 PM, I set-up my camp next to a rock and about 30 yards from Charlie who was bivying it.

Once my camp was set up I turned my attention to cooking. For this trip I had brought along a couple of freeze-dried dinners, instant oatmeal, and instant noodles, all of which could be simply and quickly prepared by adding only boiling water. The day before leaving on the hike I had bought a new Jetboil stove which claims to be able to boil one-cup of water in around one minute. For this meal I decided to cook freeze-dried beef stroganoff, and I had just finished adding the boiling water when Charlie stopped by. I ate and we chatted, and around 7 PM, we watched a group of two hikers set up across the marshy ground next to the trail; we expected they would come to the lake for water, but they never did. Just before dark we climbed a hill west of our camps to look over the Henry’s Fork basin. From this point we watched a cowboy on horseback, and his three dogs, round up and drive the domestic sheep toward the toilet bowl. The toilet bowl is a 1000 ft. high and 0.25 mile long scree covered chute next to Anderson pass which is often used as a return trip shortcut by hikers who camp at Dollar Lake.

Soon the sun was setting and each of us returned to his own camp. I sat on the big rock next to my tent for a while and watched two hikers with flashlights walk by losing them as they entered Gunsight Pass. Around 9 PM I retired to my tent, but sleep avoided me and in its place came sickness. I believe it may have been the 11,000 ft. altitude I was camping at as I was inundated with a headache on top of which the freeze dried meal, or possibly the iodine treated water, was not agreeing with my stomach. It wasn’t until after 1 AM that I finally feel asleep only to awake a couple of hours later due to wind and below freezing temperatures. Alas the cold was no match for my 27 year old, Northern Lights, down-filled mummy! Slightly before sunrise, around 6 AM, I woke-up, still with the headache and upset stomach, and decided to skip breakfast and begin the approximately five-mile, 2,500 ft. climb to the top of Utah.

At around 7 AM as I started up Gunsight Pass I looked back toward camp and waved good-bye to Charlie who had emerged from his bivy. At the top of Gunsight Pass I rested and looked for a cairn marked shortcut I had heard about. Finding the shortcut I took it up and over two ridges where I spotted, from north to south, the top of the toilet bowl, Anderson pass, and Kings Peak, below all of which was a basin that reminded me of pictures I had seen of Everest. I soon realized I needed to descend down the ridge and into the basin, where I would pick up the main trail and head up toward Anderson pass. I no sooner began to do so when I saw four other hikers coming across the shortcut a bit east of me and heading down into the basin. I directed my path to intersect with theirs. Only one of the four seemed willing to talk but nonetheless I followed along with them for a while to below Anderson pass where, around 8:30 AM, I paused for breakfast allowing them to go ahead of me. I was still feeling nauseated but I knew I needed to eat and drink so I braved down a granola bar and some beef jerky, and I drank some iodine treated water. At places a tiny stream shared the trail and it was still frozen solid at this time. As I continued on, I watched four hikers emerge to my right having climbed up the toilet bowl. Before I reached the top of Anderson pass the four hikers from the toilet bowl had started up the remaining one mile length and 900 ft. altitude climb to the peak, apparently they were trying to catch the other four hikers I had encountered earlier.

With my upset stomach, and throbbing headache I made my own push to the top. At this point there was no trail to follow, only boulders and broken pieces of rock one had to hop to and from. I was unsure exactly where my destination lay so I tried to keep an eye on my predecessors but they soon disappeared behind one of the several false peaks. At one point I was so surprised I couldn’t see them that I called out “hello” hoping they would hear and answer, but to no avail. As I continued up, my headache increased with the altitude, and I felt a blister developing on my foot. At around 10:00 AM on a big boulder, which turned out to be only 200 ft. from my goal -- although I didn’t realize I was that close -- I paused to check my foot, and to try to eat more. With the pause my stomach finally settled, and I was able to eat and drink more, while I applied moleskin to my tender foot. During this break two older men approached me and I asked them if they knew where the peak was, but they had the same question for me. I told them the four hikers - I had encountered in the basin - figured they would reach the peak by 11:00 AM, so we likely had another 45 minutes or more ahead of us, but of course that estimate was wrong and we were only 10 minutes from the objective. As I was ready to continue, down already came the eight hikers ahead of me, and from them I learn how close I was.

