

## **Tabegauche Peak: and a Flirt with McCoy Gulch**

<b>Summit Elev.:</b>	14,155 feet
<b>Trailhead Elev.:</b>	10,500 feet
<b>Total Elevation Gain:</b>	3,930 feet without McCoy Gulch error
<b>RT Length:</b>	7.4 miles
<b>Trailhead:</b>	Jennings Creek (closed)

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Shan Stuart and Laura Welch

July 24, 2012

This climb was to Tabegauche Peak (pronounced “tab-a-watch”) in the Sawatch Range not far from Salida Colorado. It all started with great preparation, highly documented warnings what to avoid and a touch of adventure re-creating a route that avoided the sections which warranted its closing in 2002. This route was reportedly more beautiful and shorter than the new standard route, but it didn’t quite go as planned. So this story is about how we got into some trouble, figured it out quickly and got ourselves out of it without Mountain Rescue!

What were the challenges? (We had issues with all three)

- **Weather** – we’re still in July and the seasonal monsoons have been bringing daily electrical storm displays mostly between 1pm and 5pm – don’t want to be anywhere on a high ridge or summit when that happens. So to get off the summit at 14,155’, re-cross the false summit at 13,936’ and traverse the very long approach ridge and saddle, we needed to start at dark/dawn in the morning.
- **Hidden trailhead** – abandoned and disguised by the U.S. Forest Service in 2002 to keep climbers away from the heavily eroding standard trail up a scree slope and ridge. Some recent climb reports found a way up this Jennings Creek valley avoided the problem ridge and we decided to explore that route.
- **Strong warnings** to avoid a dangerous gully (McCoy Gulch) that gives the false appearance as an attractive way down but traps climbers into steepening very loose rock, difficult to retrace and miles away from the trailhead even if climbers could get all the way down.



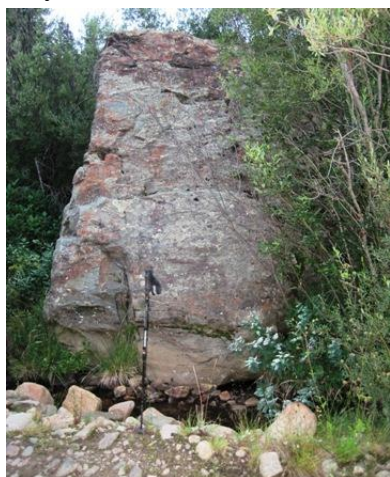
Our first attempt was a few weeks ago. We overnighted in Salida to get an early start the next morning. Salida is one more Colorado town we’ve been fortunate to visit on the way to fourteener climbs. This town is larger (pop: 5500) and has been promoted by several magazines and newspapers, from the New York Times (“The Outdoors Life With No Attitude,” December 2008) to the U.S. News and World Report Magazine (“one of the top ten affordable retirement communities in the US”). In late 2008, Diversion Magazine called Salida “one of the 10 best places you’ve never heard of.”



We woke up the next morning ready to start the day at 4:30am only to see problem weather and a forecast for storms all day. We decided to abort and headed back to Aspen over Independence Pass. Near the top of the Pass we broke through the cloud layer at about 11,800' to quite a sight – mountaintops poking through a sea of cloud.

On July 24<sup>th</sup>, we opted to try again, also overnighiting in Salida and starting our journey at 4:30am in the dark.

The research on how to find the abandoned and disguised trailhead was to travel 3.8 miles past the Angel of Shavano trailhead on CR 240 (using the trusty 4-Runner in off-road conditions in the dark) and locate a 12' boulder which is just past some tree stumps at the mouth of the trailhead. Well, we missed it the first time, hunted and finally coming back down the road in dawning light, found the boulder. Here are some pictures for those wanting to do this climb this way.



**The 12' boulder**



**The abandoned Jennings Creek trailhead**

Since we were doing some invention, I had done a ton of research on how to navigate this climb and how to avoid the risks. I'd also purchased a Garmin Oregon GPS that has the "trackback" feature as a further assist in staying on-route for the descent. I thought I pretty much understood how to use it, but there were a few important things I'd missed and its screen is hard to see in cloud-cover conditions which was to be the case this day. Also before the end of our long day, the fully-charged lithium batteries ran out – I'll bring spares next time.

Anyway, the trip reports of other climbers I'd read on the internet did explore this Jennings Creek modified route but had plenty of warnings to avoid descending from the ridge too early into McCoy Gulch. There were so many warnings that I created a warning chart and made sure we all studied it the night before we went climbing.



