

## Sunlight Peak

**Class 4**

**Exposure:**

**Summit Elev.:**

14,066 feet

**Trailhead Elev.:**

11,100 feet

**Elevation Gain:**

3,000' starting at Chicago Basin

6,000' starting at Needleton

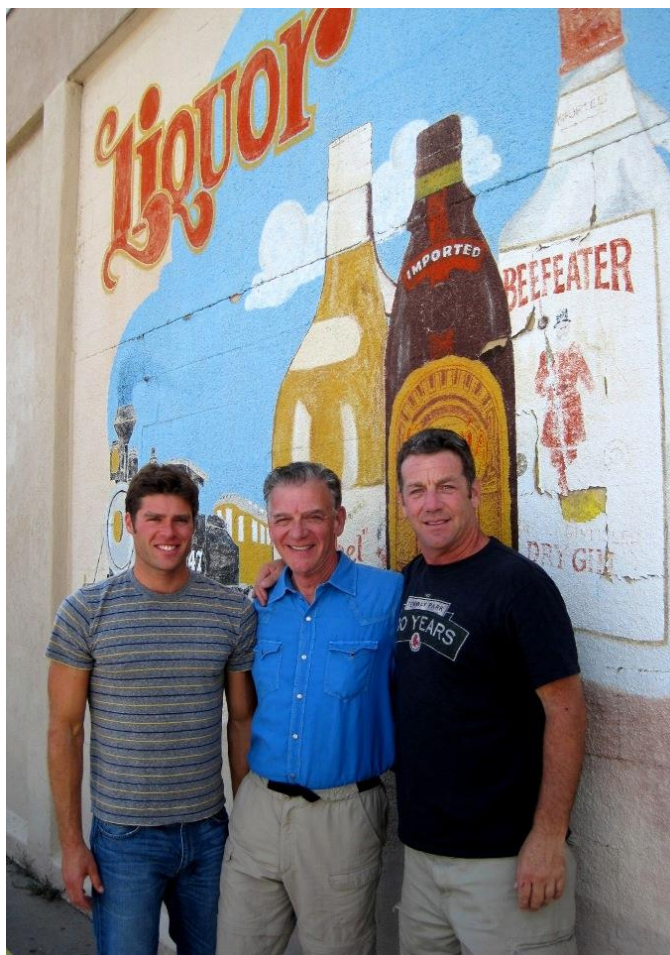
**RT Length:**

5.00 miles starting at Chicago Basin

19 miles starting at Needleton

**Climbers:** Rick, Brett and Wayne Crandall; Rick Peckham

**August 8, 2012**



I've been looking at climbing reports to Sunlight Peak for a few years – a definite notch up for me, so the right things aligned and my son Brett (Class 5 climber), brother Wayne (strong, younger but this would be his first fourteener success) and friend Rick Peckham from Alaska converged with me in Durango to embark on a classic Colorado adventure with many elements.

We overnighted in Durango, stocking up on “essential ingredients” for a two-night camp in an area called the Chicago Basin, which as you will see, takes some doing to get to.

Durango, founded in 1880 by the Denver & Rio Grande Railway company, is now southwest Colorado's largest town, with 15,000 people.

**Left to right: Brett, Rick, Wayne provisioning essentials.**

Chicago Basin is at the foot of three fourteeners in the San Juan range that can only be reached by taking Colorado's historic and still running (after 130 years) narrow-gauge train from Durango to Silverton and paying a fee to get off with back-pack in the middle of the ride. Once left behind, the next leg of the excursion is a 7 mile back-pack while climbing 3000' vertical feet to the Basin where camp is set.



Durango & Silverton Railroad. It takes 4 ½ tons of coal fed by a single worker using a shovel, to get from Durango to Silverton.

Photos show loading our backpacks in a baggage car and settling in our car for the 2 ½ hour ride to the drop-off.

Our car was on the end of the train (premium cabin to avoid “soot in the eyes”) enabling this photo from our car to the front of the train on a cliff high above the Animas River.



For an extra fee, one train per day will stop at a long-defunct mining camp called Needleton where there are the remnants of an old stagecoach trail leading towards Chicago Basin. The Needleton post office opened in May, 1882 and closed January, 1919. The Needleton station was washed away in the flood of 1927.