Up and on I went arriving at 13,528 ft. at 10:30 AM Saturday September 2, 2006. I was greeted by the two older men I had spoken with a few minutes earlier and we all agreed what a nice surprise it was to have reached the top much sooner than we had anticipated. I asked one to snap a few pictures of me then off they went leaving me alone on top. Not long after two other climbers joined me staying only for a few minutes. Left alone again I searched the top for an elevation marker, which didn’t exist, when along came a man and women whom I recognized as the couple I had seen leaving the trees, the day before, where Dollar Lake was wrongly supposed to be. They asked me to snap a couple of pictures of them, and I had them take another of me.

I was in no hurry to descend so I relaxed and took in the views. To the east was a large lake (Lake Atwood). To the south was South Kings Peak at 13,308 ft. (once believe to be higher than Kings Peak), and on the horizon endless mountains. To the west was a sheer drop off, a large basin, more mountains and a few high altitude lakes. To the north was the Henry’s Fork basin I had trekked up the day before in which I finally saw Dollar Lake off to the right, and Henry’s Lake to the west of that.

After a sunny and windless hour on the summit some teenagers arrived and I learned they were a part of a large group, so I decided to descend. Almost immediately I encountered several people on their way up, and one woman asked me where I was camped and then informed me she had seen sheep stampeding toward my camp. It took less than an hour to reach Anderson pass which now was cluttered with hikers In the basin east of Anderson pass I felt another blister coming on so I stopped to check it out. At this time the two hikers who were camped on the trail across from me came along, on their way back to camp. I informed them of the shortcut to Gunsight Pass and they decided to use it by following me. Arriving at Gunsight Pass, a bit before 2 PM, I paused to rest as my followers continued on. As I started down the pass I crossed trails with a young man from Seattle who was hiking with a dog that was carrying most of his gear. He pointed out to me the clouds that had formed over the region I had left and I warned him of the potential for lightning. Near the bottom of the pass, I encountered a woman forest ranger on horseback with a pack horse. I asked her about the sheep, but she wasn’t helpful.

By 2:15 PM, I was back at my camp, and relived to find the sheep had not been around after all. First thing I did was to treat some water, then retire to my tent for a rest while the water purified. Around 3 PM, the water was ready, and so I prepared some food. Following eating, I again entered my tent for more rest, after which I planned to pack-up and hike down to Elkhorn crossing. While back at camp two other groups of hikers set up camps in the area, so I was glad my plan was to leave. By 5:30 PM, I was well rested, had my gear packed up, and was again on my way down.

After about an hour of walking, the blisters on my feet began to hurt and I was forced to stop and apply more moleskin. In bearable pain, on I went, arriving at Elkhorn stream crossing before sunset at 7:40 PM, relived to find the camp spot I had in mind was vacant. I quickly set up camp, tied my food up in a tree, and then noticed another tent, further in, hidden behind a group of trees. By 8:30 PM I was in my mummy bag and surprised that in the trees, and at a lower elevation, the temperature seemed colder than the previous night. For the most part I slept soundly for 12 hours, waking up only a couple of times, once as a flashlight passed my tent, and another time as the wind or an animal brushed my tent.

I spent the morning of the third day relaxing, airing out my tent and sleeping bag, organizing my stuff, and cooking food. Initially no one else seemed to be around, and I supposed the occupants of the other tent had headed for the peak early and that I had seen their flashlight in the early morning darkness. Perhaps around 11:00 AM, I noticed a man fishing in the creek, and I approached him to find he was a fellow I had briefly talked to just above Anderson’s Pass as I descend Kings Peak. He didn’t seem to remember me. He had caught a trout and placed it in water in a plastic bag.

Well rested, I packed up my gear, and patched up my feet, and began the remaining 5.5 miles back to my truck, leaving at 12:30 PM. About 45 minutes into the walk, my blistered feet began to hurt, and so at 1:30 PM I stopped to rest. I was hoping I was within an hour of the end at this point, but I had not yet past the Alligator Lake trail. Around 2:30 PM I crossed trails with my fifth group of hikers of the day, and they asked me where I had been and if I was alone, following my replies they told me I had only a half mile left. Physically I felt great, having no sore muscles and lots of energy but the blisters were a genuine hindrance, and so I was again forced to rest. At 3 PM, I was extremely glad to remove my shoes and socks and to put on my Birkenstocks having reached the end of my 30 mile adventure! Before I left I looked in the log book at the trailhead to see how many groups had logged in the same day as me. I counted 15 groups which amounted to 36 people.

