

Kit Carson Peak (14,165') and Challenger Pt. (14,081')

Difficulty: **Class 3**

Exposure:

Trailhead Elev.: 8,850 feet

Elevation Gain: 6,250 feet total

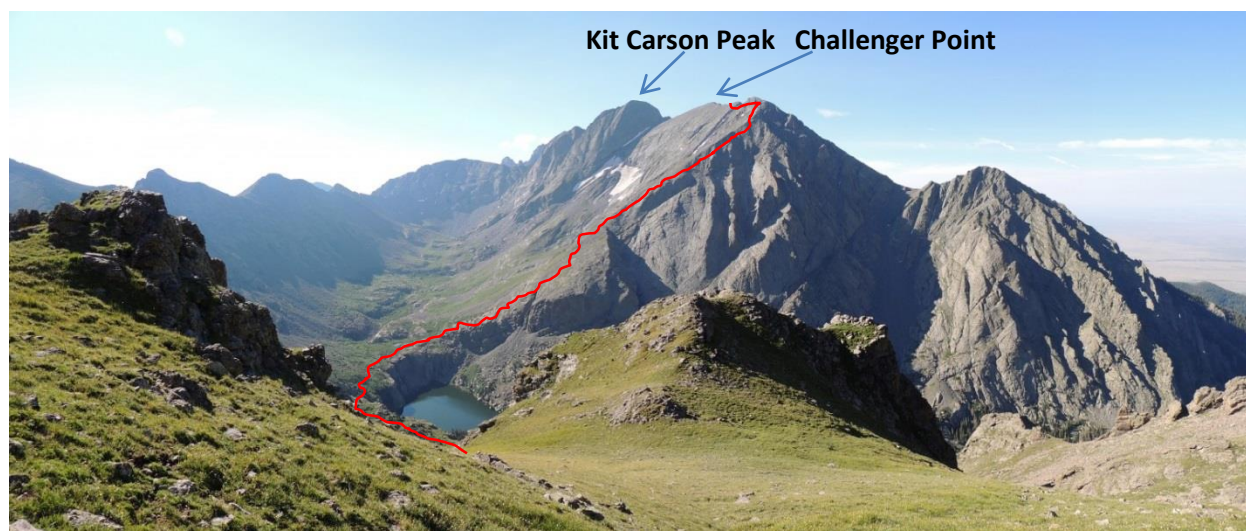
Roundtrip: 14.5 miles

Trailhead: Willow Creek

Climbers: Rick Crandall; Rick Peckham

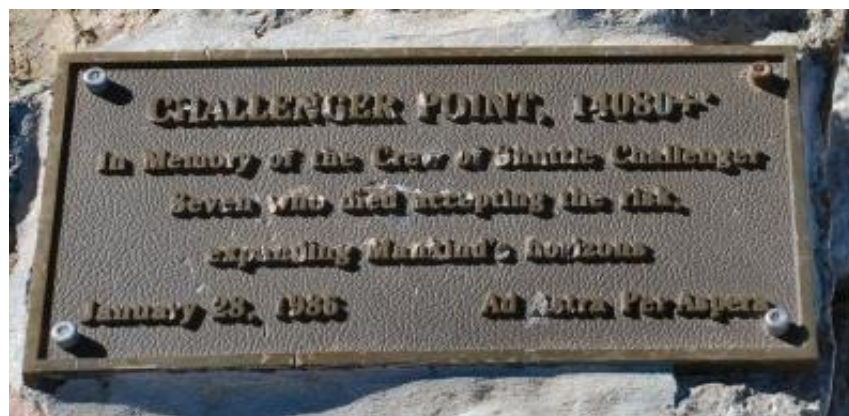
August 18, 2013

Challenger Point and Kit Carson Peak are fourteeners in the Sangre de Cristo range. These need to be climbed together since access to Kit Carson entails first summiting Challenger and then re-summiting Challenger on return. Access is from campsites at Willow Lake which is a lengthy backpack hike 2900 vertical feet and 4.5 miles up from the Willow Creek trailhead near Crestone, CO. Summiting these two mountains is well-known as a “very long day” and a tough, loose, tiring descent.