**Brett and Wayne unloading packs from the box car; the red arrow points to the start of the Needle Creek trail.**



**Brett standing next to abandoned post office.**



The old stage road stops and the long hike begins to the Chicago Basin with full packs. Rick's pack was lightened by Brett, Wayne and Rick P. being the "mules."

Our strategy was to send Brett speeding ahead, despite his heavy pack, to get a primo camp site. Wayne, feeling his oats, decided to keep up with Brett ...



... until he didn't – Rick P. and I caught up with Wayne resting, and we three went on together – at my slower pace.



Sure enough, Brett found a great camp site before anyone else, and he spotted us right away as we came up through the Basin. The views were spectacular; the San Juans are noted for their beauty and ruggedness.



Sunlight Peak and its rugged approach. Windom rises to the right, clipped in this photo. You can see that the ridge between them is crazy, so to get to Windom from Sunlight is a significant down-climb, crossing a loose boulder field and ascending up Windom's "right" side.



Wayne crawled into camp after 7 miles, 3000' up to our campsite at 11,200'. Brett showed him a few stretches which got us ready for an evening of fun in the wilderness.

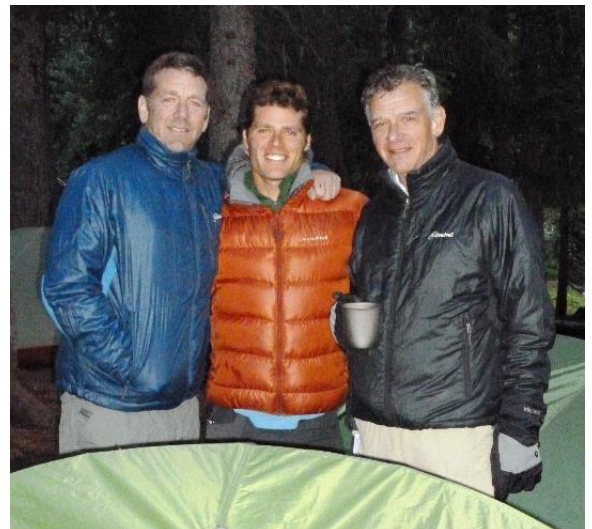
Chicago Basin allows no open fires this year, so we cooked with portable stoves and we hoped for moderate weather – which we got apparently for the first time in weeks.



Nothing like some Jack Daniels “Honey” after a long hike – while Brett and Rick P. trade off pumping and filtering stream water.



Rick C. shows off his latest purchase ... “the best” and lightest air mat for comfy sleeping.



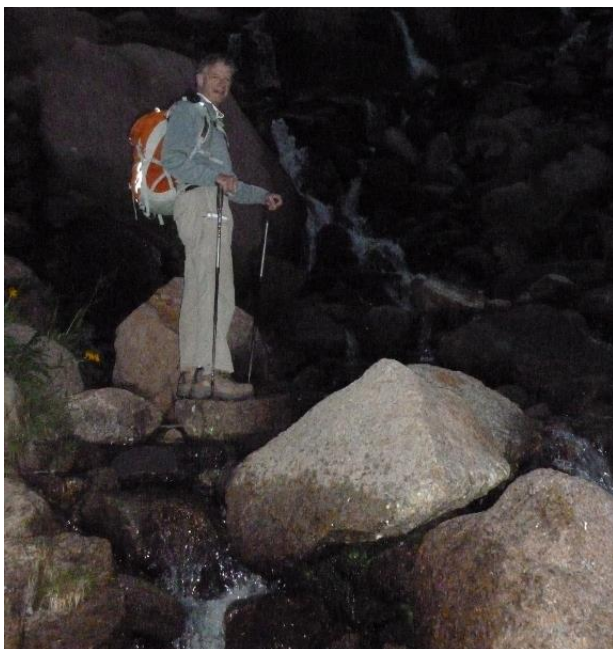


**Final evening light on our target for the next day.**



### **The Next Day**

After not much sleep, we were up at 4am, had coffee and P,B and J's for breakfast and hit the trail at 4:45am in total darkness with headlamps. We'd heard there were electrical storms every day and we wanted to be sure to nab Sunlight Peak as our prize – and then get down before lightning strikes.