I could not have asked for a better trip, everything worked out flawlessly, and the weather was exceptional. Henry’s Fork basin is a beautiful, peaceful area, and reaching the highest point of Utah was a magnificent accomplishment.

**Gannett Peak, WY, 13,804 ft. – August 19, 2009, HP #6: The Titcomb basin area could very well be the most beautiful natural place I have been in the USA.**

Wanting to resume a slower pace of life, and to have closer access to outdoor activities -- especially winter activities like snow skiing – I had moved to Utah in August 2005. Before the move I had lined up a full-time web development job with a small startup company located in Utah County. Six months into that job I found a more promising one in the same field, and by October 2006 I had purchased a home in Orem.

The first two winters were big snow seasons, and the skiing was excellent. Outside of ski season I began doing a fair amount of hiking not unlike when I lived in Virginia. Between arriving in Utah and my climb of Kings Peak just over a year later, I climbed six additional mountains, and I was trying to figure out how to get into mountaineering so I could explore snow covered peaks. This desire, along with my love of skiing, lead me not only into mountaineering but also into backcountry skiing, and eventually into rock climbing.

When I climbed Gannett Peak in 2009 I was by then a pretty serious mountaineer (or at least an experienced mountain adventurer) having completed 150 mountain climbs spanning all seasons of the year. I must admit the fact that Gannett Peak is a state high point was not the driving force behind my desire to face it. I took it on as a mountaineering challenge, and for the beauty and thrill of climbing it.

Through my frequent excursions into the mountains, I had started rubbing shoulders with a few members of the Salt Lake City based Wasatch Mountain Club (however I have never been a member), and had skied the Trinity Chutes of Mount Shasta, CA with a couple of them in May 2009. Unofficially, outside the club, six of them had purposed tackling Gannett Peak, and I was invited to join them. We planned a trip for the end of August 2009 trusting that the summer bugs would be on the decline by then.

August 16, 2009 the seven of us meet up in a suburb of Salt Lake City, loaded into three cars then drove northwest 240 miles to the small Wyoming town of Pinedale. From Pinedale it is about a 15 mile drive along the eastern shore of Freemont Lake to Elkhart Park where Skyline Drive ends. A campground and a parking area is located there, as is the Pole Creek trail trailhead which is the first of a series of trails which combined take trekkers into the breathtaking Titcomb basin. We arrived in the evening and spent the night at the campground at an elevation of 9280 feet with temperatures dropping below freezing.

It is close to 23 miles from Elkhart Park to the top of Wyoming, making it over 45 miles roundtrip with over 9000 feet of elevation gain. We didn’t want to overexert ourselves so our plan was to take two days to backpack into the upper Titcomb Lake, where we would set up what we called basecamp from which we would go for the peak. Needless to say, taking on Gannett Peak is a pretty serious quest.

Having two days for the approach it seemed like we were not in a rush and we didn’t begin hiking Monday August 17, 2009 until after 9 am. We reached Photographer Point (10,350 ft.), 4.5 miles into our journey, at around lunch time, and I was hungry and not feeling any need to hurry. After snapping a few photos the rest of the group conversely, all of a sudden, was in a hurry and didn’t linger around. I decided to not worry about it and just enjoyed my lunch anyway, catching up with them soon enough only to find out at least one of them was upset with me. Being confident and comfortable in the outdoors alone, and having everything I needed with me, I wasn’t at all concern about it, but was still wondering why none of them had stopped for lunch.

By 1:40 pm we had covered 7.5 miles having reached the Seneca Lake outlet giving us an average of 1.7 miles per hour – not bad with full backpacks on uneven ground. Two miles further along at just before 3pm we stopped for the day and set up our camp at the north end of Seneca Lake prior to Little Seneca Lake. About half way between the lake outlet and its northern end we had encounter a dead horse just below the switch backs west of Seneca Lake (around inbound mile 8.5). We wondered if the owner, or someone, would return to dynamite it into small compostable pieces as there was no chance it was going to be removed from the area.

August 18 we broke camp, again at a leisurely pace, heading north on the Seneca Lake trail by 10 am. After just one mile our destination put us on the Indian Pass trail still traveling north. The scenery of granite mountains like Freemont peak, along with boulders everywhere and multiple lakes was incredible. On the rise above Island Lake we caught a glimpse of our goal, Gannett Peak, and the pass, Bonney Pass, we would have to traverse to reach it. A half an hour later we were at the south end of Island Lake still enchanted with the spectacular backdrop. I will go out on a limb here and say the Titcomb basin area could very well be the most beautiful natural place I have been in the USA. We continued around the east side of Island Lake traversing its sandy beaches. As we left Island Lake, now on the Titcomb Basin trail, we paused for lunch at noon, and a half an hour later we encountered our first section of snow, but not enough to warrant crampons.