Route from Willow Lake campsites to Challenger Pt. summit.

Challenger Point was named in the memory of the seven astronauts who died when the Space Shuttle Challenger disintegrated on January 28, 1986. The USGS Board of Geographic Names approved the name application in April of 1987. A plaque was installed on the summit.



"In memory of the Crew of the Shuttle Challenger Seven who died accepting the risk expanding Mankind's horizons."

"Ad Astra per Aspera" which means "To the stars through adversity."

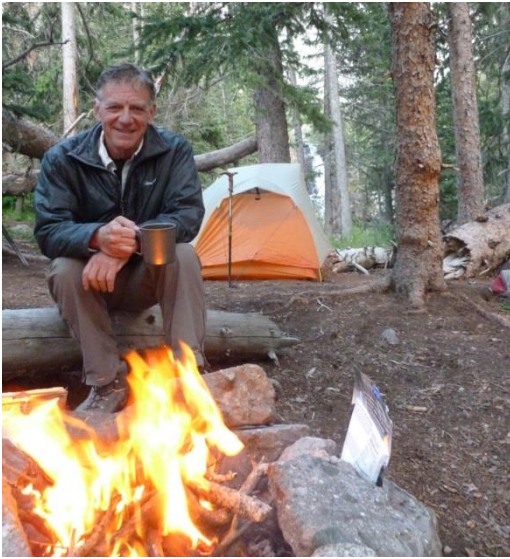
Challenger Point is actually a sub-peak of Kit Carson Peak which has an interesting history. The mountain was named after the famed frontiersman who had a complicated history with the American Indian. He lived among and married into the Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes but is said to have lodged an 1864 campaign to dislodge the Navajo Indians who had sided with the Confederacy. In 1995 a group including Yale University purchased a ranch for \$15 million that included Kit Carson Peak. In 2006 ownership changed again when the Nature Conservancy purchased the ranch and the Peak for \$31 million. At that time a local Dharma group that practices beneath the Peak attempted to rename it “Ritro Gonpo” which is the name of a Tibetan deity that serves as the protector of meditation retreats. Today it is still Kit Carson Peak.

Kit Carson is a fun mountain to climb once you get to Challenger’s summit. However fatalities and lost climbers happen often because some of the gullies fool the eye and lead climbers to bad places. These lead to ice fields, cliffs, steep and loose rock ending in sheer and highly technical terrain. Search and Rescue teams regularly recover bodies from the bottom of the couloirs (from Wikipedia).” Indeed, even the correct couloir sports an 800’ pitch of 48 degree inclination!

We started this adventure with the 4.5 mile backpack from the Willow Lake trailhead just outside of Crestone, CO. This hike entailed easily over 200 switchbacks and 2900’ of elevation gain with full packs just to get to Willow Lake at 11,500’ to set camp. The grind was offset by great views.



We got to Willow Lake at about 6 pm and were met by a surprise. A fitness firm from Texas had gathered 60 fitness buffs, all in their 20’s, from Dallas, Houston and Austin and brought them to Willow Lake for some heart-pumping hiking and climbing. It was tent city. We found a great camp site, maybe the last one left with flat ground for our tents. As other “real climbers” came up the trail I don’t know where they found to set up, but we had our ground staked.



Rick P. and I kicked into our well-practiced roles: making (filtering) water, setting tents, cutting dead wood for fire and Rick P. lugging stones to create a safe fire pit. Out came the wine and our Backpackers Pantry favorite dehydrated dinners – which are excellent – especially the Beef Stroganoff and the Chicken Alfredo.



Willow Lake with the early part of the route to Challenger shown in red.