**Pre-dawn rock-hopping.**



We make it to Twin Lakes at 12,500' by sunrise, and we see an awe-inspiring sight.



**Our next objective (blue line) is the steep, loose orange gully leading to just below Sunlight's East ridge.**

**It was chilly, but we saw the sun-line converging on us, which we knew meant instant warmth.**

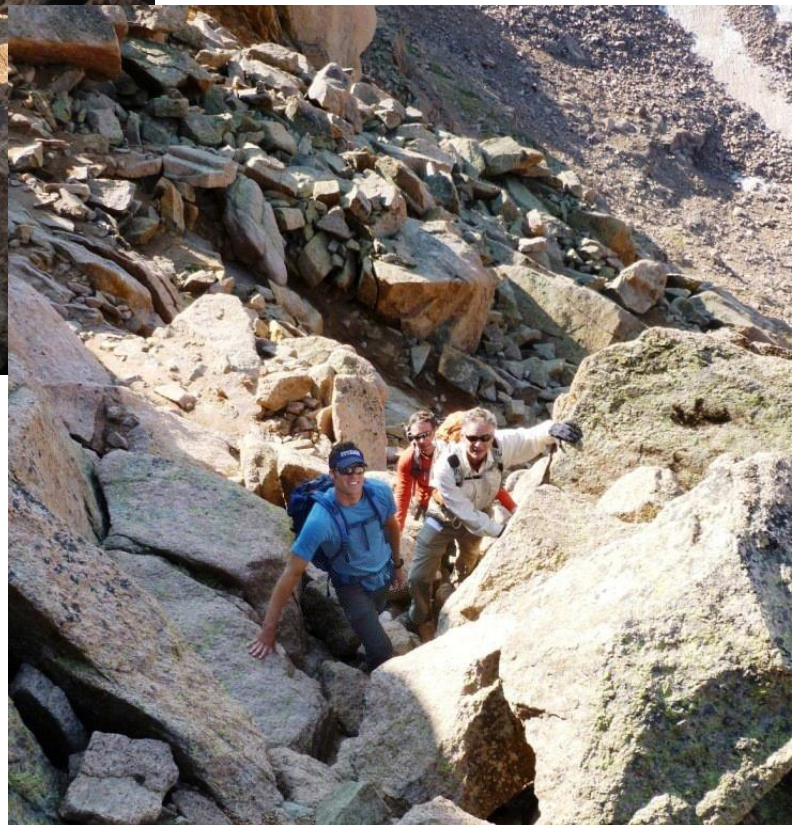




**Wayne didn't much like the loose stuff – but he got up it anyway!**



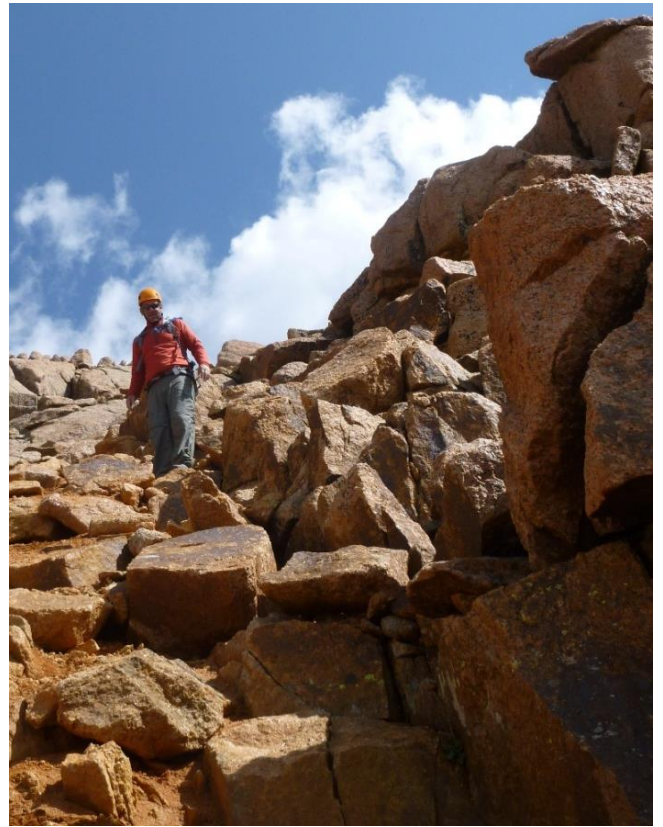
Ahhh. Rick is standing on the sun-line - the sun warms and the clothes come off just as we start the real rock climbing. That's not the summit behind Rick, only the beginning of the real fun you can't see from here.