Less than 3 hours into the day’s journey we reached the lower Titcomb Lake. Northeast of the Upper Titcomb Lake at around 10,600 feet, still in the early afternoon, we choose a spot for our basecamp. We had covered 6.5 miles for the day. When the comfortable breeze would stop we had a lot of mosquitoes to deal with. To pass the time we relaxed in our tents, filtered water, and made dinner. After dinner some played cards until dark. Layered clothing, and even ski hats, were needed to stay warm when you weren’t exerting yourself. Our basecamp was located 2.5 miles from the top of the 12,800 ft. Bonney Pass, and approximately 7 miles from the 13,804 ft. summit.

Day three was summit day and we got an early start leaving camp at 6 am which isn’t a crazy alpine early start. At the bottom of the snow covered Bonney pass, with the sun starting to come up, we donned our gaiters, strapped on our crampons, and pulled out our ice axes. From this point on we would be traveling on snow. We gained the 2,200 feet to the top of Bonney Pass in two hours, next dropping down to 11,580 ft. to the Dinwoody Glacier with its absurdly deep moot by 9 am. From the Dinwoody Glacier over to Gooseneck Glacier requires locating a thin band of snow that leads to Gooseneck Ridge, this strip of snow would have been very hard to find without Ben’s knowledge of the route. Ben was the only member of our group who had climbed the peak before and his familiarity was appreciated.

Within an hour and a half from the Dinwoody Glacier we reached what we hoped wasn’t going to be a major obstacle namely the notorious bergschrund. We had taken a bit of a calculated risk when we elected to leave behind pickets, harnesses, and ropes trusting that we wouldn’t need them to get over the bergschrund. Fortunately, with care the “schrund” was passable without gear and the 40 degree (or more) slope above the "schrund" proved to be the crux of the climb. By 10:45 am our full group of seven had safely navigated the crux, and within another 15 minutes we reached the point where the Gooseneck Ridge turns from West to North and overlooks what I believe is known as Glacier Pass. From there we soon reached the Gooseneck pinnacle, and before noon all seven of us stood upon the highest spot in Wyoming with blue skies all around and breath taking views in all directions.

Leah had brought along a cloth banner on which she had written Gannett and below that 13,804’ - we took turns posing for pictures while holding it. We relaxed on the top soaking in the sun and the views, found and signed the summit registry, and within an hour began the return trip to basecamp climbing over the seemingly bottomless “schrund” by 1:30 pm. We retrace our steps to the top of Bonney Pass arriving by 4:30 pm.

I was the first of our group to start down the 2000 plus vertical feet of Bonney Pass, and after some time a commotion caused me to pause and look back up, only to see Ben uncontrollably sliding on his belly, feet first, rapidly gaining speed as he plummeted toward me. I could see he had lost his ice axe, and so I yelled at him to spread out his arms and legs, hoping that would slow him enough so he could regain control. It was a frightening scene to witness, but mercifully he heard my instructions, followed them, and recovered control. He suffered only scrapes, along with some bumps and bruises, being blessed to have not snagged a crampon and to have stopped when he did. He told me that as he started down he stopped to get something out of his pack and in doing so released the leash of his axe from the waist band strap, only to next slip with his axe left above stuck in the snow. On a steep slope like we were descending self-arresting without an axe was an unlikely affair which he pulled off. He would have been badly hurt, and we all would have been in serious trouble otherwise. I for one thanked my Heavenly Father for his protection.

It was a twelve hour day by the time we all securely returned to basecamp, and we were exhausted having covered 14 miles and climbed just shy of 7000 vertical feet. Water, food, and rest – in that order – was all we wanted and needed that evening.

Our fourth day in the mountains was essentially a reverse of days two and one. We began the 16 mile return hike at 8:00 am, passed Little Seneca Lake inside an hour and a half, encountered the bloated dead horse 20 minutes before noon, and reached the parking lot at Elkhart Park by 4:30 pm. I finished the last of my food on the return trip meaning I had packed no extra. Nevertheless, I was in favor of either spending another night at the campground, or making the journey home. However, the consensus of the majority of the group was to drive to Pinedale, get some motel rooms, and dine at a restaurant. Come to find out Ben had a motel room already reserved! We returned home August 21, 2009.