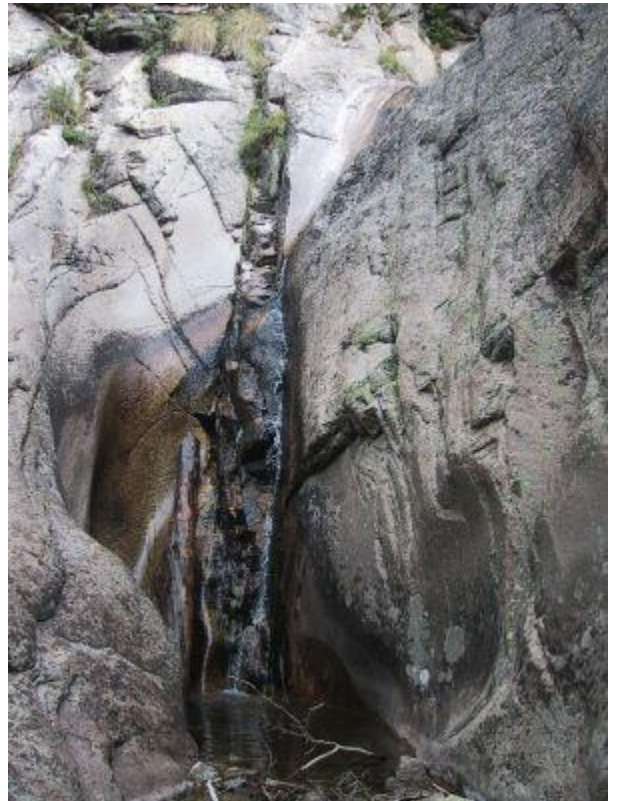
## Here is McCoy Gulch

### “McCoy Gulch

One of the classic 14er route finding errors is to drop south from Tabeguache too early when descending the Jennings Creek route. This puts one into McCoy Gulch instead of the Jennings drainage and has led to numerous calls for search and rescue teams to locate stranded hikers. What appears to be another reasonable route off the mountain turns out to be an invitation to a narrow, difficult canyon not visible from above.”

**“WARNING!** Hikers descending from Tabeguache should not descend into McCoy Gulch! This is a dangerous route and a number of climbers have been injured or killed.”

