

## Little Bear Peak in a Snowstorm – and a Real Bear

Little Bear Peak – West Ridge and Southwest Face September 10, 1911

<b>Difficulty:</b>	Class 4
<b>Exposure:</b>	-----
<b>Summit Elev.:</b>	14,037 feet
<b>Trailhead Elev.:</b>	11,737 feet at Lake Como
<b>Elevation Gain:</b>	2,300 feet (starting at Lake Como)
<b>RT Length:</b>	3.50 miles if you start near Lake Como

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Andy Mishmash, Rob Clark, Jeff Wall

Little Bear Peak along with its companion fourteeners, Blanca and Ellingwood, are in the Sangre de Cristo Range in southern Colorado about 4 hours from Aspen.

This is a tale of multiple adventures. All the reports were saying things like:

- “Little Bear would be more appropriately named ‘Satan’s Playground’ and the hourglass-shaped summit approach is a steep, smooth gully should be named “The Devils Crotch.”
- Dangerous climbing on Class 3 and Class 4 rock, often loose ... no place to be caught in a thunderstorm.
- This loose, dangerous route is the most difficult standard route of all Colorado fourteeners.
- Beware; there are bears in the vicinity that have developed an interest in tent contents.

I wanted to attempt this if nothing else to see what it looks like up close – and I was to do it with Andy who is a master Class 5 technical climber, great teacher and super coach who I trust. Andy’s friends Rob and Jeff needed no tending – Jeff, for example, has climbed Everest, McKinley twice and the hard fourteeners many times, although this was first time for Little Bear. Andy’s goal was to summit Little Bear, guide me back down the tough parts, re-summit and do the most difficult of Colorado’s classic traverses from Little Bear Peak to Mt. Blanca – another fourteener I was going to do the following day.

This developed into quite a story.

Andy drove the four of us in his Toyota truck to near Alamosa and turned onto the famed Lake Como Road. This road is reputed to be the worst road in all of Colorado, 5 miles of hell – with several obstructions that look more like rock walls affectionately called “Jaws 1” and “Jaws 2.” The only vehicles that can realistically get over them are specially modified monster Jeeps and ATV’s and matched with those should be specialized driving skills. But the road is the only way to get to campsite and we didn’t want to hike up 5.5 miles of rocky road and 3,900’ of elevation gain with full backpacks just to get to the campsite at Lake Como.



**Someone else doing Jaws 2 in a modified vehicle.**

Our plan was to drive part way up that road (I can now verify its reputation) to below Jaws 1, park and begin backpacking, thereby cutting the uphill trek down to about 3 miles and 2000' elevation gain to camp at the lake.

We got to Lake Como Road and began the uphill ride.



**Sharp left  
turn – one of  
the  
obstacles  
Andy did  
take the  
truck over.**



**... and up we  
went.**



**We parked, and began backpacking –**

**... here is Jaws 2 – and there were more, but you get the picture.**

I was not confident I could backpack much more than 30lbs up that kind of elevation gain, so Andy took on everyone's extras, including my tent, some stuff from the other guys, food and wine that I bought (11 lbs.), two stoves and fuel ... even a dozen fresh eggs!



I'm guessing he lugged 60 – 70 lbs that day – and not showing worse for the wear.

(All eggs made it unbroken!)

Along the way, we met several parties coming down. They stopped to warn us that bears were wreaking havoc at the lake campsite. While they were tying their food up in trees, the bears were still getting to it. And the previous night a bear crashed a tent with the people in it – no major injuries. We were a little jumpy about all the warnings – which we'd even read about in the trip reports.



We reached Lake Como at about 5 pm – and there was Little Bear Peak right in our faces, with the steep, loose gully, the long ridge and the peak in full view. However, the crux of the climb, the “hourglass” (red dotted arrow) is not in view from this perspective.

