

Mt. Belford (14,197') and Mt. Oxford (14,153')

Difficulty: **Class 2**

Exposure:

Trailhead Elev.: 9,650 feet

Elevation Gain: 5,800 feet total

Roundtrip: 12.00 miles

Trailhead: Missouri Gulch

Climbers: Rick Crandall; Rick Peckham and Laura Welch

July 22, 2013

The July 22nd full moon is called the “Super Moon” because it is the first full moon of the summer hence it is the closest to earth and therefore the brightest full moon of the year,

The Algonquin tribes from what is now the Eastern US called it the Full Buck Moon, since early Summer is normally when the new antlers of buck deer push out of their foreheads with coatings of velvety fur. Another name is the Thunder Moon because of early summer’s frequent thunderstorms.

Thunderstorms have been appearing daily in Colorado, but my interpretation of the NOAA technical weather site, predicted that we had an unusual (for this time of summer) clear window of two days before the monsoon storms hit again. I decided to make a different kind of climbing adventure – to climb a fourteener at night under full moon and then to watch the sunrise from the summit.

We targeted a pair of mountains near each other, Mt. Belford and Mt. Oxford, the latter being only accessible by summiting Belford first. The grind on this route is that once you get over to Oxford, you have to re-climb a steep approach to the Belford summit and then down a seemingly endless bunch of loose, sandy, gravelly and often steep switchbacks for a loss of elevation of 4600’ to get back to the trailhead.

Mt. Belford is in the Sawatch Range of Colorado, not far from Buena Vista. It is named for James B. Belford, Colorado's first congressman.

Mt. Oxford is one of a group of five Collegiate Peak 14ers in the Sawatch Range that also includes Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Columbia. In 1925, Stephen Hart and Albert Ellingwood first attracted attention to this unnamed summit when they hauled surveying instruments to the summits of Harvard and Columbia to confirm Oxford’s 14,000-foot- plus elevation. It was subsequently christened "Mt. Oxford," in keeping with the tradition of naming Collegiate Peak 14ers after institutions of higher education, and in honor of the eminent London university that both Hart and Ellingwood had attended. Oxford was the last of the Collegiate Peak 14ers to be named.

We decided to tackle the first 1600’ and 2 miles from trailhead as a backpacking hike to find a camp site at about tree-line. The plan was then to awaken at 1:30 am to start the real climb using only moonlight.

To enhance the experience, we loaded up with a special gourmet “Laura Welch” dinner (see below).



Rick Peckham, Laura Welch and me at the Missouri Gulch trailhead (at 9650') located off US 24 between Twin Lakes and Buena Vista, Colorado.



We backpacked up the Missouri Gulch trail which was steeper than the usual approach trails, and ascended about 1650' in under two miles to tree-line at about 11,300' where we scouted for a good camp location.

For anyone intending to do this climb, **warning:** halfway up the trail there is a trail junction that is unmarked. Take the left fork and cross the stream over some logs. The right fork will lead you towards Mt. Missouri, which is not what you want.



As we approached tree-line the view opened and there was the approach to Mt. Belford in front of us (see red arrows). The summit is further over the top.



We found a flat enough area for camp and set up our tents at about 3:30 pm.



As 6 pm approached, we got to the good stuff. Laura's 3 course feast was many steps up from the typical dehydrated camping dinners we normally use for camping to save pack weight. Shown here is the salad course:

Barrata salad with organic arugula, olive oil, black salt and crème de truffled balsamic vinegar



... followed by the entrée:

Beef tenderloin with horseradish whipped cream, accompanied by roasted baby peppers with pencil asparagus ...and paired with my offering of stream-cooled Flora Springs Trilogy (red blend) wine, which tasted just fine in our light-weight titanium camping cups...