**Borah Peak, ID, 12,662 ft. – September 5, 2009, HP #7: Borah was raised seven feet during a 1983 earthquake.**

After work on Friday September 4, 2009 I took I-15 north from Utah to Blackfoot Idaho, then US-26 north west to Arco where I continued north west on US-93 through Mackay and finally to Birch Springs road to the southwest ridge trailhead of Borah Peak. It was a 330 mile drive. Upon arriving at 10:45 pm I folded down the back seat of my SUV and made myself comfortable for the night.

Next morning I was up at 5:15 am, and by 6:20 am I was following a trail upward to the east between pine trees and sage brush. Soon, as I headed up a series of switchbacks, I caught up to a party ahead of me. I put my head down, and picked up my pace and as I overtook them one of them called me by name. I turned to see Ray Williams who I had worked with in Australia back in 1988. These days Ray is a pilot and lives in Idaho. In the last twenty-one years we had only seen each other one other time when nine years prior his work had taken him to the DC area. He was climbing Borah with his son, and it was a pleasant surprise to run into an old friend especially at such a remote location. I didn’t want to interrupt his father and son time so I was soon on my way.

About 80 minutes into the hike the trees thinned out and Borah Peak came into view, I was over 9000 feet by this point. This was my first time seeing it with my own eyes, as I had arrived in the dark not getting a view of the mountain from the highway. From this vantage point the summit looked lower than its neighboring peak an optical illusion as often happens in the mountains. At roughly 10,500 feet the trail enters an alpine plateau, and about 800 vertical feet later a rocky buttress is encountered which is the bottom of the legendary Chicken Out Ridge, considered the crux of the outing.

Chicken Out Ridge involves continuous stout third class scrambling - with a few fourth class moves sprinkled in for added spice- as it gains 300 vertical feet. The ridge has exposure on both sides with the north side being the more perilous as it looks down 2000 or so feet. Sounds daunting, but the rock is solid with amble trustworthy hand and foot holds, and as such it is nothing to be worried about - some folks even take their dogs up and over it. The ridge ends at a 20 foot down climb landing on a snow filled notch (which wasn't so snow filled this late in the year). Just in case I had packed an ice axe with me, but there wasn’t any need to unstrap it from my bag. The route travels north east from this point to the peak, on the southwest ridge - I’m guessing this section is the route namesake. This next section is narrow, but was easily passable, and leads slightly downward to a saddle which I reached at 9:10 am. From the saddle it’s another 800 feet or so up to the summit, which required 40 minutes to climb.

This southwest ridge trail is steep gaining, on average, close to 1500 ft. per mile as it surges 5200 vertical feet in 3.5 miles from the trailhead. I took 3.5 hours to ascend it, and was privileged to arrive to an unpopulated peak. An American flag was flying from a flag pole prompted up by the summit cairn with an Idaho flag sunk below it on the group of rocks.

I only had the peak to myself for about five minutes as I took in the beautiful landscapes of the Lost River Range with its many 12000 foot peaks scattered before me. No longer alone I took advantage of the company by having someone take my photo as I posed holding the faded jean "Mt. Borah, elev. 12,662 ft." banner, which is stored on the peak for all to model with, as I sported my 70’s style sunglasses. Those who climbed this mountain before 1983 would have needed a banner labeled with 12,655 ft. as Borah was raised seven feet during a 1983 earthquake that shook the area.

By 10:10 am Ray and his boy arrived, and we took a couple of photos together. While chitchatting we both mentioned a desire to one day climb Denali – Ray hoped to climb it with his son.

I hung out on the peak for about an hour. Ultimately retracing my steps returning to the parking lot by 2pm. Near the trailhead I stopped to read a “Safety Tips For Hiking Borah” sign which had been in the dark for my ascent. The sign said to plan on a 12-hour round trip but besides that it made some reasonable points. A second sign gave the origins of the mountains name stating “Named in 1933 for William E. Borah, Idaho’s senator from1906 to 1940”.

Next to the parking lot I found an empty camping spot with a picnic table. After removing my boots I cleaned up then made lunch at the table. It was quiet so I rested hoping, but failing, to fall asleep. Around 6pm I began the long drive back arriving home just after 11:00 pm.