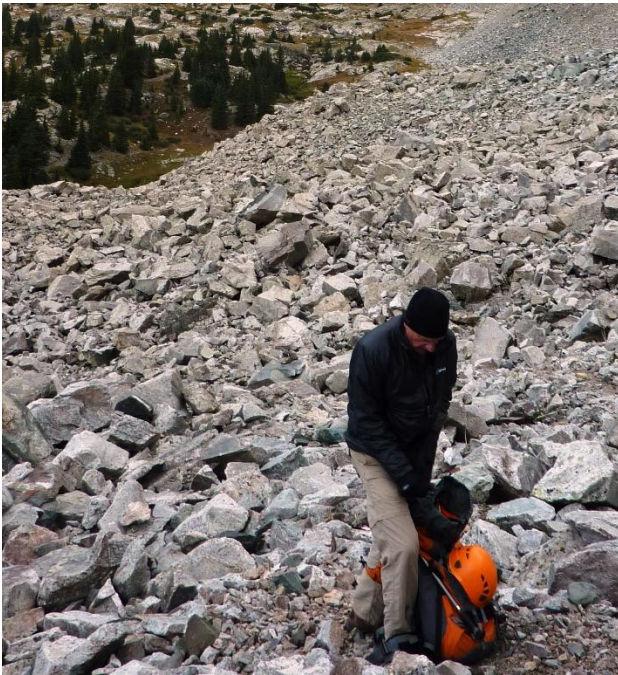


**Weather not looking great – but the lighting at the end of the day was tremendous.**



**Rob (left), with Andy the chef of the trip – cooking steaks, corn and other goodies – accompanied by Magnificat red wine.**

After dinner and fireside chats, we bagged all food, dishes, pans and anything else that remotely smacked of food, and hoisted them far up off the ground AND far out from the tree trunks themselves (we knew bears climb trees – a point which we observed was missed by the others warning us). We climbed in our tents at 10 pm and agreed to awaken at 5pm to start the climb early. We had full moon, but waves of clouds and high winds offered only occasional moon showings – and some concern about the weather for the next day.



**Above: 6:30am start. Donning helmet after climbing the first boulder field.**

**Right: Rick heading up the steep, loose gully. Red arrow shows the campsite.**





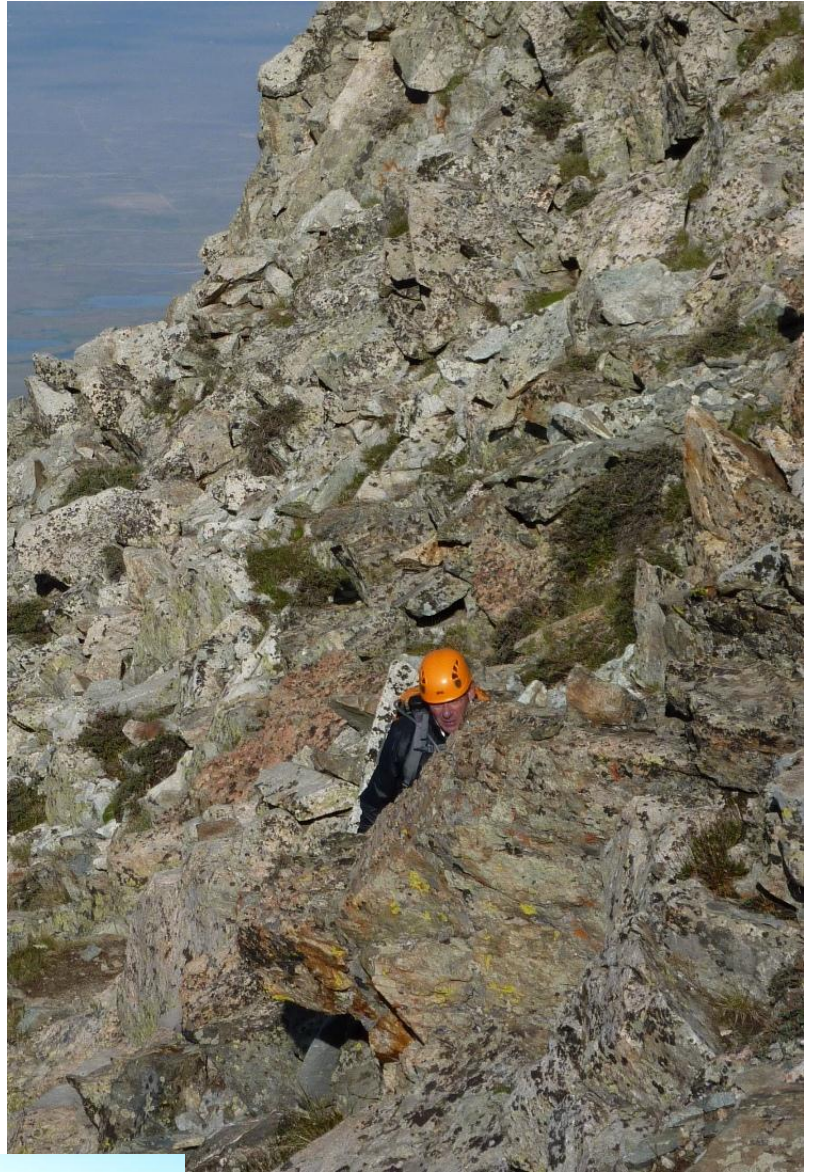
Reaching the ridge, Rob (left) and Jeff (right) were awaiting our approach – and then climbed the ridge-line with speed. Andy stayed with me – which as you will see, was a good thing for me.



