

## **Still Livin' the Dream**

You all know me – the crazy guy who found a new life's passion following my dog Emme up to higher and higher hikes until we started climbing Colorado's 14,000' peaks – among the highest in the continental U.S. I did sixteen of them with her before she got too old for more. By then I caught the passion from her and continued on with some great climber friends. I learned many things in the ten subsequent years I have been climbing fourteeners.

### **Lessons from Up High**

Some of my most important learnings went beyond the facts. I learned that it is never too late to find a new passion in life – the kind of passion that wakes you up in the morning with new ideas, that fires the imagination and that motivates you to go beyond what you think is possible. I learned that the mind is more powerful than the body. And I also learned that the spark of a new passion can come from anywhere ... for me the latest one came from my dog's passion.

Along the way, the passion transformed into a goal – to climb all 58 of the Rocky Mountain fourteeners – even though some of them require extended outings, rock climbing and some technical moves. I had to learn how to climb and I had to get fit and it has been my great fortune to have had a few friends far superior than me in climbing skills (and younger) willing to be my climbing mates – even catching a bit of my passion that was always apparent.

When I got my 58<sup>th</sup> and final summit, it was an event – and several parties. While the goal was attained, I still loved all the experiences climbing with friends provides, but last summer's season was blocked in smoke from forest fires – all over the west. Climbing in smoke is a bad idea.

Then this summer the climbing season was shortened for me due to very high snows up high and a late melt off. But finally, on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, right after Labor Day, conditions were right and my climbing buddy, Rick Peckham, from Alaska, had come down for a visit and for climbs as he had done every year for the past ten years.

### **What is Next?**

With the fourteeners all done, my attention turns to the thirteeners. They are no less difficult, and many are even more challenging because there is much less information about viable routes. That makes them often more adventurous – getting stuck on top of an unforeseen cliff or not finding camp on the way back down can and has been life threatening to those unprepared for such possibilities.

I spent last winter researching thirteeners and I came up with a pair of them that looked great – the right combination of beauty, challenge and discovery. They are East Buffalo Peak (13,300') and West Buffalo Peak (13,326') with a ridge between them that was clearly going to be the crux of the climb. In total, it looked like about 8 miles of trekking and climbing and about 3100' of elevation gain. Our plan was to drive up an old silver mining trail (jokingly called a road) to the Buffalo Peaks Mine, set camp and go for it early the next morning.

**West Buffalo Peak 13,326 feet**

**East Buffalo Peak 13,300 feet**

**Roundtrip from Buffalo Peaks Mine: 6.8 miles, 2920 feet elevation gain.**

### **To Campsite**

Rick P. and I drove over Independence Pass and down to an area between two old Colorado towns, Buena Vista and Fairplay. There we went off-road in my trusty Four Runner TRD PRO designed by Toyota for off-roading. We were very thankful for that car as we turned onto the dusty Forest Road 435 (not bad) for 6 miles and then onto the nightmare Forest Road 436. That was a single-track, rocky, gutted mess we drove for 5 neck-wrenching miles to the mine. All I could think about was, “what if someone was coming the other way?” There is zero chance of two cars passing – the only out was that the uphill car has to back up to some prior spot where the road might widen enough – and that can be a hellish maneuver in such poor conditions.

That didn’t happen to us this time and we got to a nicely level circle – out in the middle of nowhere. We parked and set up our tents and fire ring for a cherished campout. Camping before a climb, especially with an open fire and favorite wine, is one of the many things I love about climbing. Oh yes, my favorite wine for camping is a fruity and heavier pinot noir – it tastes great even when colder than red wines should be – and at camp, there is no such thing as room temperature.



We ate, we studied my notes on what I could gather about the climb, Rick P. checked out a few hundred feet into the woods where we would need to navigate in the next morning’s darkness.

**Ah, cork is good, wine is better, even in our titanium cups (light and unbreakable).**

## **Early Morning Start**



We awoke and rolled out of our tents at 5 am, headlamps on. We packed up camp, threw everything in the 4runner and got on the trail by 6 am.

