

## Blanca Peak – Northwest Ridge

<b>Difficulty:</b>	Difficult Class 2
<b>Exposure:</b>	Moderate, except more exposure on top of Northwest ridge
<b>Summit Elevation:</b>	14,345'
<b>Elevation Gain:</b>	5700 feet from car
<b>Round Trip:</b>	14.5 miles from car
<b>Trailhead:</b>	Blanca Peak Road: Car at pull off - 8800' 4.25 miles from Lake Como

**Climbers:** Rick Crandall; Rick Peckham

Blanca Peak is the fourth-highest peak of the Rocky Mountains located in the southern Sangre de Cristo range not far from Alamosa, CO. It is known to the Navajo people as the Sacred Mountain of the East. It is associated with the color white, and is said to be covered in daylight and dawn and fastened to the ground with lightning.



**Blanca Peak. Navajo Sacred Mountain**

Translation From: *Foundation of Navajo Culture*, by Wilson Aronilth, Jr.:

*"We call it Sisnaajini (white shell mountain). It is the Sacred mountain made by First Man and First Woman, together with the Yei'i' (the Holy People) and made with white shells, white lightning and rain clouds. Bald Eagles migrate through the valley in spring. Each of the sacred mountains is a holy person dressed in various outfits. Blanca Peak has a belt. A layer of trees around it that is caused by the 'tree line' forms the belt. Just like any of the sacred mountains, Blanca Peak stands on its feet and extends out its arms.*

*The mountain is considered to be the eastern boundary of the traditional Navajo homeland. The Holy People dressed Sisnaajini with a perfect white shell for positive thoughts and thinking.*

*Then the Holy People ran a bolt of lightning through the sacred mountain to fasten the East mountain to our Mother Earth.*

*As Navajo people, we were given Blanca Peak as a starting point. Blanca Peak was put in the eastern direction because the sun rises from there at the start of each day.*

*Blanca Peak should be thought of as the 'north arrow' on a map, which determines the orientation of a person's mind and physical presence on earth. The eastern direction is easily determined each morning as it is dawning. The sun then rises.*

*During this process, you are waking up and thinking what it is that you will be doing for the day. As you go outside of your Hogan, you're already facing east toward the Holy People. So, being that Blanca Peak is in the eastern direction, Blanca Peak represents 'thought'. Thought comes first in everything that you do. Blanca Peak was carefully formed.*

From: Roof of the Rockies by William Bueler:

The first recorded ascent of Blanca was made on August 14, 1874, by members of the Wheeler Survey. Once having reached the summit, the account reads:

*"Nothing can surpass, either in ruggedness or in grandeur, the little piece of country immediately about us. When we first set foot on the summit we were struck by this beautiful subordination of summits we had not before seen anywhere among the mountains of Colorado."*

There at the summit, they found a structure they presumed of Indian origin. Further clues to its purpose can be found in several researches.

From Fourteen Thousand Feet, by John L. Jerome Hart, June, 1925, The Indian as An Alpinist

*"Blanca Peak was first documented by the Wheeler Survey in 1874... The top is but a few yards in extent and occupied almost entirely by a circular depression used by Indians as an "eagle trap" baited with either a dead coyote or small goat.*

*The trapper would hide against a rock-wall creation. The eagles would see the dead animal from a great distance, and would come to get it. When the eagles lit by the animal, the Indian would grab the eagle by the feet. They had some kind of an herb that they used so that just as soon as he grabbed that eagle, the eagle had a fit and was helpless, and he would pull it in. The herb was on his hands and if he touched you with it, you would have a fit. This herb is something that no one else knows what it is. They would also catch the wildest horses in the country with it.*

*The reason the trap was at the top of the peak was because they had to have some place there weren't any trees, for if there were trees, the eagles would have lit on the trees. They had to be sure to get both of their feet. The eagles were bald-headed eagles. The Indians used their feathers for the headdresses.*

Well of course I had to see the eagle trap for myself which has been only one of several motivations to climb this great mountain. However, if you've read others of these stories on fourteener climbs (on [www.rickcrandall.net](http://www.rickcrandall.net)), you know there are unique challenges to each of them. In the case of Blanca Peak, the challenges only begin with motoring as far up as you dare on Blanca Peak Road, "the worst road in Colorado." Then there's the weather, and this year, there's the bears. So let's begin.