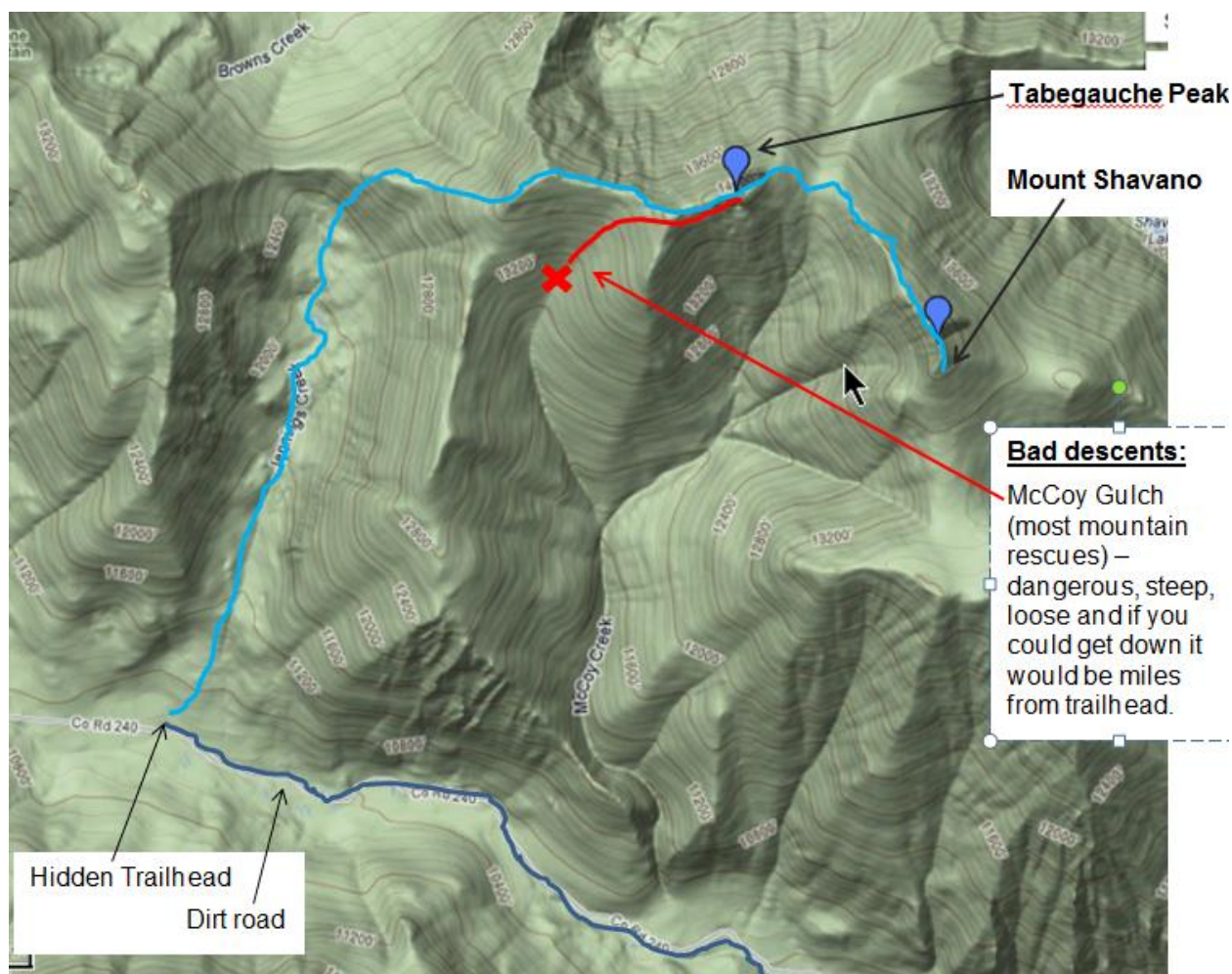
**“WARNING!** Hikers descending from Tabeguache should avoid McCoy Gulch!! This gulch is very deceiving in that it appears easily accessible but is in reality blocked by steep cliffs. Numerous hikers have become trapped over the years and several deaths have resulted from descending McCoy Gulch.”



Some of the unpleasantness awaiting a climber attempting to descend McCoy Gulch







### My briefing chart about McCoy Gulch.

Well, I wouldn't have included all this if McCoy gulch didn't turn out to be part of our adventure – but that will be further down in this story.

So, at 6:20 am, later than we wanted due to extra time finding the trailhead, we started up the Jennings Creek valley. At first the old trail was obvious, and after about a half hour we saw where to bushwhack off it to avoid the deteriorated old scree route.



The route was simple: stay left of the talus (on the right), stay right of the willows until mid-valley where you cross the creek to the left and head for the saddle at the end of the beautiful valley that opens up.





**Approaching the saddle climb, all the way to the left, and then the route heads up the long ridge with continuing elevation gain.**



From the 12,500' saddle, the view north was exciting. From there it is a steep but not difficult hike along the ridge towards Pt. 13,935', the first false summit along the ridge. Following the ridge was easy work, and staying on rock the entire time is completely reasonable.





Making our way up the ridge, it was simply a matter of choosing the easiest lines, as the views expanded in every direction.



**Laura and Shan  
on typical Class 2  
rock**

I chose the very top of the ridge, at times involving a bit of rock scrambling but solid rock. Laura chose a bit further down the slope where the terrain was looser scree, but she declared she preferred it as easier with her “shorter legs.”





**A look ahead at the West Ridge; we joined the old route here, beyond the eroded slopes that forced the closure...**



**Approaching the false summit at 13,935', Shan scrambles up some rock to stay on the ridge approach.**





**A rare sight when Laura is actually following Rick – only happens when there's actual rock climbing. Anything less than that, like scree-walking (as you'll soon see), Laura rockets!**



**A cliff band guards the final summit pitch, making for a Class 3 scramble to reach the top of the peak shown just behind Rick. He's actually sitting on a knife edge – lots of exposure off the North side – and what you can't see is intimidating black cloud gathering.**





**10:59 am according to Spot: No leisurely lunch on the summit – we hightailed it out of there realizing we had several false summits, a long ridge walk and a saddle walk, literally hours before we were out of danger from electrical storms.**

OK, so we were nervous – cloud formations threatening, lots of rock, ridge and lesser summits to traverse, I guess we zoned into typical down-climb where Laura is fast, I'm slow and Shan splits the difference so he doesn't let me out of his sight.