**Here is Rick P. framed by our first target, East Buffalo Peak with alpenglow.**

As we hiked up towards tree line, we looked East and saw the first glimmer of sun.



There is a special time of morning before full sunrise when the glow on mountains is red – it is called alpenglow.



## **Mother Nature's Palette**

As the sun rose and we climbed, we encountered a totally unexpected and undocumented gallery of sculptures. Trees that had been worked over by some unknown force into fantastic shapes and colors. Was it fire? We didn't see any burn marks. Was it fierce winds? Possible at near tree line. An avalanche stripping the bark and leaving the trees? Nah, they'd be down. I'm going with Mother Nature having a creative moment and we were the only ones that day to gain admission.

[Note: an experienced friend suggested this was caused by lightning strikes that travel down the moist inside of tree bark and explode the bark right off the tree. So lightning is Mother Nature's laser carving tool! I like it.]

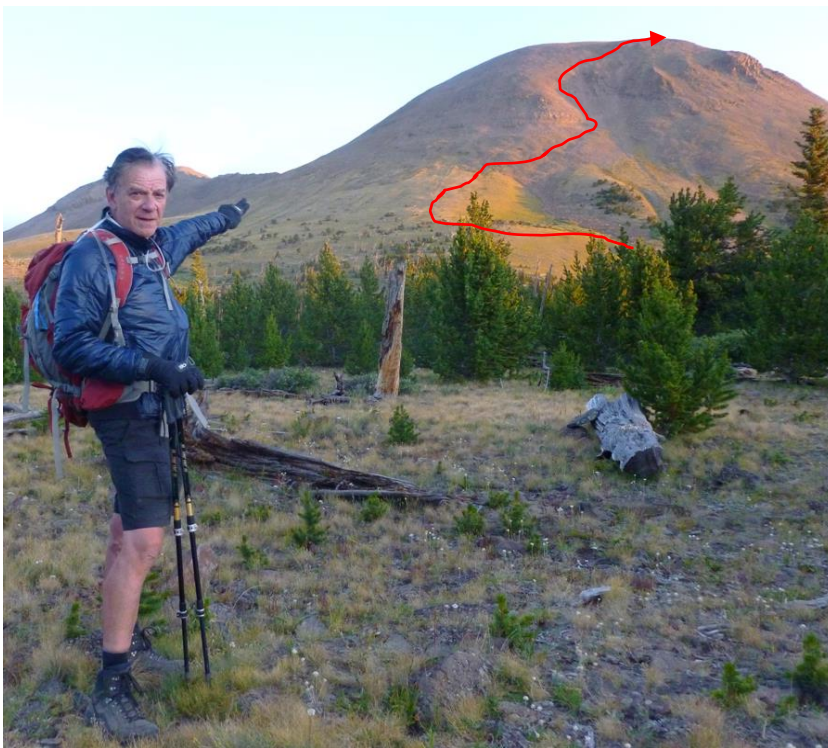






### **The Route to East Buffalo**

After such an experience in the art gallery, we hiked to 11,500' where the trees were shrinking in size. Another 300' up and the trees cannot survive the severity of winter at all, which defines "tree line" in the Rockies.



**We were headed towards a ridge marked with the red line.**



The lower portion of East Buffalo looked to be grasses and thistles growing among rocks which would be good foot traction in the early stages. The upper portion did not look pleasant – loose rock and boulders on increasingly steep slopes leading to a broad and rounded summit.

That was one of my several worries. Another was that since there was no real trail, finding our way back would be tough since distances are so deceiving amongst these behemoth mountains. My solution has always been to bring orange ribbon and tie a few in key spots like breadcrumbs. We did just that.



**I knew it! The upper part was going to be no fun. All those rocks are sharp and loose.**

I use hiking poles for balance, but the best approach is to use them to get some uphill momentum going so that feet are not on any one rock long enough to twist an ankle. These mountains are volcanic in origin.

**Oh yes! Summit East Maroon Peak at 10 am, four hours after starting.**



The cannister is usually present at all named summits. Inside are signatures of those who have made it to top. the device on my pack strap is an emergency satellite communicator sending my position every 20 minutes to a web site that some trusty friends can watch progress.