... topped off with: *Laura's special recipe peach cobbler pie for dessert.*

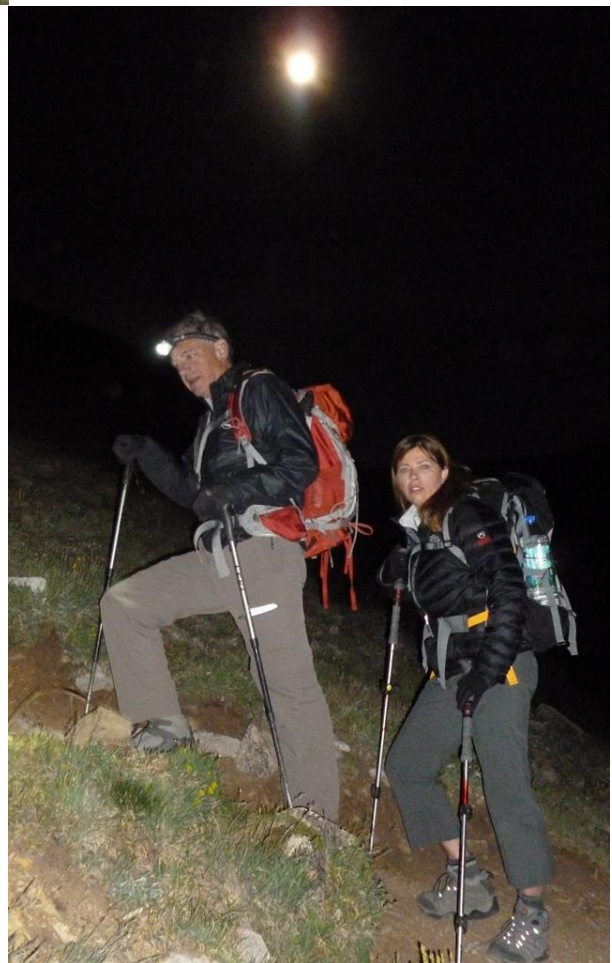
I know it was shameful. It's a good thing no other real climbers saw this decadence. Don't tell anybody.



At around 8:30 pm we turned into our tents to catch a few hours of sleep before our planned 1:30 am start to the climb. I wondered how bright the moon would be – would it be bright enough for climbing visibility? I got the first clue at around 11:00 pm when I awoke to my tent being lit up like a light bulb. The “Super Moon” had arisen above the Belford summit, and it was bright.

I stuck my camera out of the tent to get this shot. Can you see Mt. Belford silhouetted?

Without a whole lot of sleep, we crawled out of our tents, loaded up and were on the trail by 1:50 am. At first we had our headlamps on, but soon we tried with our lights off and found that we had plenty of moonlight for our route.



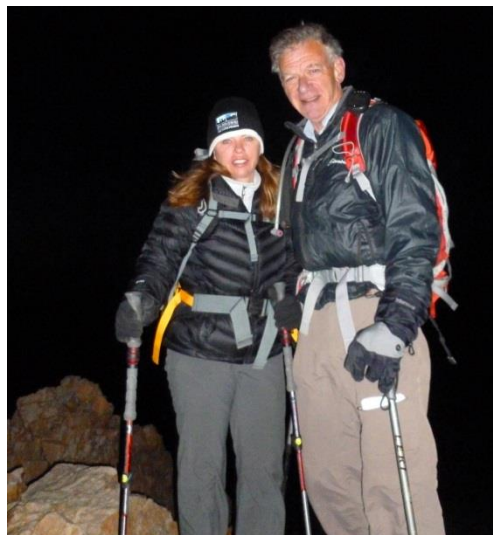
It was a long way up, countless switchbacks but never anything more difficult than Class 2 (rocks underfoot), however we were noticing that there were lots of steep, loose sand and small round rocks (we call marbles) that were not going to be fun on the way down.

A very strange thing happened to me that I'll mention here in case anyone reading this has a similar experience, you'll know what the issue is. While I did turn off my headlamp, I left it on my head, held on with the typical elastic head strap and I thought no more about it. As we climbed above 13,000' I started to get a headache and it worsened as we ascended. It got to the point that was so painful I wondered if I could continue past 13,500' – and I slowed our progress dramatically.

During one of my frequent stops from the pain, we discussed the possibilities. I'd not generally been susceptible to altitude sickness, so I guessed that maybe drinking the wine was the cause – not surprising at high altitude, although I've had plenty of wine on earlier climbs. I declared that for the next climb, no wine – to which Rick P. let out an uncontrolled groan.

The pain was centered behind my ear. Finally in an attempt to massage that area I knocked my headlamp off my head and almost instantly the pain disappeared! Clearly the head band itself was pressing against blood vessels causing reduced circulation and the attendant headache. I stowed the headlamp in my pack and then I was able to pick up my pace with no further problem summiting three times at over 14,000'. When I declared that wine would be back on our backpacking table, Rick P. cheered so enthusiastically I thought he'd fall off the mountain.

Anyway, at 5:00 am we summited Mt. Belford, still in the dark but with the suggestion of a sunrise to the East. We saw no other lunatics around.



Summit Mt. Belford, 14,197' 5 am 3 hours, 10 minutes, 3000' and 2.5 miles from camp.

With the moon still bright to the West side and the start of sunrise to the East, we groped around for the way towards Mt. Oxford which we knew was 1.5 miles away and down a steep slope from Belford. **Another warning:** As the trail from Belford turns left, you will see another better-looking trail that bears right. Do not take it; continue left to the Belford-Oxford saddle.