At 12,750' just on the other side of the ridge – the rest of the route is visible. It looks like pebbles in the distance, but the scale fools you- those are all boulders.



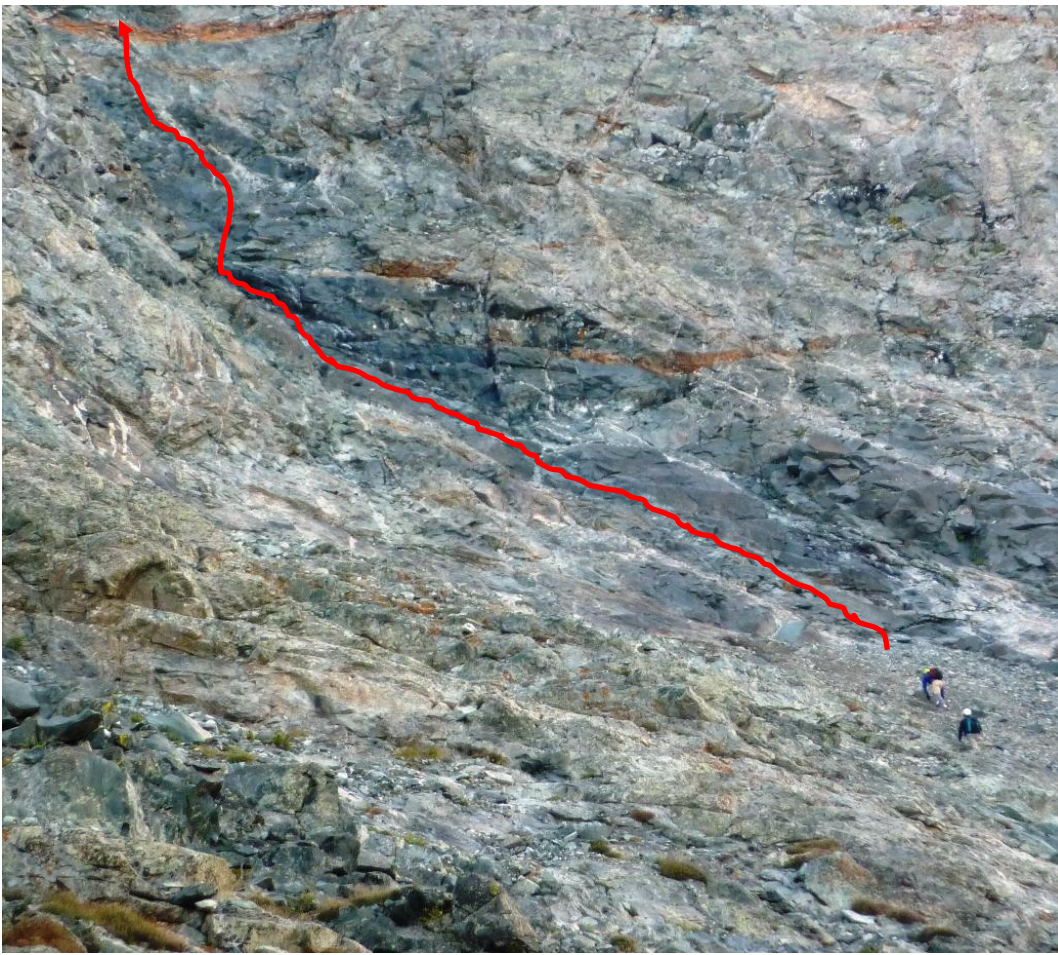
**Above: Jeff in foreground, Rick in back.**