## **The Weather**

The start of the 2015 summer climbing season has been fraught with an unprecedented daily appearance of electrical storms for nearly the entire months of June and July. Stories of climbers getting hit, hospitalized and killed by lightning began to appear regularly.

*"four hikers hit by strike on Yale Peak"*

*“15 hikers struck by lightning on Mt. Bierstadt*

Finally, at the end of July, I saw a break in the weather and we dropped everything to go for Blanca.

### **The Blanca Peak Road**

I probably can't do justice to describing how bad this road is – either to drive on or even to hike up. It is 7.5 miles of rock and boulder hell, and with the sun shining, it's a cauldron. And that's just to get to camp at Lake Como (11,800') for a next-morning climb. With my new Toyota 4Runner TRD PRO designed



for off-road, we charged up this road for 3.25 miles of bone-rattling ride until I just wasn't going to risk going further. There are only rare places two cars could pass each other and backing up on that nightmare was not in my playbook. We knew we'd get nowhere near the top, so we had full backpacks loaded for overnight camping. For the next 4.25 miles to the lake the road got several times worse, with several obstacles names "Jaws 1, Jaws 2, etc.

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



**Rick at Jaws 1**

We stopped the car at 8800' and backpacked the remaining 4.25 miles and 3000' of vertical to Lake Como, arriving at 5 pm with plenty of light left for setting camp and having dinner, except for the third challenge ...

### **The Bears**

In prior stories I've commented on proper and safe "etiquette" for managing a camp site so as not to attract bears. This includes stringing up your food and other items that have a smell in a bag on line

strung at least 20' high between two trees at least 20' apart. It's not just food that attracts bears – it could be toothpaste, suntan lotion even candy bars that are sealed in their wrappers – and even after washing a pot or silverware – it all goes in the bag overnight and when left behind at campsite while climbing.



However this year in particular exactly at Lake Como the bears were reputed to have gotten a lot smarter and a lot more aggressive. Comment from recent trip reports on the Web went like this:

*“Bear bags will be pillaged ... hanging them high and on a line between two trees is insufficient.”*

*“Beware of bears, those nuisance bear warnings are not to be taken lightly.”*

*“The bears are smart, they will take your food while you are watching. Your bad food habits can get you killed.”*

We had all kinds of strategies to deal with bears including carrying up a large specially-designed bear canister that you put your food and other smells into and it seals so they can't smell them. On the way up we met another group that put their stuff in Nalgene containers and weighted them underwater in the lake.

Well .... We got to the lake and hiked to its far side up off the lake and set camp. That fooled no bear. Soon here's what we saw:





This bear was BIG, actually very handsome and VERY interested in us. He tracked all around our site. When he moved towards us we yelled at him. At one point Rick P. threw a rock which seemed to do the trick.

The bear ran out of sight, seemingly off to look for any others around the lake. We'd only seen a few other campers so we knew we were choice.



Anyway, we'd come with campers' dehydrated food packs to minimize food smells (my favorite is the Beef Stroganoff paired with a fruity pinot noir wine which we also had on hand!

We also had a can of bear spray that shoots 30'



Looks like a shot out of National Geographic, right?

He ran off, which gave us relaxation time for dinner and drink.



**Rick P. relishing in the joys of high-mountain camping: tents on level, soft ground, big fire, warm temps and a cup of great wine. We even had a nearly full moon.**



**What could be better? (fewer bears!).**

Later at dusk we saw either that bear or another one return, scout us from several angles and we yelled him off again.

Usually we set our tents somewhat far from each other so snoring isn't an issue, but this time we figured, maybe closer is better so if one hears

the bear we can wake the other and start yelling. Also Rick P. had the can of bear spray – I figured he'd be quicker to pop out of his tent on the offensive.

**Here's the tent setup. This is important to the story. Rick P's in front, mine in back.**



About 9:45 pm we got in our tents and managed to fall asleep. After all we had backpacked up 3000' and 4 ½ miles on a crappy road and we were going for a 14,000' summit the next day.