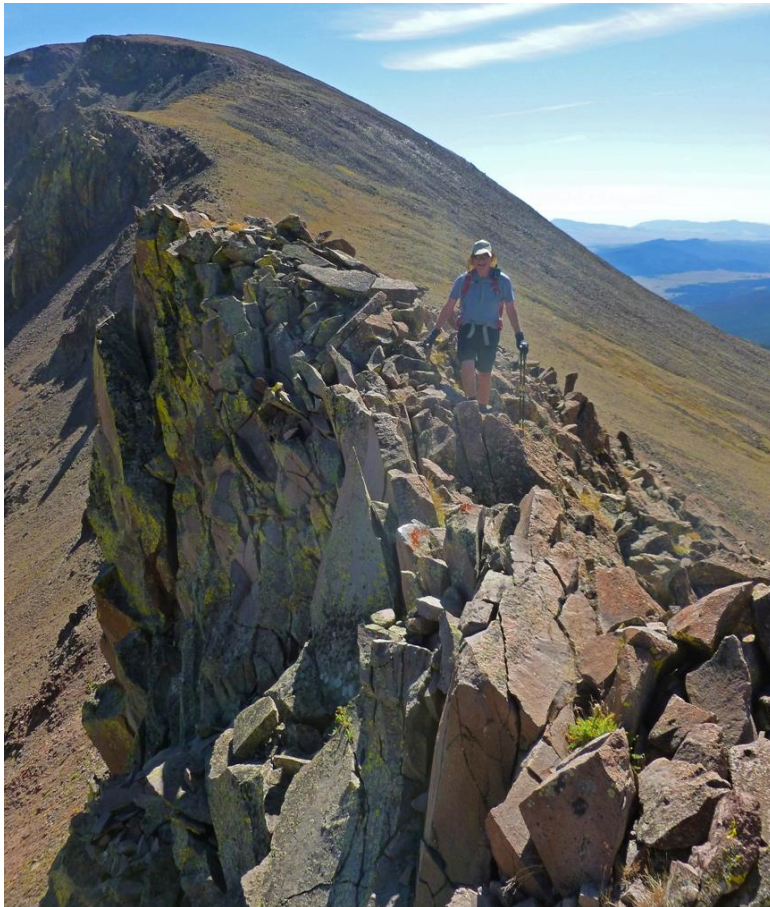


**West Buffalo is in the rear, only a mile away, but down a rocky slope and then across an “entertaining” ridge, before heading up to that summit.**

I was feeling good so far which was a relief after two years of not much climbing and being two years older.



The route down to the saddle and ridge from East Buffalo began on rocks no worse than we had just ascended, so we descended easily to a welcomed grassy saddle. However, once we hit the jagged ridge on the other side of the saddle, my progress slowed considerably.



The drop-off on the side of the ridge was ... invigorating, and at times, the best route was right on that edge which is what climbers call “exposed.” Fortunately, these rocks were solid, not loose.

At the start I had one hand on the rock and the other with the poles.



But some of the ridge mandated all hands-on-deck that climbers call “scrambling.”

**Here Rick P. is showing us some scrambling technique on the ridge.**



Somewhere in the middle of that ridge, I looked at my watch and got concerned with how slow I was going. While the weather was forecasting OK for the day, I never trust that in Colorado summers when weather from the southwest convects up and hits the high mountains in early afternoons and then anything can happen including rain, hail, high wind, and worst of all, lightening. But on this day, that felt like an excuse. Maybe I was just tiring. I began to think that maybe I'd had enough. We got one summit, we had a great day so far and I no longer had an over-reaching goal, like to climb all thirteeners.

We stopped to eat a protein bar and I told Rick P. my thoughts. One of the best characteristics of a great climbing buddy is they do what is best for everyone, and they avoid summit fever. He told me he was fine with turning around. But once I had his permission, I thought: "turn around? What is the reason for turning around? Do I just lack the motivation to push on?" At that point I recalled all the times I've told others that in climbing, as in all hard things, the mind is the most powerful part of the body.