**Rick C. high above Twin Lakes**



**Wayne at the top of the orange gully.**



Then we got to some of the Class 4 pitches – more exposed and steeper as we went up a vertical chimney heading towards a hole we needed to pass through.



Meanwhile, Rick P. scrambled hither and fro to ward us off dead ends, defined as climbing up a route that only leads to cliffs on the other side.



We aimed for a hole in the approach cap – and found it. Brett led us through to access the summit from the other side. Brett was leading on the tough bits – and then acted as teacher and counselor for Wayne and me – literally calling out hand-holds and foot placements. Without that, we would not have summited.



Wayne seeing us go through, chimed in with his oft-heard “I’m, in!” and with Brett’s guidance he came up the chimney and through the hole – Class 4 climbing for a first-time peak-bagger. Not bad.

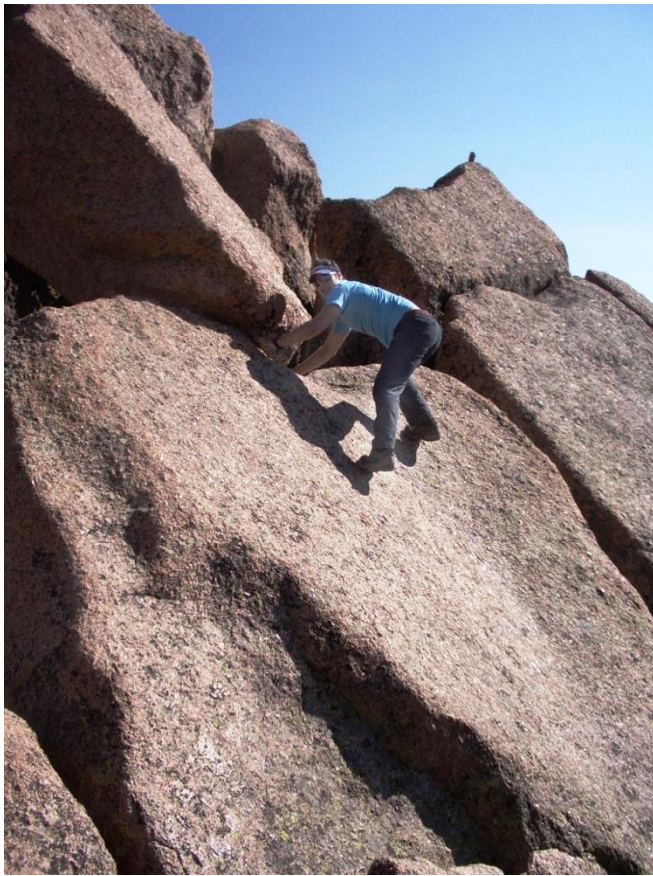


**Summit Sunlight Peak, 14,066’ 10:03 am August 8, 2012**

**Rick C. with signature cannister.**

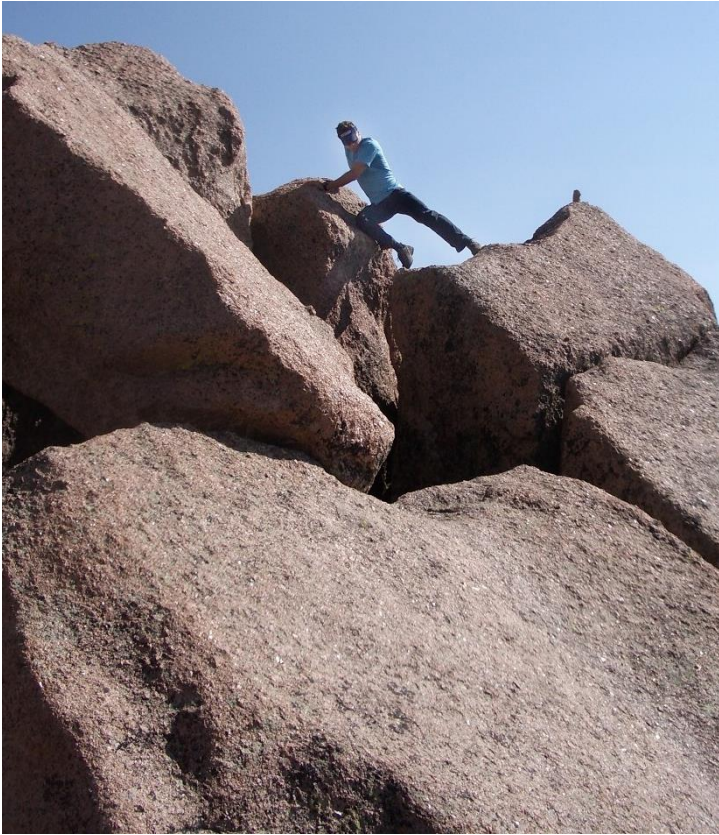


**Wayne at the summit of Sunlight.**



**BUT ....**

Not done yet. In a most unusual formation, one of the signatures of this incredible mountain is a group of five huge boulders stacked on the peak as though someone put them there creating the biggest cairn anyone has ever seen – and exposed on three sides with 1000' sheer drop-offs. Just watching Brett go up it was good enough for me.



**Brett's moves.**



**How did those  
rocks get  
there?**