At just after midnight I began surfacing out of a deep sleep, awakened by Rick P. yelling unmentionables. As I prepared to jump up and out of the tent, my head got smashed into my air pillow by a large paw – right through my tent. The good news part of this is that the bear wasn't after me, he'd been sniffing at Rick P.'s tent which woke him up and the yelling scared the bear into a run – right between the head of my tent and a tree. We think he tripped on the tent-anchor strings and put his left paw down on the tent for balance, under which was my head. So, cushioned partially by the taut tent and partially by the



air pillow underneath, my noggin didn't get squashed.

He continued running and didn't return, but we didn't sleep much either.

**Path of the bear at midnight.**

## The Climb of Blanca Peak

Oh right – this is a climbing story. We'd planned on an early start to summit early in order to get off the heights before possible weather might arrive. So at 4:15 am we were on the move, in the dark.

The first part of this approach is an easy uphill walk on a good path, in part grassy and in part on solid rock. By the time dawn broke, we were well past the next lake up, called Blue Lake, that some even camp at to try to avoid the bears, but it's just above tree line and being exposed to a possible electrical storm was scarier to me than the bears, so we opted for the lower Lake Como campsite.

Once above Blue Lake and into the higher lakes, the rocks and scree underfoot starts – and never quits for the rest of the day. Expert climbers dance over these rocks with admirable balance and forward motion. For the rest of us, it's a grind that gets more intense as the slope steepens and the altitude increases. We were already over 12,500'.



**Rick C. ascending towards the Northwest approach ridge. Here at about 12,500'**



**Rick P. nearing the ridge at 13,700' still 700' vertical and a long way to summit.**

Once on the Northwest ridge, there are two options for heading towards the summit. One is to ascend right on the top of the ridge all the way. The plus is that the rock is all solid, the minus is that there are Class 3 sections and there definitely are places with lots of exposure. The other approach is reasonably well-marked with cairns and drops down maybe 50 – 100' from the top of the ridge which has no exposure and is no more than Class 2 Difficult although there is some looser rock and some sandy patches in areas.



**This is what the Northwest ridge looks like. The far peak on the other side of the ridge is Ellingwood Pt. that we'd climbed last year (yellow arrow) from Lake Zapata.**



Here's a tricky bit when right on top of the ridge. It's hard to see in the photo but that's a break in the ridge with a several hundred foot drop that you need to almost jump across to a brief knife edge you see in front. Experienced climbers hop right over it. The rest of us stare at it a bit first.

Finally, after rounding a false summit at about 14,200' the real summit is in sight.