"Let's go on," I said. "Let's see what the next half hour brings." Once I got moving, my brain took over. We were going for the second summit, period! Ahead were the slabs, one of the very cool parts of this ridge. Slabs have their own climbing style. You gather up energy and use sticky



feet and forward momentum, never stopping or you might fall off.

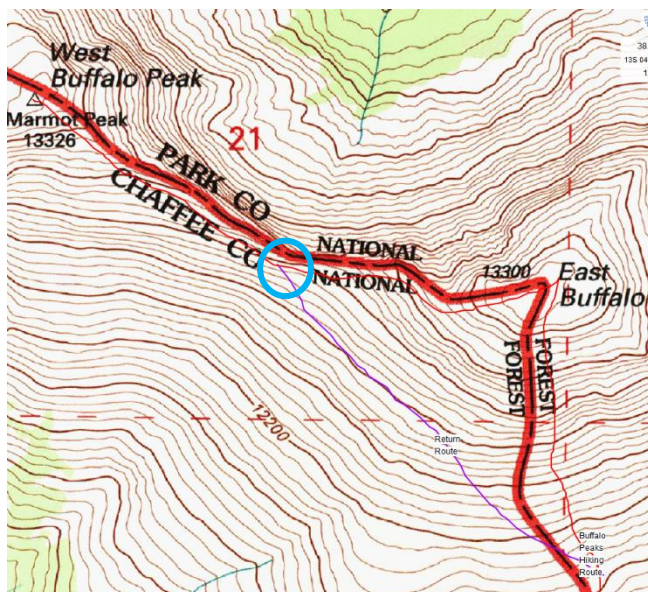
**We sailed up those slabs, over the top and crushed the next 500' up to the West Buffalo summit.**



**Here I am feeling positively victorious at the West Buffalo summit just after 12 noon and eating a P B & J sandwich – protein and sugar, yum!**

I rarely rejoice at summit – I save that for after the part of the descent that still has risk, and we still had to get back down. That was another of my several worries about this adventure. There was little information on how to get down without re-summiting East Buffalo for which we had no appetite.

I had found a map from someone else's trip report on these mountains which seemed to indicate you could work down through the rocks right from the connecting saddle.



**See what I mean – in the blue circle the purple line departing the saddle between the two peaks and angling down towards where we camped.**



We got down to the beginning of the saddle and saw a faint trail right where we had hoped. Of course, in those hills, most trails are made by mountain goats and bighorn sheep that can climb anything, but we took it.

At first it went easily, and we were congratulating ourselves, and then we hit the rocks. Not only were they loose and sharp and steep – but they never ended.



**This was only part of the three-hour grind through those rocks.**

The only way I have found to keep going is to get into what we call a “zombie walk” where the brain is out of body just telling each limb what to do and ignoring pain, tiredness, sun, sweat ... In that mode I have no expectation of ever being done, just surviving in a permanent forward motion.





**And the rocks kept coming.**



Until finally ... grass! Wonderful grass. And there is tree line below, but ... where do we punch into that forest? As is always the case, it all looks the same from up here. I knew we were over where the trees pushed up past the main tree line, so we headed there.





Rick P.'s sharp eyes spotted one of our orange ribbons –

Now that's a great feeling.