**Right: Rick finding even the ridge is a challenge.**



**Andy taking a self-photo with Rick taking care with every step – the footing keeps your focus “in the present” for sure – and some of those rocks are loose.**



**Rob and Jeff (lower right) approaching the hourglass - which is the major reason why this mountain is ranked the toughest. It is steep, loose, smooth (i.e. no good handholds) and has water running down the middle.**

**The orange lines are mineral veins.**



**Rick heading towards the hourglass – note his pack is missing – Andy took them both – a welcomed assist, see next page.**



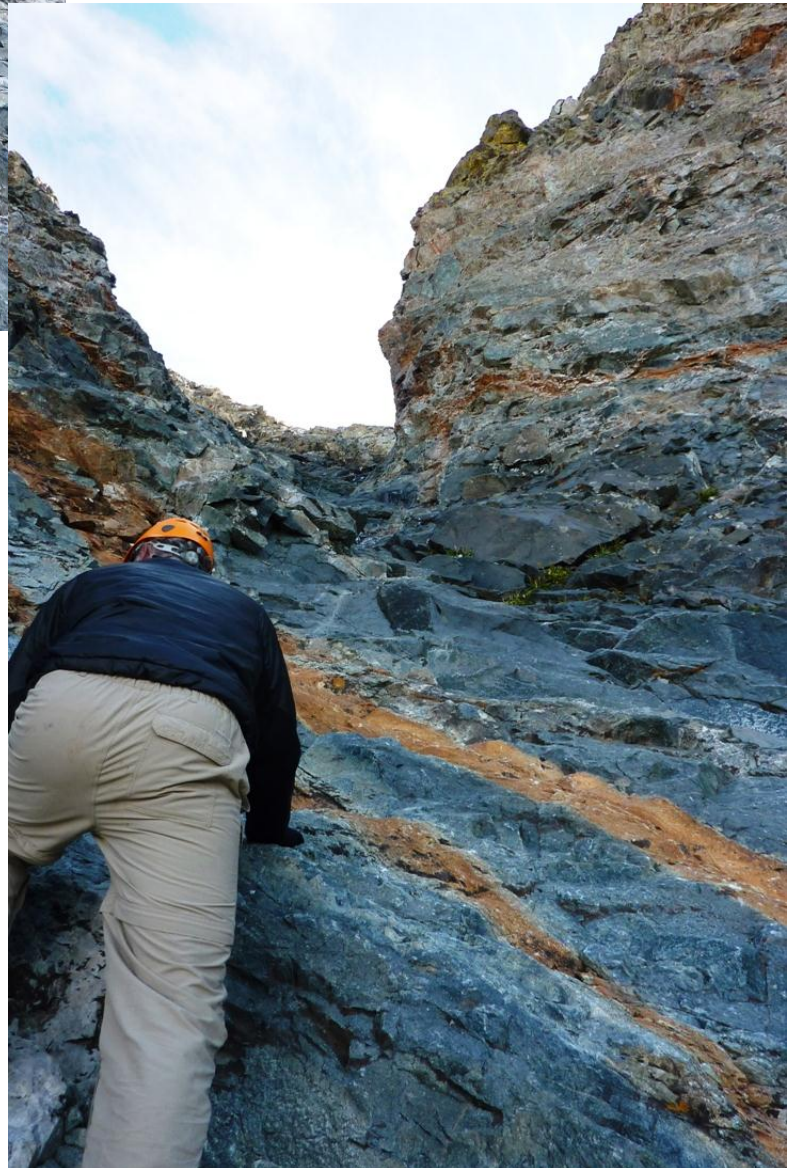


**Rick heading up the hourglass.**

**Often these climbing pictures don't give a good sense of the steepness – I think these do!**

**Excuse the derriere – but check out how steep and smooth is the rock. I'm to the left of the water running down the middle – if it was dry, the middle looked a bit easier, but apparently it's never dry.**