As the sun began to set on a perfect-weather evening, we had a backdrop of alpenglow on the nearby mountains, listened to the white noise of the nearby waterfall and enjoyed little else to do but tend the fire, drink and eat.



Some changed their plans to go after some thirteeners in the area to avoid the crowd. We planned to get up early and be on the trail at 5 am to get an earlier start than the crowd.

We were in our tents and asleep by 10 pm with our alarms set for 4:15 am.

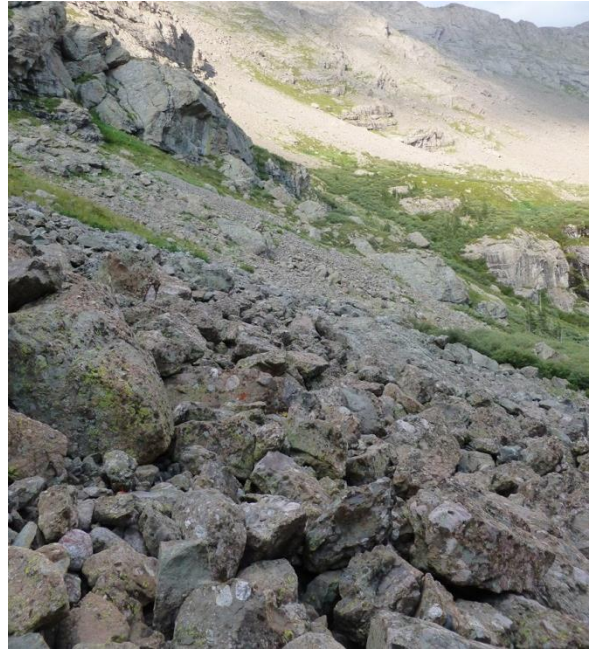
We heard other climbers grouching about how bad and dangerous the next day would be with 60 kids scrambling on steep, loose gullies kicking rocks and boulders loose to rain on anyone below.



We awoke as planned and prepared to start hiking in the dark with our headlamps. Then we saw, coming up the trail, a giggly line of lights looking like a glow-in-the-dark caterpillar. We learned that the group of 60 were divided into sub-groups of 20 and the first group was setting out right as we were. Apparently there's a Forest Service rule that a max of 20 can do a climb in one group. So we followed them around the lake and across boulder fields. As dawn broke we approached the first steep pitch.



Using the gully sidewall to pull up



The boulders are big and loose.



Rick P. working up through the boulders and scree. Kit Carson is the imposing mountain behind him and to the right in the background are Crestone Peak and Needle – both very difficult fourteeners.



The first group of Texas 20-somethings were above us working up the couloir to a steep upper gully aiming for the Challenger summit ridge. Below us was the second group of 20 that had left camp ½ hour later. There was a third group following them.

We found them uniformly nice, polite, respectful of the dangers they could cause us with rock-fall and all around great kids. We had no problem with them being around.

As we headed up the couloir, conditions got steeper and worse. Several of the kids had petered out and went back to camp, but most continued on.



Rick P. about to start the final and steepest push to the summit ridge. According to the guidebooks, the angle of ascent got to 48 degrees in this 800' push to the ridge.

Rick P. mentioned to one of the guides in the first group that we were going for both peaks and that a much older guy is going to do both peaks. That guide apparently radioed the guides on the second and third groups to use that as a motivator to get the kids to push to the top. Well the word spread like wildfire and all the way up as groups of them reached us, I was getting kisses from the girls and fist bumps and high-fives from the guys. They were really into it!