**Of course Rick P. couldn't be left out of the sphincter-tightening experience!**



**The views from the summit were beyond breathtaking – absolutely breathtaking.**

So the major goal of the adventure was realized, we'd summited Sunlight. But there was another fourteenner, Windom Peak, nearby, although as mentioned earlier, it was a more difficult approach than the typical walk down to a saddle and then up again. Windom was connected by an impassable ridge, and so to get there meant down-climbing to a lower basin, crossing a boulder field and climbing up 800 vertical feet of rock.



I knew that with a fresh start it would be no problem for me, but by the time we down-climbed from Sunlight, it was noon and we'd been climbing for 7 hours and I'd forgotten to bulk up on protein. Anyway I wanted to go for it and Wayne decided to rest at Twin Lakes.

**So first we all down-climbed to the top of the loose orange gully.**



**The route to Windom – down Sunlight's loose gully, and crossing to Windom's east side.**



We were hot and dry, almost no water left in our pack-bladders – fortunately Rick P. brought along our water filter and pump – and he made water half way across from melted snow running beneath the rocks.

I was tired but not yet willing to call it quits. As we ascended Windom's East Ridge approach, we were back into Class 2 difficult and then Class 3 sharp boulders. At 400' from the Windom summit Brett started observing symptoms in me of early on-set of altitude sickness – maybe from lack of sleep the night before, maybe from exertion up to this point, maybe having forgotten to eat some lunch, but we made the decision to turn back. It was still a long way down with difficult footing, take a look:



It took me forever to down-climb, but I stepped with overly conservative care since falling on this stuff would not be a happy ending!