**This is Class 4 climbing.**

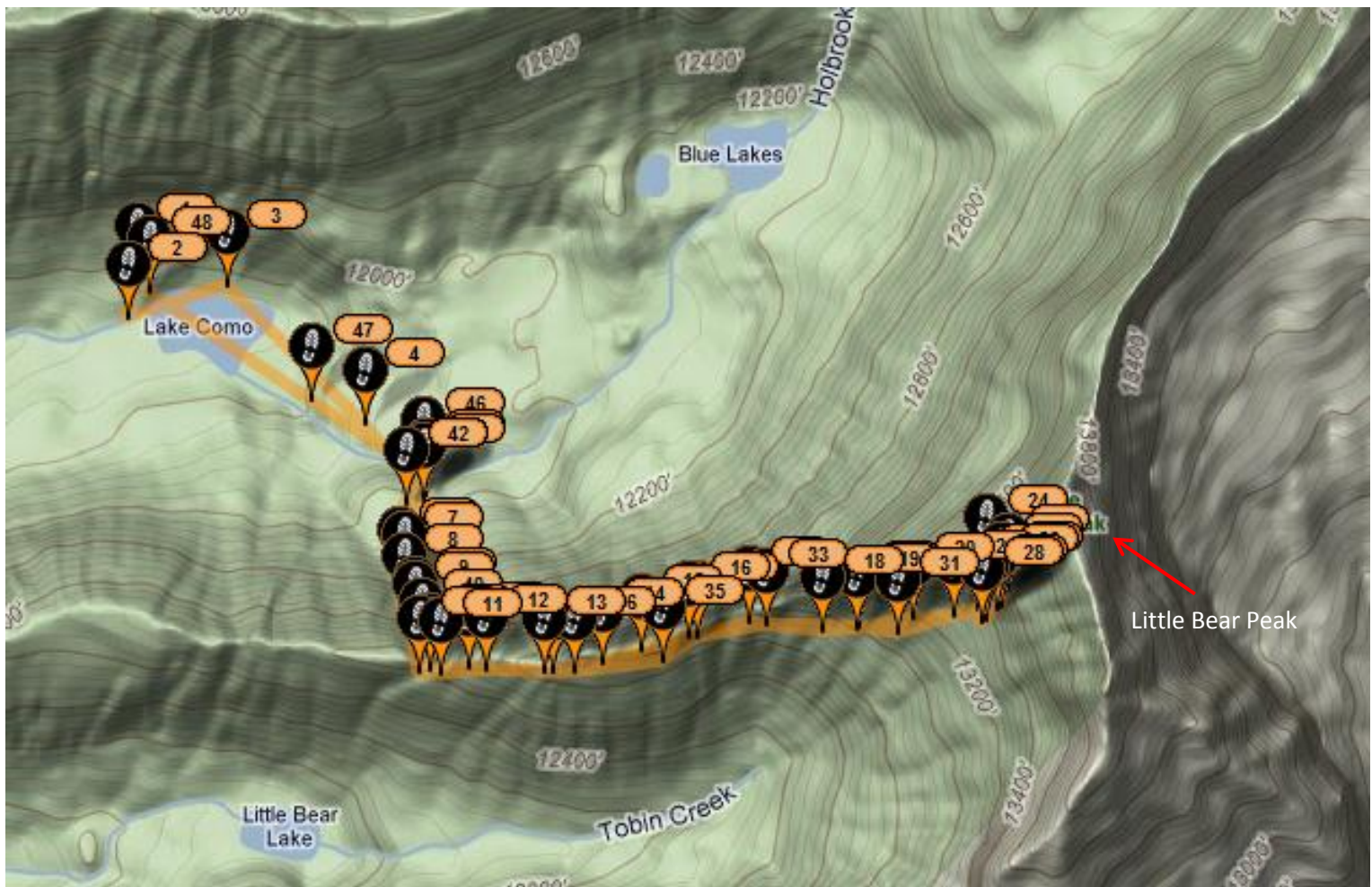




**Decision time – that white stuff above is not just water – it's ice.**

The weather was worsening - Andy says he could have worked out how to get me up this horror show with enough time, but time was running out – so I decided right then and there to start down-climbing, despite being oh so close to the summit (see Spot tracking map below, it looks like we actually made it!). I already had far exceeded any prior climb, and the down-climb was no piece of cake either.