**Summit
Challenger Point,
14,081' at 8:30 am,
3 hrs. 40 minutes
from camp**

Actually the summit is behind me, with a slight problem. There were about 50 kids and 6 guides on it and they were having a great time. For most this was their first fourteener and they completely blanketed the

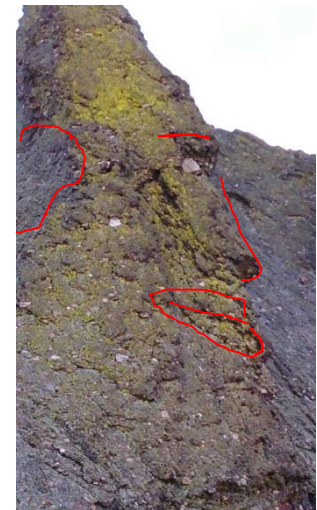
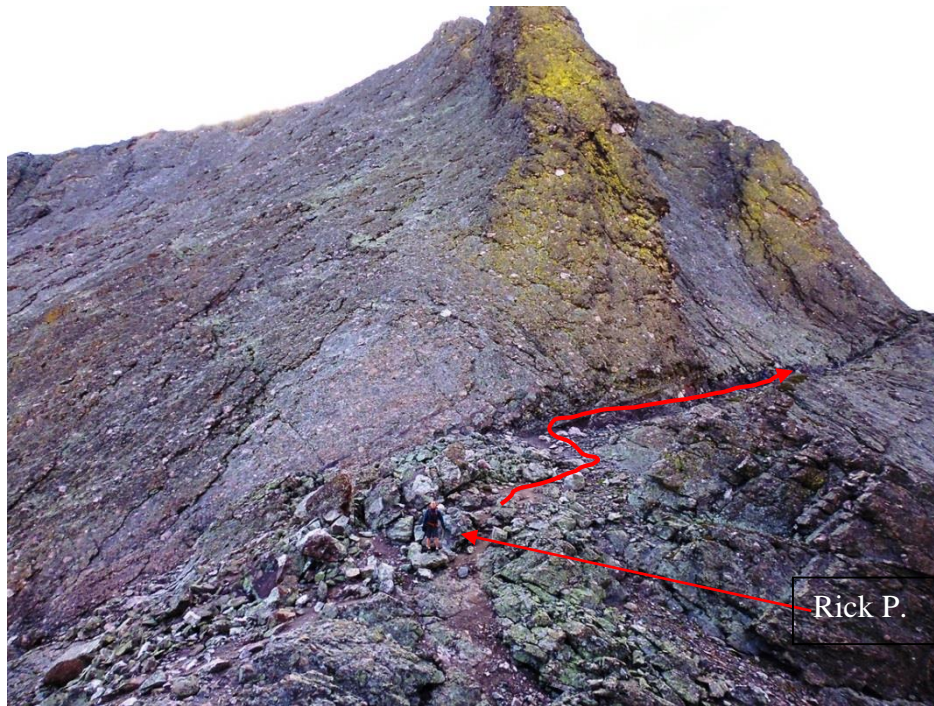
summit. We went right in the middle of them and joined in the excitement. I was loving that it was only 8:30 am and we had gotten our first summit of the day done.



We still had to get over to Kit Carson and then back to Challenger, so by 8:45 we headed off. About 2/3 of the kids decided they'd had enough and began to descend to camp. About 16 of them with two guides headed to Kit Carson.

Our next objective was to descend the north side of Challenger to cross to an unusual mountain feature – a ramp lovingly called “Kit Carson Avenue.” We needed to ascend

the Avenue to get around the prow of the mountain and then climb another gully to KC's summit ridge.



Can you see the face on Kit Carson?

After making it up to the top of the ramp, it wrapped around the mountain and then ramped down steeply. I knew the standard route ended the ramp by entering a loose gully that headed up to the ridge, but the gully also continues below the ramp to bad stuff. This mountain is replete in stories of climbers coming back down this particular gully and not seeing the ramp, instead proceeding down the gully into trouble and getting lost. This has been the cause of lots of mountain rescues and unplanned overnight experiences lost on a fourteener. To avoid this, we brought bright orange ribbon with us to mark where to exit that gully onto the Avenue.



However I'd also read in a few reports that before that gully there was another one, steeper but solid granite and a great Class 3 climb.