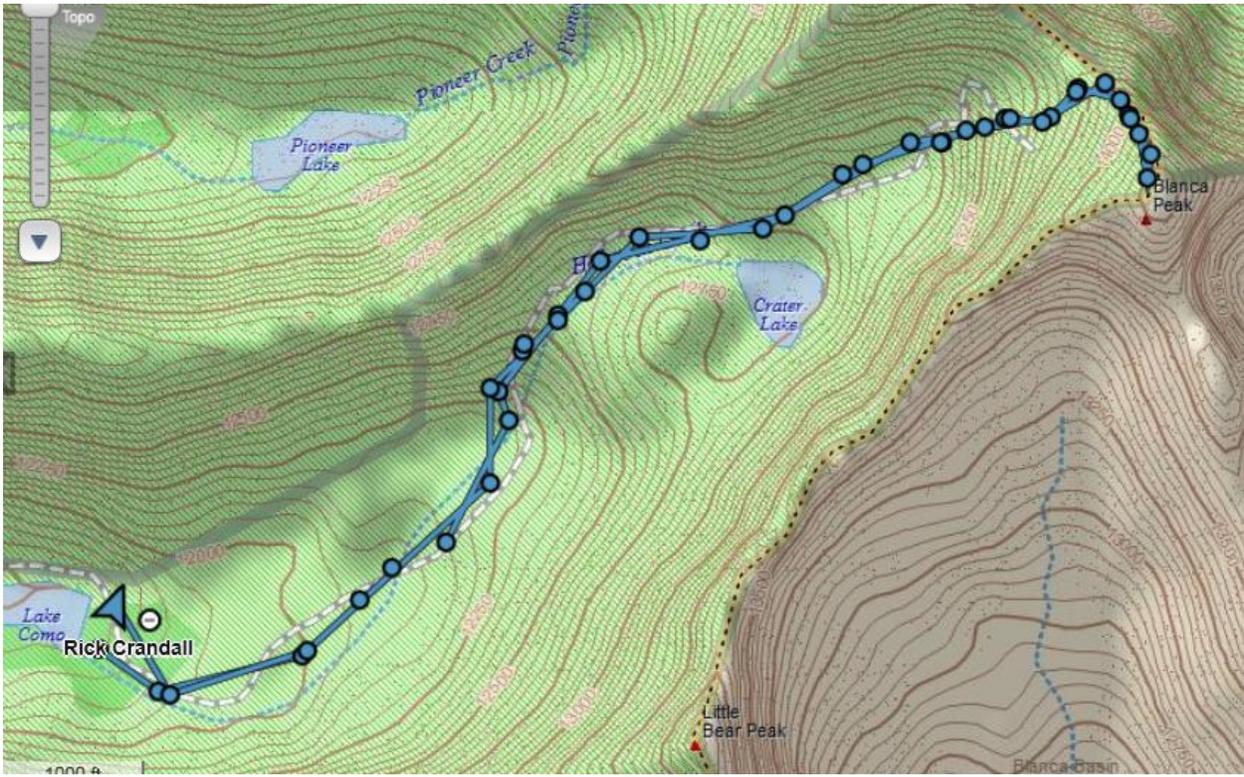
Wait a second, is that an eagle up there on the Blanca summit? And is that rock pile on the right, the fabled eagle trap?

Well the eagle is a fake stuffed eagle I'd bought just for this story and my dear friend Rick P. lugged it all the way to summit for what comes next.

And yes that is the 130 year-old eagle trap crafted by the Navajo's – we'll take a closer look at how that works.



Rick P. and Rick C. at summit, Blanca Peak, 14,345' at 9:30 am, 5 hours and 15 minutes from camp at Lake Como.



DeLorme InReach Emergency GPS real-time track of our progress along the way to summit

## The Navajo Eagle Trap



Here is the Eagle trap, cleverly constructed right at the Blanca summit. The orange oval is where a dead small goat or coyote would be placed. The blue arrow points to where the Indian would crouch hidden around the corner waiting for an Eagle to spot the bait and fly in claw feet extended.



Here Rick P. demonstrates leaping out from the hidden part of the trap and as the narrative at the beginning of this story indicates, both feet must be grabbed or you're in trouble – and the Navajo's had some kind of "crazy dust" on their hands that disoriented the eagle so they could safely collect feathers and then let go of the animal. Of course a real eagle is 2 – 3x the size of this stuffed animal.

So that is the story of Blanca Peak. We relaxed at summit after Rick P's most excellent acting performance, ate a sandwich and enjoyed a windless, sunny, perfect summer day on the tallest summit in sight anywhere you looked. At about 10:15 am we headed down, reversing our route, taking care not to take for granted the many thousands of rocks we traversed.

That all went perfectly fine until we got to within yards of our camp, and I lost focus just once, tripped on a small rock in the path and did my first face-plant on a fourteener – somehow I wasn't injured – a fact that Rick P. still can't figure out having witnessed the fall.



**Rick C. victorious at the Blanca summit ..... and diminished by a face-plant on nearly level ground near camp 3 ½ hours later.**

### **The Bear Again!**

Guess what? We got back to camp and that bear taught us who's boss. In the early morning, we'd collapsed the tents to the ground to be less inviting – nothing inside except our sleeping gear. He still came by while we were gone and slashed both our tents – just the tents, everything inside was perfect – I can't even figure out how he could slash just the tent and not what was underneath.



It was surgical. He left his signature too ☺

We packed up, and backpacked 4 ½ miles down that grueling rocky road to our waiting chariot and on the way back to Aspen we celebrated our amazing experiences on a very sacred, challenging and beautiful Colorado 14,000' mountain.