

Three Fourteener Summits in One Long Day

Redcloud Peak (14,040' twice) and **Sunshine Peak** (14,007')

Difficulty: Class 2

Total elevation gain: 4,800'

Round-trip from trail head: 12 miles

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Shan Stuart, Laura Welch ... and Emme the amazing 20 lb Australian Terrier

July 29, 2011

This was to be a two-fourteener day out in the San Juan Mountains about 5 hours from Aspen. One of the challenges with this one is that there is no safe way off the saddle between the two summits, so the only viable route is to summit Redcloud, take a careful look at the weather, decide on a gamble to Sunshine (1.5 miles away) and once committed, we would have to re-summit Redcloud regardless of weather conditions. Being anywhere near a 14er summit in an electrical storm is a very bad idea and with the monsoons coming up from Arizona almost every day for 8 weeks – that was a risk to be mindful of indeed.



Once again I found myself driving the 5 hours to Lake City (having just done Wetterhorn the week before) – a Colorado western town. We stopped in Paonia where I'd found the week before that they were serving my favorite fish, Artic Char. It was worth the ½ hour extra route time.

We got to Lake City about 9:30pm and settled in for an early start the next day. The goal was to be clear of the third summit by 1pm the following day as the electrical storms usually arrive mid-afternoon.

We were up at 5 am, driving by 5:30 am and it took nearly an hour to drive the 16 mile increasingly rough bumpy dirt road to the trailhead. Somehow Laura slept through the whole drive.

We started on the trail at 6:35am.





This was to be Emme's 14th and 15th fourteeners – and we immediately got into how much of a day it was going to be for her. Emme is 10 ½ years old now – and about 20 minutes into the day we were into the rocks – this kind of stuff under-foot is what makes it a Class 2 route. Somehow she gets each of those four feet on a rock without sprains or jamming in the cracks.



We left the trees at about 11,800' and at about 12,200' we started traversing a major basin at which point we'd done about 3 miles and 2000' of elevation gain. Neither of the two peaks is visible yet, Redcloud is off to the right where we needed to first acquire a saddle at 13,000'



Redcloud is the very red peak to the left, but we first had to acquire the 13,565' peak to the right as a false summit to Redcloud. For scale, you can see Shan and Laura at 13,000' part way up the trail. The day started amazing – Colorado blue sky, bright sun.

Approaching the 13er peak, we got back into the rocks.



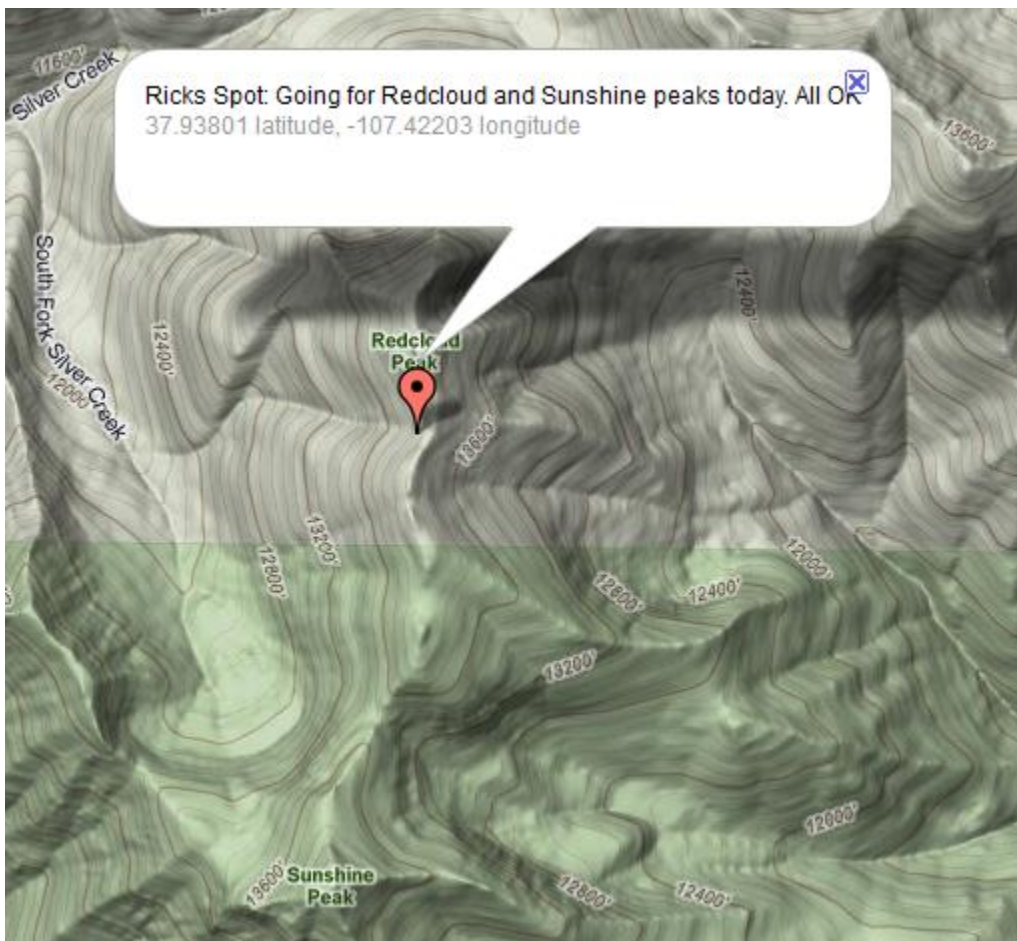


Emme picking her way through the rocks.