We really didn't want to be on the loose gully with the bunch of kids and I always prefer climbing solid Class 3 rather than loose Class 2. The other benefit if we could locate that gully was that it would be clear where the Avenue intersected it when we returned.

We looked and we found the Class 3 gully. It looked great. It

was steeper but lots of foot and handholds and very solid rock, so up we went. This photo shows a lone climber ahead of us who also had found the gully.



Rick P. after climbing part of the Class 3 gully to the ridge above.



Summit Kit Carson Peak, 14,165' at 10:20 am, 1 hr. 30 minutes from Challenger.

Crestone Needle and Crestone Peak were impressively in our view. Both are famous fourteeners and both are among the 8 most difficult.



A beautiful shot from Kit Carson summit. The Crestones are in the background and the ridge in the foreground leads up on the left to the summit of Columbia Point, a thirteener named after the Columbia space shuttle tragedy.



Having now had a successful two-summit day, it was going to be no small task getting all the way back to the car. Ahead of us was descending the upper gully of KC, ascending the back part of the Avenue, descending the front part, ascending back to the Challenger summit, descending the long, steep, loose and sandy couloirs and gullies to camp, packing up and hiking down another 2850' and 4.5 miles to the car.

Rick C. descending the Class 3 gully we had to ourselves.



For some reason I hadn't counted on how much uphill it would be ascending the Avenue on return. It was a grind for me.

See the three climbers in the circle – for perspective.

We were confused that we hadn't seen the Texas crowd who was descending the looser gully next to ours and we didn't see a trace of them even in the far distance. Later as we ascended Challenger, we saw them catching up to us. We learned that the whole group of 16 plus the two guides had missed the intersection with KC Avenue and they'd descended about 250' below it before they fortunately realized their error. So they had to climb back up to the Avenue to continue the quest to regain the summit of Challenger!



We pushed all the way back to the Challenger summit. We got there at about 12:15 pm and I was starting to wilt. We'd been at it for 7 ½ hours but we still had a long, junky descent ahead of us.



Some climbers have attempted to skirt re-summiting Challenger as it looks like you can just hike down the boulders to the grass far below.

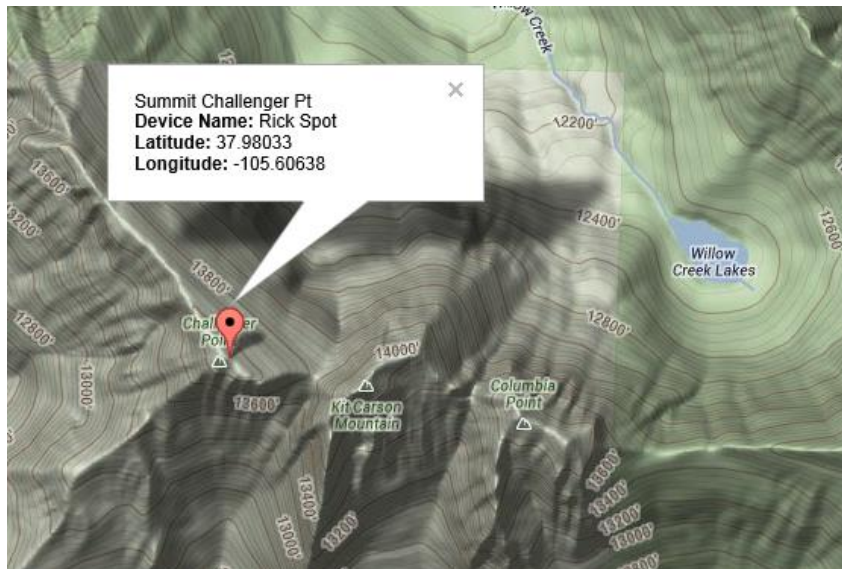
DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT. READ THE SIGN, IT'S THERE FOR A GOOD REASON!

