

Climbing Longs Peak

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What makes Longs Peak so special? At 14,255 feet, it's not the tallest mountain in Colorado (although it is 145 feet higher than the more famous Pikes Peak). True, it is the most northerly peak above 14,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains south of Alaska, but almost any mountain can be made unique by a chain of qualifiers that long. In fact, the significance of Longs Peak rests in quality not quantity. It has a distinctive shape, with a precipitous east face and a rounded western side rilled by several ridges radiating from the summit. Its slopes hold lakes, forests, tundra, flowers, birds and animals in abundance. I can see the very tip of its summit from my townhouse in Boulder, and it draws me. Whatever its appeal, I wanted to climb it.

I drove north from Boulder at 5 pm on 8 September 1991. The sun was shining with special clarity, and the Boulder mountains—even little Haystack—stood out sharp and distinct. I saw a great blue heron near Boulder Creek. As I drove up the St. Vrain Creek I saw both a sundog and a rainbow. Finally, well after dark, I drove into the Longs Peak campground of Rocky Mountain National Park. The stars were bright. The wind nearly blew my tent away. For a while it kept me awake, but then the wind stopped all at once and I slept.

At 4:45 am, my alarm went off. One starts this climb early to avoid the frequent afternoon thunderstorms. I was slow in striking camp and eating breakfast...I didn't hit the trail until about 5:30, and the register showed about ten climbers already on the mountain. Just as I was leaving the trailhead, a woman from Chicago also started out. We walked together, flashlights in hand, for about a mile before she needed to rest and I wanted to go on. I heard but couldn't see a cascading brook. Sunrise came just as I reached the first hint of timberline.

The walking above timberline was easy. Late in the year though it was, a few alpine wild flowers were still in bloom. Water pipits flew about. There were patches of krumholtz here and there. At Chasm Junction I got my first view of the east face and summit of Longs. Although I didn't realize it at

the time, this point also has the very last tree on the summit route. Just a few steps beyond, I was startled by a high-pitched squeak. A pika! This was the first one I had ever seen. A bit farther on, I saw two more pikas, giving an occasional squeak and harvesting hay.

At Granite Pass the trail goes over a small ridge and a whole new view opens up. The trail then touches on a wetland lush with plantlife... as well as a marmot, chipmunks, and three ptarmigan! And more pikas: I must have seen a dozen all together.

The trail makes several switchbacks to reach the rocky but level floor of a cirque, aptly called the “boulder field.” I began to pass some of the 4 am starters. The trail stops dead in the middle of the boulder field, and I scrambled over rocks to a gap in the next ridge. An enormous rock overhangs the gap, so it is called the “keyhole.” What a view opens up there! I could look up to miles of snowy peaks on the continental divide, or down to Black Lake thousands of feet below. Beyond the keyhole the route scrambles along the “west ledges.” It looks frightening, all the more so because the rocks were coated with a thin layer of ice. But with care it was perfectly safe. I passed more hikers. Some of the rocks were edged with beautiful feathers of ice. The level west ledges dumped me out into a couloir called the “trough,” and I scrambled up it. I looked back to above the ledges where I had just been, and there I saw one of the most wonderful rock walls I have ever witnessed. The cliff was so elegantly curved that it looked both delicate and imposing at the same time. I kept on working my way up.

At the top of the trough I passed other hikers for the last time. I worked my way over the rock... level for a while, then climbing, and then suddenly—and very unexpectedly—I was on top.

The top of this steep mountain is a flat field about 100 yards on a side. I strolled over to the summit, signed the register, and walked about. It was not yet 10 am. I was the first person on the summit that day, and I had it all to myself. The views in all directions were stunning. In a dusting of snow I saw pika tracks. I ate my lunch of cheese and tomato.

After about half an hour a party of two popped up, and a moment later a party of four came up from a different direction. They had taken a technical

climbing route—the cable route—up the mountain. We chatted and took photographs of each other. One of the technical climbers proclaimed that the view today was the best he had seen in his three trips up Longs. I had trouble seeing it, though: my eye was jiggling, a sign of overexertion. I decided to head down so that, with luck, I'd be over the scrambling before my eyesight got too bad.

I went down slowly and, fortunately, my eye soon straightened out. But I still didn't feel good. I was tired and headachy, and I kept tasting that tomato. No doubt about it. . . altitude sickness. A raven soared over the west ledges, but I hardly noticed it. I took long pauses at the keyhole and at several other places as I went down. I had great views, more flowers and more pikas, but it was hard to concentrate.

By the time I reached Granite Pass—12,000 feet—the sickness was gone, but I was still plenty tired. There was a marmot at Chasm Junction, and a blue harebell growing just below it. Why hadn't I seen it while going up? I must have been too excited. Down and down I went. . . more flowers, then trees! Finally I got to see the brook that I had heard in the dark morning, and at last I got so low down that even aspen grew among the spruces.

I came out at the Longs Peak ranger station, talked with the ranger, and then drove away. I was home before 5 pm. The next day, I sent out this message over computer mail:

I climbed Longs Peak yesterday. I got altitude sickness, but it was worth it. There are soaring rock walls beyond the keyhole that look like symphonies in stone.