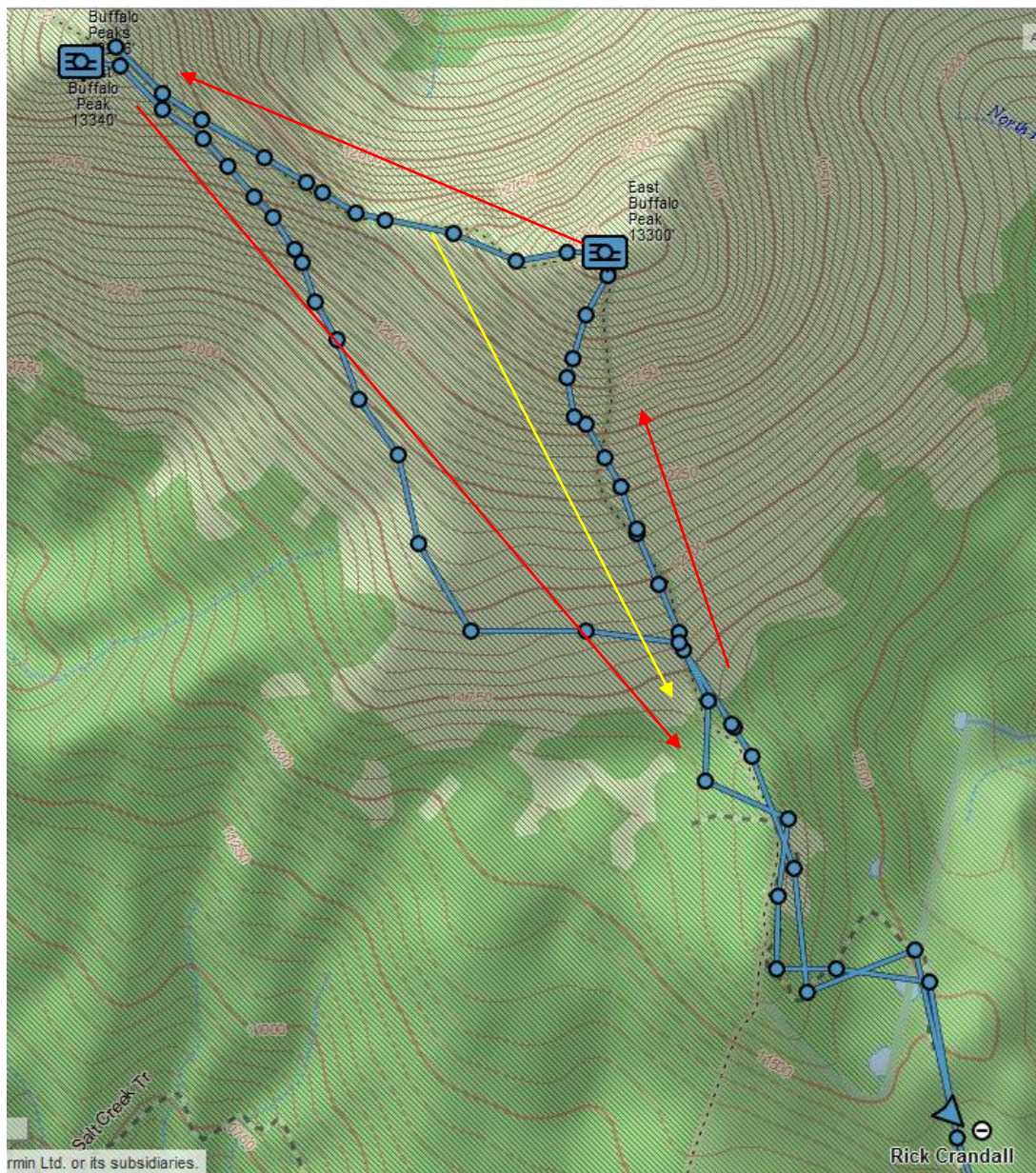
An even better feeling, at 4:15 pm, 10 ¼ hours after the start of the day, there was our faithful ride, just waiting for our tired bodies to climb in and drive down that tortuous 5-mile road with all fingers crossed that no one was attempting to drive up.

After two years of nothing more than modest hiking following a ten-year marathon climbing all 58 Colorado fourteeners, I was back on the board with two high summits and a fun connecting ridge.

As we approached the car, I got momentarily overwhelmed with how fortunate I felt that I could still pursue my passion for these amazing creatures called mountains. I hugged Rick P. for his companionship and tearfully choked out a heart-felt thank you.

**Still livin' the dream ... indeed.**





Here is our entire track for the day, recorded by my DeLorme Inreach emergency GPS sending our location to a personalized shared web site watched by several friends. It shows:

East Buffalo at 10:04 am  
West Buffalo at 12:15pm  
Return to car at 4:45pm

**Climbers' Note:**

If I were to do it again, I would return over the ragged ridge to the smooth part of the saddle and then head diagonally down the rocks (yellow line) from there. You would still be on rocks but much fewer of them and the ridge was fun and quicker than the rocks.