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

**“Sa, I’m taking it to the top”**

**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 GPS, as I have been blessed with a keen sense of direction and have a love of paper maps.

**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.

**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.