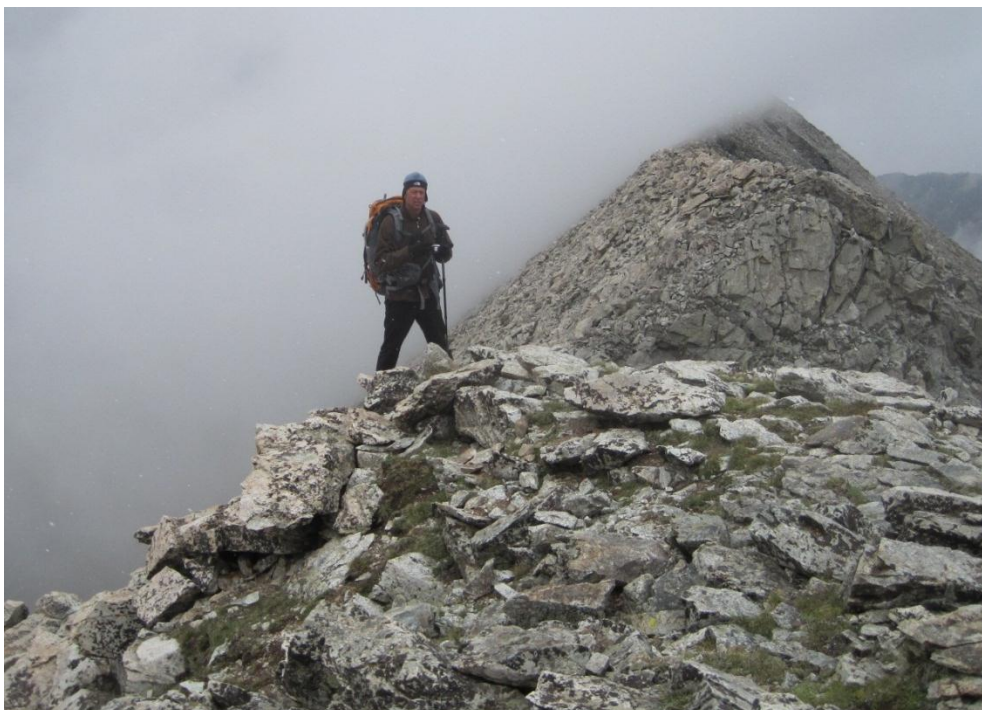
Jeff and Rob had already gone up the hourglass, well to the left where it is steeper yet, but solid. Andy willingly forfeited a shot at the summit to coach me down – there was never any question in his mind that was the plan – and if he hadn't I'd probably still be up there. The only thing that makes me feel better about his not summiting is that his real goal was to summit and then do a Class 5 traverse – the most difficult in the state, to Blanca. As you will see, doing the traverse would have been a very bad idea given what weather was soon to be upon us, so that was not in the cards anyway.



**This is Spot tracking (satellite fix every 10 minutes of the climb) – note we got to #24 in the hourglass before turning around. The summit is so close its designation is partially covered (red arrow).**

Getting down the hourglass left no hands for taking photos. We then did the long, rocky retrace just under the ridge to find the main gully down. The weather was deteriorating, and we started seeing “grabble”

which is snowfall that looks like hail – small, round balls instead of flakes. This was not good – we were still up on the ridge.



**Andy with bad weather and lots of ridge behind him and he was still toting his pack and mine – I needed whatever strength and balance I could gather for the slippery down-climb to come.**

Just as we started the long, loose gully down-climb, Jeff and Rob re-joined us after summiting.



**Rick following down the gully, note gathering snow pellets (grabble) already accumulating – and note how far down we still had to go.**



**Rocks were now fully wetted, and surrounded by accumulating snow. The camera captured some of the blurred falling snow/grabble.**



Ugh, more snow. Just above this in the final rocks of the lower boulder field, maybe 20' from this final approach to the campsite – I slipped on a rock and fell – bumped an elbow, to which Andy exclaimed, “Oh, no – if you get a bruise everyone will think I wasn’t looking out for you.”

After what we’d just been through that was really comical, but by next morning, there was no visible bruise so I assured Andy there was no evidence of my fall.



**My tent in the snow. They had a 3-man tent (yellow) you can see in the background.**



**Ahhh. The warmth of a fire.**

We all went logging and really piled on the wood to overcome the continuing snowfall. We were soaked but happy we were down, we had a fire and some cut logs someone left us to sit on.