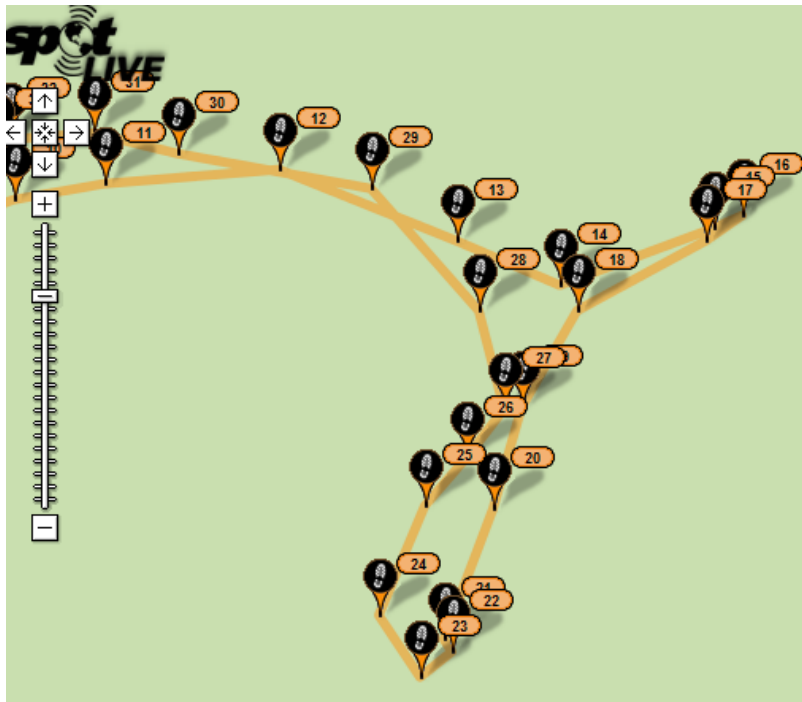
As we headed back to the high false summit, Laura looked down and saw grass 2000' below, figured it was the grass in "our" valley (i.e. Jennings Creek) and headed down the steepening, loose rock, but she's good at that, and fast. Obviously maybe because of the threatening weather, she was more concerned about getting down than all the pre-warnings. It was like a horse heading for the barn.

Shan was following but not as fast. Meanwhile I'm watching and thinking, *"That's not right, we should be staying up high on the ridge for a much longer time."* I was not sure where she was heading, so despite the threatening cloud, I took out my new Garmin and tried to see where we were in relation to the route. That's where I got confused for a few minutes – when you put Garmin into Trackback mode, it calls the start of your hike the finish – but I was interpreting "finish" as the summit and got confused. I was even turning it upside down, doing zooms – finally I decided to descend somewhat to shout down before they got out of hearing range – *"stop, you're too low!"*

Laura already couldn't hear me but Shan was only about 150' below me and he heard and had already figured it out for himself, so he shouted down to Laura who had already descended about 600' from the ridge. She apparently called back to him that she saw grass far below and was headed towards it, but he insisted and the three of us then began to up-climb an exhausting steep and loose rock slope to regain the ridge.

It was only later that night when I was able to see the Spot track that I saw she was headed straight down to McCoy Gulch! (See photos at the start of this report).