So we ground down 2700' of the worst descent conditions I've seen and definitely worse than Mount Columbia that others complain so much about

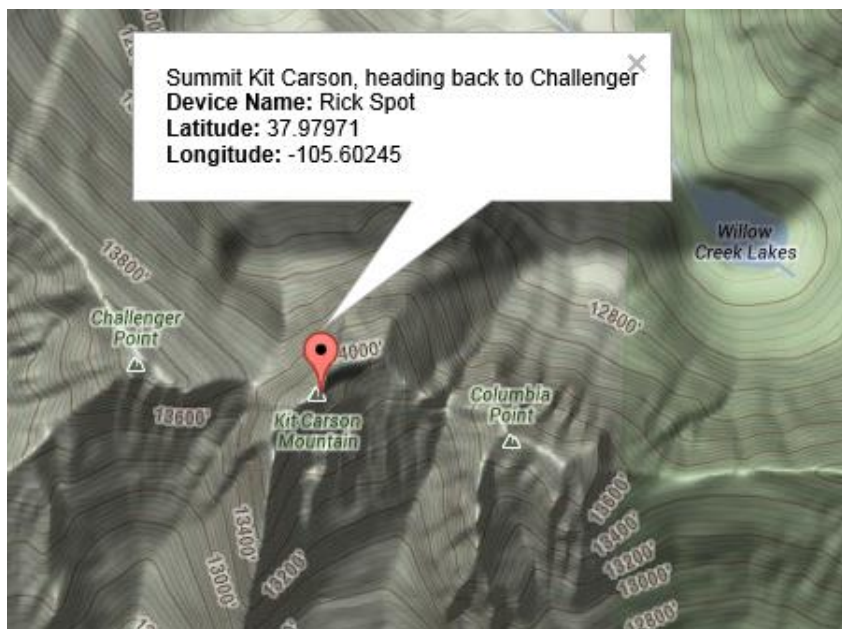
(see <http://rickcrandall.net/wp/mt-harvard-and-mt-columbia/>)



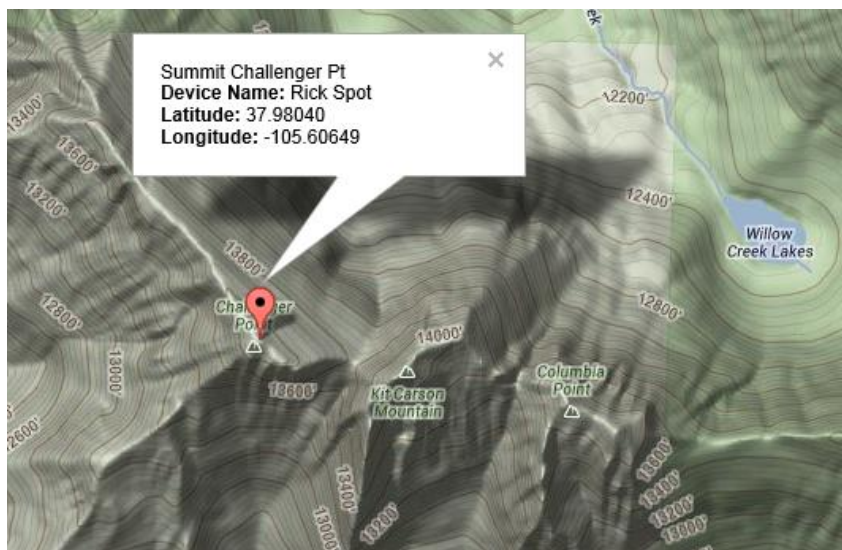
We got to campsite at 4 pm, broke camp by 4:30 pm and backpacked down the 4.5 miles to the car by 8 pm. That was a 15 hour day, a very long day indeed, but very satisfying and a super all-around experience in the Colorado Rockies.



Spot: 8:40 am



Spot 10:28 am



Spot 12:13 pm