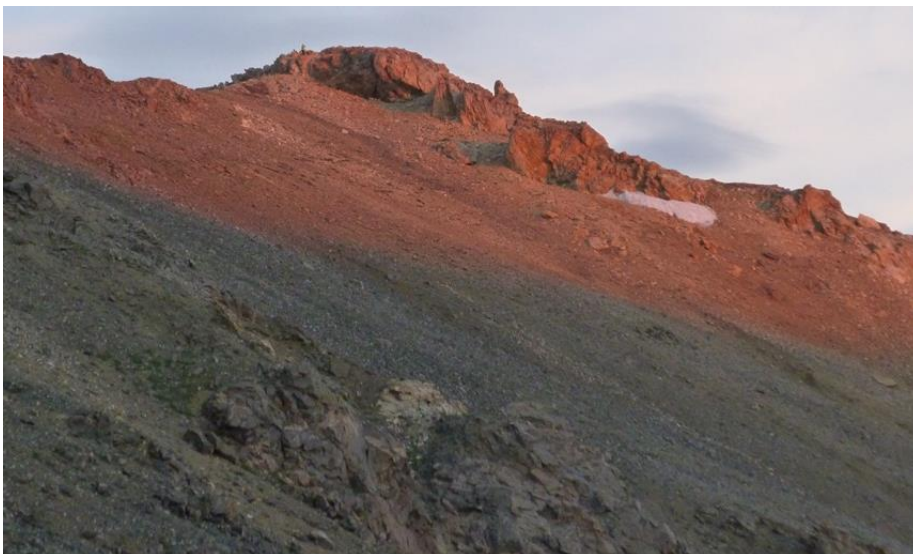
False summit leading to Oxford.

**Do I look like I'd had no sleep?
We had a lot more distance to cover.**



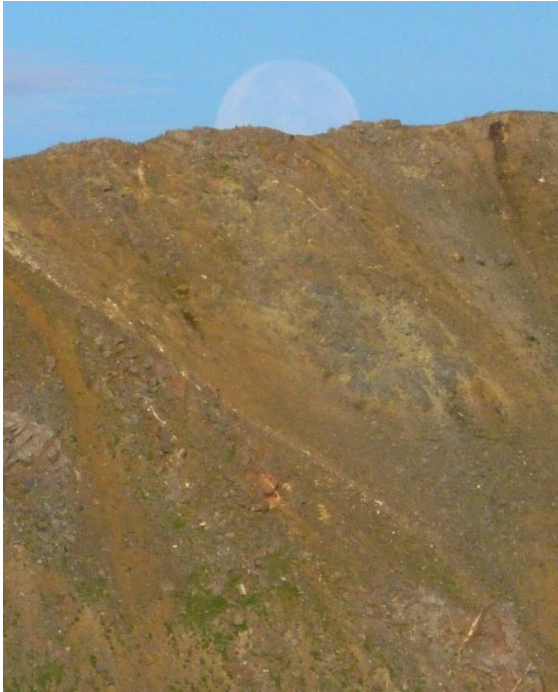
We descended steeply about 650' to the connecting ridge. As we traversed, the sunrise progressed and we had a magical time looking left at the colors of the sunrise and looking right at the moon.

I had the moon in the palm of my hand!



This is a look back at the summit of Mt. Belford in the morning alpenglow just before sunrise.

As we hiked, the moon left us



And a “sun dial” appeared momentarily.



Once down to the ridge traverse, the hiking to Oxford was not difficult, but it felt a lot longer than 1.5 miles, especially when false summits trick the eye.

Finally, there we were, on top of Oxford with Belford in the far distance.



Summit Mt. Oxford, 14,153' at 7:20 am, 2 hours from Belford and 5.5 hours from camp.





I'd read from other trip reports that the climb back to Belford was the real grind of this route, 1.5 miles back and a steep pitch to the approach shoulder. Now we had that to do next.



After trekking across the saddle we humped up the 600' steep rise to the shoulder of Belford.

As the reports stated simply: "*Portions of the route back to Mt. Belford, are the most grueling part of this climb.*"



Re-summit Mt. Belford at 9:10 am, one hr. and 40 minutes from Oxford and 7 ½ hours from camp.



We re-fueled with some food and protein bars from our packs, and then headed down the 2 ½ mile route that had seemingly an infinity of switch-backs to get to camp at tree-line. There we broke camp, loaded our packs and hiked down another 2 miles to the car arriving at 1:10 pm.

We had trekked for 11 ½ hours, 10 ½ miles and three summits since 1:50 am. I had logged my 38th and 39th 14er.