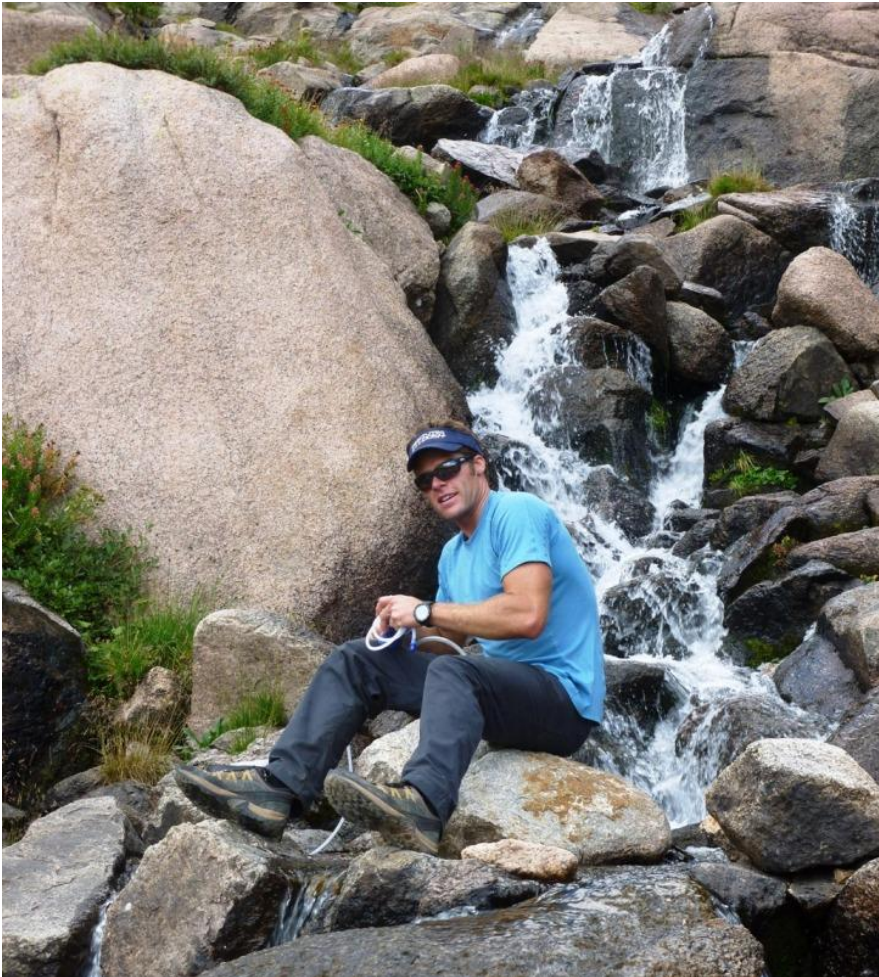
Here's a shot taken by Wayne as I came down towards Twin Lakes off Windom.



A very happy Rick finally off those rocks.



As if to say: *“so what’s the problem? I have no problem with the rocks.”* a mountain goat appeared looking down on me!



The Windom climb did me out of water again – I drank 6 liters during the 12 hours of climbing – so this time it was Brett’s turn to make water.



**I think he liked me.**



**Back at camp at 5pm  
– that would be 12  
hours of climbing,  
can you tell I was  
bushed? But really  
happy!**



We knew after Sunlight, that attempting Mt. Eolus the next morning before back-packing out to the train was a crazy idea – we definitely would have missed the train. So we had a leisurely morning, packed up and hiked the 7 miles and 3000' down-hill to the train tracks.

**Wayne dancing across one of the several stream crossings.**

We got back to Needleton by about 12:30pm and had to wait 3 ½ hours to flag the train down.



*Wayne: what's this really cool black rock – is it valuable?*

*Rick: It's coal, Wayne. We're riding on a coal-fired steam engine train. Wait a few thousand years and maybe it'll turn into a diamond.*

Next thing you know, Brett, Rick P. and Wayne are all stripping to wash off in the Needle Creek – which by the way is created from waterfalls and snow melt. They all said: *“Come on in Rick, it’s not bad after you get used to it.”*

So being anxious to wash off three days of hiking and climbing, in I went and....



**ARE YOU NUTS !!!!!**





Pretty soon other climbers started arriving at the tracks .. and getting bored. Two crusty-looking guys spent their time creating a whole art gallery of stone figures. One of the guys recognized me and said: *"We passed you going up Windom – you look a lot younger today than you did then!"* You get no diplomacy on the trail – just truth.



Finally, at 3:45pm the train from Silverton to Durango steamed around the bend– we flagged it down by waving our arms across our knees, Charleston-style, which they require.



We loaded up and rode the 2 ½ hours back to Durango – plenty of time to hash over the amazing past few days.



This was definitely the best, most fun and interesting fourteenner yet – and my 30<sup>th</sup>!  
How great to do it with son Brett, brother Wayne and friend Rick P.?