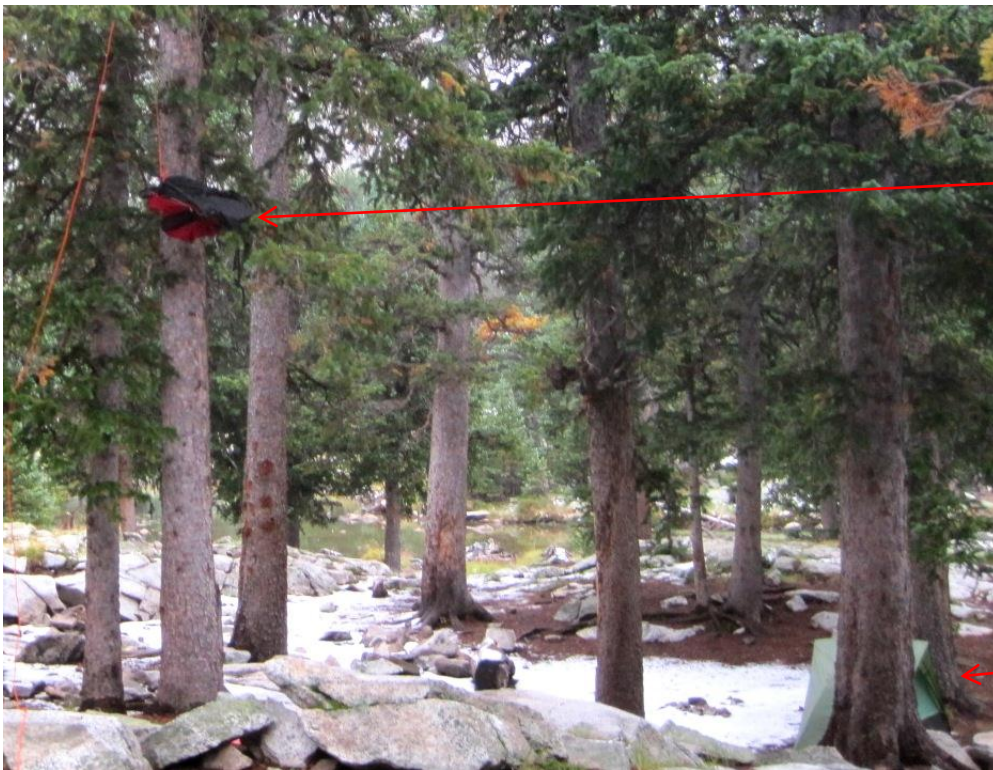
By about 5pm, after several hours of snowing, it stopped and the skies cleared! We looked up at Little Bear and were astonished how much snow accumulation there was – thankful we weren't still up there.



Our original plan was to climb Little Bear on Saturday and then to climb Blanca and Ellingwood, the other two fourteeners accessible from Lake Como, on Sunday. With that much snow on the mountains, that was clearly not happening. But the adventure didn't quite end there.

After dinner, some drying out around the campfire, and re-hanging anything remotely connected with food, we called it an early night and returned to our tents at 9:30pm. It had been a long day with plenty of exercise, but I wanted to make sure to get some sleep without worrying about bears, so I took an Ambien and dropped right to sleep.

Little did I know, that some late-arriving climbers had come up the road and set camp not far from my tent – but the real corker was they strung up their food in a backpack very close to my tent – and the bastards improperly spaced the pack only about a foot away from the tree trunk. During the night, my buddies heard bear, and probably so did everyone else in the area ... except me sleeping soundly. In the morning, the new visiting climbers discovered their backpack was ripped open and the food was gone. The bear had climbed the tree near to my tent, swiped the bag, got the food, ate it, descended the tree probably a few feet from my tent and took off! Thanks to Ambien I never fretted – never knew what was going on.



**Ripped backpack, food gone.**

**My tent.**

After that excitement, Andy cooked up bagel sandwiches with egg, meat and cheese. We folded tents and backpacked down that crazy road. The discussion on the way down was how we were going to come back next summer to bag Blanca and Ellingwood without having to risk one of our vehicles up that road. Ideas included a herd of Llamas carrying our stuff from the bottom or renting an ATV and trailer, but who had the skill to drive it up that mess?

We'll figure it out, of that you can be sure. We drove back into civilization to welcome the news that no one had bombed New York or Washington DC on this tenth year anniversary of 911.



**Backpacking down the Lake Como Road. This is yet another obstacle – and here someone had taken a log from a decaying gold-miners cabin to try to buffer the huge up-climbs for vehicles attempting this mess of a road.**