Rick approaching the summit of Redcloud with the 1.5 mile ridge leading to Sunshine in the background. The orange device on the right pack strap is the Spot emergency GPS that sends the messages below and the red cup is for Emme's

drinking water.

We summited at 10:30am, Redcloud Peak, 14,040' at 10:30am after 3 hours 55 minutes, 4.5 miles and 3,700' elevation gain.





Rick with Emme,
Laura and Shan at
Redcloud Peak.



Views from Redcloud were amazing – a bunch of the San Juan’s fourteeners in view. The one in the middle is Uncompahgre and the other sharp looking one way left of center is Wetterhorn. If you look



carefully at the saddle to the right just above the lower part of the snow you can see a few climbers ready to come up.

The decision: Some clouds were gathering, but from Redcloud it didn't look too hard to scoot over to Sunshine, so we went for it. Of course everything is deceptive in the mountains; you have no real concept of scale. Getting to Sunshine was a 1.5 mile trip with several downs and ups and a final 600' pitch to its summit.

Below: A cut through the rocks along the way to Sunshine. Clouds still holding,





Summit Sunshine Mountain: 14,007' at 12:05pm, 6 miles from trailhead. So it took us nearly 1.5 hours to get over and up there.





Shan and Laura at Sunshine Summit – there we rested for a half hour and ate some lunch. Shan actually brought some sliced tomatoes and avocado for our turkey sandwiches.





Rick was getting antsy about the weather and agitated to start heading down. Finally Shan and Laura headed down from Sunshine – here's what the approach to the summit looked like:



So we get back down to the saddle between the two peaks and Rick does a 360 looksee – and spots a storm – with lightening!!! The one thing I did NOT want to run into.



Shan and Laura hadn't spotted it yet, and were merrily taking a photo at the warning sign – the only way off is to re-climb to the Redcloud summit!

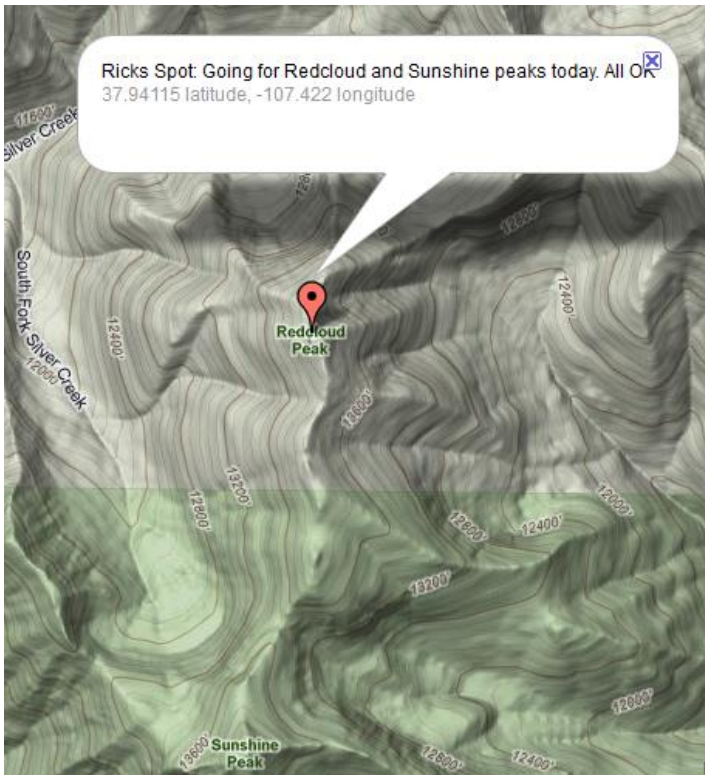


Now I knew that from the research I always do – but somehow it has a greater impact when you're standing at the actual sign and staring at an electrical storm – which is usually a signal to scramble way off any peak you are on – and fast.

Here we needed to climb back up to Redcloud before we could even start to scramble off.

We had one thing going for us – the wind was blowing it away from us – but there was more gathering around us.

Where we were we were in a hole in the clouds and it was actually sunny and hot – but we started hauling up towards Redcloud with no dilly-dallying.



Rick running up to the Redcloud summit – we got there at 1:30pm , only one hour back vs. 1.5 hours going – no lightning bolts out of the sky yet.

I shot a Spot and then we wasted no time down-climbing the other side.



Notice where we were still sun, and hot but down on the 13,000' saddle where we were headed – it was dark.

I worried a little about Emme – having just done a third fourteener summit in the same day – 4800' vertical, hot sun, lots of rocks underfoot – but she found her way to cool off – and continued on like an amazing trooper.



Mountain flower – oh the daisies too.

We got down to the saddle and a bit further and then we heard the thunder, still far off. Next we knew we were getting pelted by pea-sized hail – which didn't stop for two hours! It stung a bit but we preferred it to rain. We got a bit of rain, but mostly hail.



Hail pelting the lake we passed.

Back at the trailhead at 4:01pm - after 9 ½ hours, three summits, 4,800' of vertical , 12 miles round-trip and two hours of hail – the sun came out for a few minutes, we stripped our gear, hopped into the 4runner and headed out that 16 mile approach road.

And we call that a fantastic day, great adventure!

Crazy? We report, you decide.