**Mount Elbert, CO, 14,433 ft. – September 18, 2009, HP #8: Borah was raised seven feet during a 1983 earthquake.**

It was a quick and easy decision to make, when I learned the trailhead for Mt. Elbert was only about a 100 mile longer drive than had been the drive to Borah the prior week. Mt. Elbert it would be then – my hundredth distinct mountain and a new personal height record to boot. Prior to climbing Mt. Elbert I had completed 151 successful mountain climbs on 99 separate mountains as such Elbert would be my hundredth distinct mountain. Not wanting to rush it, I planned it for a week out -- I’d leave next Thursday afternoon, sleep in my SUV at the trailhead and climb it the following day.

Thursday arrived, and I set off anonymously after lunch. The miles passed uneventfully and soon I found myself in Grand Junction, CO with my odometer indicating that roughly half of the drive was behind me. Four o’clock seemed a bit early for dinner, but after I filled up the gas tank I realized I might as well eat too. Soon enough I was back on I-70 heading east covering new ground, through often scenic areas, with each passing mile. Near the small town of Minturn, I exited the freeway turning south onto US-24 to wind my way up to the two-mile high town of Leadville. As I neared Leadville I spotted Mt Elbert to the southwest and thought it looked more impressive than the pictures I had seen. I reached Leadville just as the sun had set and I topped off my gas tank before heading off in search of CO 11 which would lead me into the San Isabel National Forest and the trailhead of Mt. Elbert about 12 miles distant.

It was around eight o’clock when I pulled up at the Mt Elbert northeast ridge trailhead where only one other vehicle occupied the parking lot. The vacancy coupled with the darkness and an unfamiliar place set a rather eerie feeling as I stepped out my vehicle to examine the trailhead sign. Confirming I was in the right place, next I had to decide if I would spend the night here as planned or in the campground across the dirt road. This decision became obvious when a faceless male voice from the other vehicle suddenly informed me to keep my eye on the eastern sky where the voice claimed to have seen strange lights and unidentified flying objects.

At the campground I approached a string of lights thinking it was the trailer of the campground host when in fact it turned out to be the head lamps of a group of three or four campers. They informed me the campground was closed for the season, so there was nowhere to pay a fee, but that I could camp anywhere. Not wanting to bother anyone, and liking my privacy, but bearing in mind the voice across the road I prudently picked a secluded spot within shouting distance of the other campers. I had few preparations to make for the morning, and was soon stretched out comfortably in the back of my SUV with an alarm clock set for 6 am. The plan was to hit the trail by 7 am with the sun just up, but with plenty of hours ahead to make the climb and descent before the inevitable afternoon thunderstorms arrived.

Five fifteen the clock read, and already someone was pulling into the Mt. Elbert trailhead parking lot. Obviously I wasn’t going to be alone on the mountain today. Shortly my alarm went off, and I was up and crunching down some homemade granola and a boiled egg. I hit the trail at 6:50 am, and within half an hour I had climbed several switch backs on the Colorado Trail and was at the turn off to the Mt. Elbert trail 1.3 miles into the 9 mile round trip.

As the trees got thinner the trail seemed to get steeper, and around 8:00 a.m., at nearly the tree line, I passed two older gentlemen who I learned were from Texas and had been driving the car that woke me up at 5:15 am. Shortly thereafter the mountain came into view, a large but plan looking peak. As I left the trees I encountered a father and his grown son resting, and they commented about eating breakfast as I past them. A woman hiking alone who I thought might be with them was a few yards further ahead on the steep barren trail. I continued my march up and soon caught up with her as she informed me that she was hiking alone as part of her training to climb Mt Kilimanjaro in a few weeks. She was chatty but I was eager and wanting to move forward, so on I went, hoping I would now be the first on the peak that day.

A false summit of approximately 13,800 ft. loomed in front of me as the wind blew slightly and I stopped to put my fleece back on. As I made my way up I occasionally noticed a fresh boot print and the odd dog foot print, making me question my pole position. Once the false peak was reached after 2.5 hours plus and about 3,800 vertical feet of climbing I was a bit let down to see how far away the next summit was which I incorrectly assumed was the highpoint.