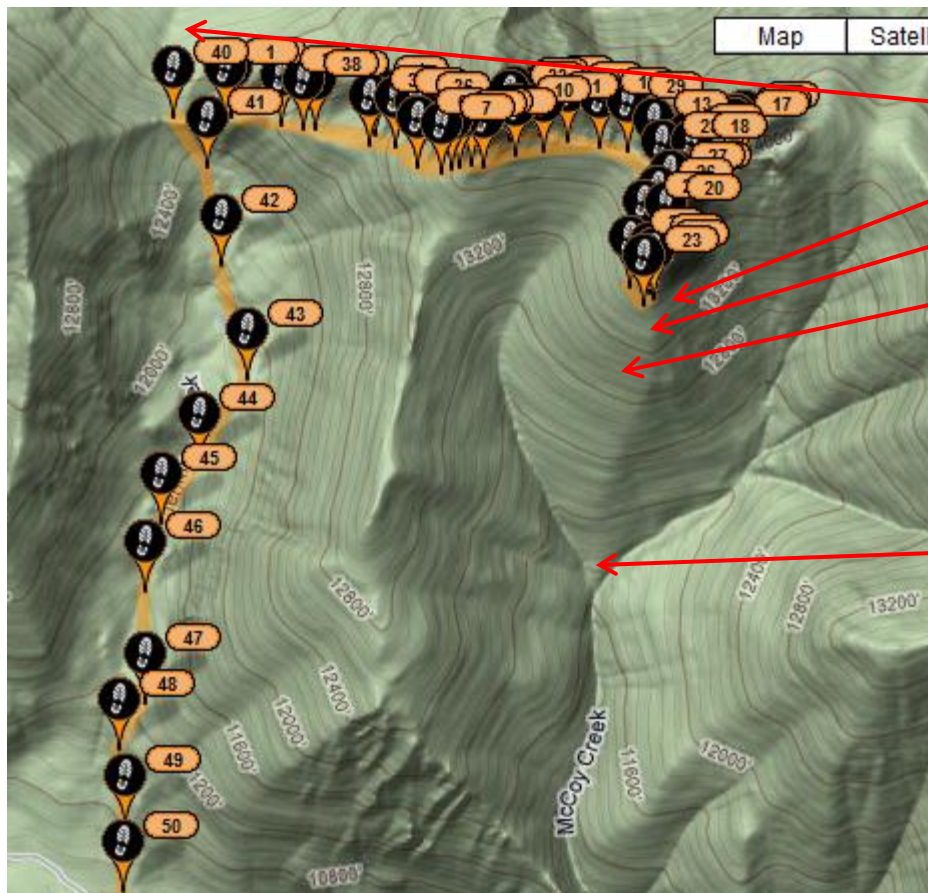




Our route should have been from Flag 16 at the Tabby summit to Flag 14 and then stayed on the ridge to Flag 13 and 12. As you can see, since I was wearing the Spot, I'd descended to Flag 23, about 300' down, shouted to Shan who was about 450' down and then headed back up to the ridge at Flag 28. Laura had a much tougher job; she had to come up 600' on that messy slope, but that she did.

Time lapse was from 11:19 when she headed down to 1:09 pm when we all got back to the ridge – almost two hours of dealing with that slope – and

weather holding, thankfully. No Mountain Rescue for us today.



Correct return

Rick descended to here

Shan was about here

Laura was here before heading back up.

The dreaded McCoy Gulch





So, once we re-gained the ridge, I needed a power bar – Laura realized she had cell coverage and relaxed a few minutes on the phone!



**Rick heading down the talus to the saddle.**

Amazingly that gathering cloud stayed stuck on Tabegauche, giving us good, cool weather to hightail it over the several lesser summits, and down to the saddle.



**At 3:09pm, back to the notch at the top of the saddle for the final switchback downclimb to the correct valley below.**





**Shan descending down from the saddle towards the comforting valley below.**







**Cool dead-tree shot**



**Rick so happy to see his 4-Runner at 5 pm, after 10 hours 45 minutes of hiking and climbing!**

**... and Laura looking good but needing an extra two legs to stay upright.**





We bumped back on the dirt road and happily reviewed our adventure – happy that it all turned out OK. There were many positives:

- It was a beautiful route up Tabegauche
- The weather held for the climb, and then let loose only after we were in the car
- We knocked off another fourteener (I think my 29<sup>th</sup>)
- We all re-learned the respect these tall mountains deserve
- We learned we've got the extra "juice" (i.e. fitness) to get out of some trouble – but by no means cocky about that.
- I'm gonna learn my GPS
- The Gods were on our side today!

So to cap the day, heading up Independence Pass on return we ran into an aggressive series of electrical storms, hail, sleet, lightening flashes all over and mudslides we had to swerve around. We couldn't help but imagine what we'd avoided by at least being respectful of the weather on a climb that featured so much ridge and summit elapsed time – all above 13,000' and of course above 14000 at and near the summit.

Apprantly just after we passed over the top of Independence at 7:30 pm, it was closed for three hours and re-opened at 10:40pm. I repeat about the Gods ...

**From:** [alert@pitkinalert.org](mailto:alert@pitkinalert.org)

**Date:** July 24, 2012 10:40:03 PM MDT

**To:** [Pitkin@pitkinalert.org](mailto:Pitkin@pitkinalert.org)

**Subject: #4301 Independence Pass is now open.**

Independence Pass was closed due to a mud slide and is now open.

By the way – including our McCoy Gulch error, our total vertical for the day was:

Rick: 4258'

Shan: 4418'

Laura 4608'