In planning, I had figured I could easily complete the whole 4,383 vertical feet and 4.5 miles of non-technical hiking in 3.5 hours, but hoped to complete it in 3 hours; 3 hours now seemed doubtful. Nonetheless, I was pleased with my progress, and glad that I was unaffected by the elevation. Within 25 minutes I reached the next elevated point from which I could finally see the true 14,433 foot peak. I would have to gain about another 50 feet and travel along a small wide ridge to reach the pinnacle of Colorado. Three hours were slightly past so I decided not to hurry, and instead I took a few pictures of myself with the peak behind. Surprisingly it only took six minutes to complete the ascent putting me on top at 10:02 am. A new personal height record, the highest point in Colorado and the second highest spot in the lower 48 had been reached!

It appeared as though I was alone, much to my delight. Several rock walls had been stacked up as wind barriers but as I looked around moving from one to another in search of a summit log I quickly discovered who had made the boot and dog tracks. Well, now I had someone to take my picture! I asked him about the summit log and he pointed out some PVC pipe to me. Inside I found the pipe to be stuffed with crumpled moist papers -- it was a mess so I cleaned it out discovering only one well maintain paper which was a sign listing the mountain name and elevation. As I was sorting out the summit log, a solo hiker arrived and I was surprised that it was a young man and not the lone woman I had passed. Armed with the sign, I asked the dog owner to take a photo of me with the view to the south of the rugged north face of 14,336 foot La Plata Peak in the background.

I relaxed in the brisk air at the top of Colorado donning my windproof layer to ensure I'd stay warm. Content with my accomplishment, I munched on some snacks as I absorbed the spectacular views in all directions. To the east I could see Twin Lakes, and to the northeast the town of Leadville. Colorado’s second tallest peak, 14,421 foot Mt. Massive, dominated the view north. In all directions the odd cloud lingered but none of them looked threatening (which I was thankful for) so I saw no need to hurry down. More pictures were taken and I even made a short summit video.

After about 30 minutes the lone female hiker arrived, asking if I minded if she took a break near me. Just before 11:00 am another lone male hiker arrived. As I took a picture of him with his disposable camera, and listen to him talk, I soon wondered if he wasn’t the owner of the UFO-speaking voice of the night before, but thought it best not to ask him.

About the time I decided to begin my descent the father, without his son, who I had seen at tree-line, arrived. I started down, with the fellow and his dog not far behind and with a young man and young woman approaching the peak. I followed a path which angled down a bit to the east, instead of the northeast, noticing the dog and owner diverging from me; I thought that was good as I preferred not to have company on the descent. Giving them a bit of room I before long veered back to the main trail and watched them moving down, as at least five more people were making their way up. At the lower false summit I encountered the two older gentlemen steadily working their way up, one of them mentioned his GPS as he did when I pasted him on my ascent, making me realize he didn’t recognize me from a couple hours before.

Just below the lower false summit I decided I should tighten my boot laces to avoid hammer toe, and as I did so I was soon overcome with hunger. I paused to eat and was quickly overtaken by the suspected UFO voice, lone female hiker and father. As I ate I watched the suspected UFO voice rapidly move down, often jogging. Also I saw the dog and owner resting a hundred feet or so below me. Just as I got up to continue my descent the young couple who were just arriving at the peak as I started down spotted me and asked me if I was descending or ascending. The question annoyed me, and I snapped back that I was descending hoping they didn’t notice the irritation in my response. I soon past the lone female hiker, and was shortly thereafter the young couple jogged passed me.

The father and I were moving at about the same pace, and as such I preferred he stay a distance in front of me. It wasn’t until well into the trees that I eventually overtook him, as we exchanged a few minutes of conversation, and I learned he had climbed Mt. Elbert as a goal to summit a Fourteener at the age of 60 – he was younger looking and fit and I told him as much. From that point on I didn’t see any more people until just near the end of the Colorado Trail where I crossed paths with a fellow carrying his mountain bike.

As I walked into the parking lot at 1:45 pm, my suspicions were confirmed as I saw who sat in the driver’s seat of the lone-vehicle of the night before. As I had asked the night before I felt tempted to ask him again if he was a believer, but didn’t feel like identifying myself.

Grateful, hungry, and little bit tired, I crossed the road to my vehicle not surprised that I now had a neighbor. Desiring solitude, I moved to another spot, closer to the creek which I cleaned up in before making my lunch. Following lunch, the inescapable afternoon shower rolled in as I relaxed and napped in my SUV bed. It was wonderful to be in the woods, and just as splendid to have reached the highest point in Colorado as my hundredth distinct mountain summit.

I wasn’t stopping at 100, tomorrow would see me on top of 14,421 foot Mt. Massive...