

Mt. Elbert – East Ridge

Difficulty: Class 1
Exposure: None
Summit Elev.: 14,440 feet
Trailhead Elev.: 10,400 feet
Elevation Gain: 4,100 feet
Roundtrip Length: 8.5 miles
Trailhead: South Elbert (near Twin Lakes)

Hikers: 1st Time: Rick Crandall; Shan Stuart August 31, 2002
2nd Time: Rick Crandall June 27, 2016

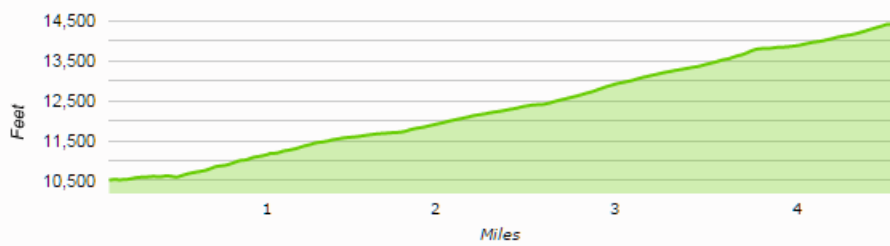
Mt. Elbert is distinguished as the highest peak in Colorado and the second highest in the lower 49 states, only Mt. Whitney in California is higher by 65 feet. This mountain also is distinguished as usually the first for those who go on to climb other Colorado fourteeners. Indeed it was my first in the summer of 2002, three years after I moved to Colorado. I decided to do it again now in 2016 as prep for harder mountains to come – and in 2002 I wasn't doing these stories.

Located in the Sawatch Range of the Colorado Rockies, Mt. Elbert was named for Samuel Elbert who was a controversial territorial governor of Colorado in 1873. Aside from the elevation gain which is substantial at 4100' and the obvious elevation of its summit, far above 14,000', Elbert is an easy "walk up" graded Class 1, with a well-defined path the whole way up.



Most of the East Ridge route up Mt. Elbert is shown here.

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The route has a fairly steady uphill profile with occasional rocks and loose sand underfoot – first-timers should use hiking sticks which will make the descent easier. I also recommend ankle-high hiking boots so that once on the summit and about to head down you can cinch the top two lace rungs tight to pull your toes back from the front of your boots. Otherwise this is a long hike down that can blister your toes.

You can go for Elbert from Aspen without camping by leaving early to summit before noon if there's any risk of thunderstorms in the afternoon. In the most recent hike, I had to be back for a dinner engagement, so I left Aspen at 3:30 am and was at the upper trailhead by 5:30 am as dawn arrived. There's a lower trailhead for 2WD cars (paved) and then it's a rougher dirt road to upper trailhead (4WD only).



From the trailhead, you actually start on the "Colorado Trail" which hikes the Continental Divide but you soon get to an intersection with the South Elbert trail – take it left for the next 4.1 miles and 4100' vertical.



The trail starts at 10,400' – first milestone is losing the Aspen's at about 11,400' and then treeline at 11,800' you see here – "only" 2800' to go! It was a gorgeous "bluebird" day.



Almost perfectly disguised with surrounding rock colors, the White-tailed Ptarmigan have little fear. They prefer to run along the ground, although they can take flight.

This is the alpine species and is the only bird to permanently reside in the alpine zone – rocky, snowy meadows.



Well above tree line the views are 360 degrees – easy hiking, great aerobic!



After a few more hours, looking off to the left shows Twin Lakes in the distance – the road running past the lakes is CO 82 where I started.



Nearing 14,200' with the summit in sight.



Nearly there ...



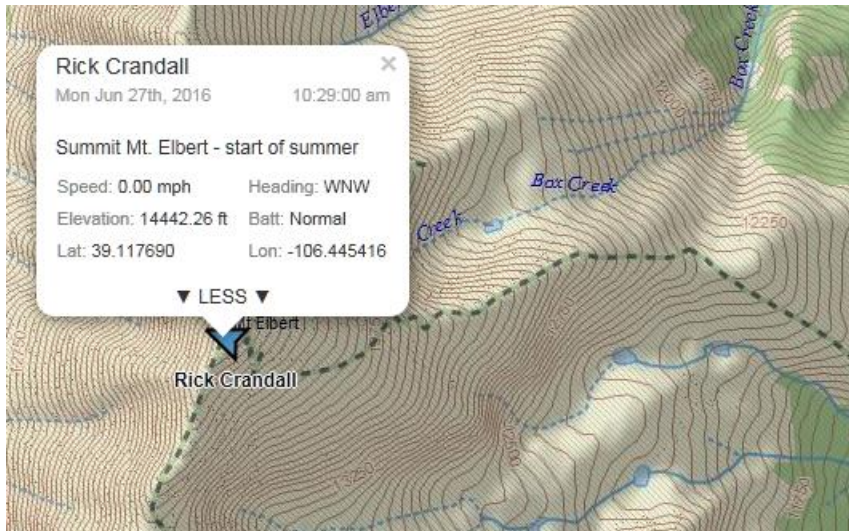
Summit : Mt. Elbert 14,440' at 10:20 am, 4 hrs 45 min from trailhead. June 28, 2016



And here is the summit shot when I hiked this mountain on August 31, 2002 –

Then 14 years ago it took me 5 hrs 15 min from trailhead – I was 25 lbs. heavier and obviously not as fit - I like that ☺

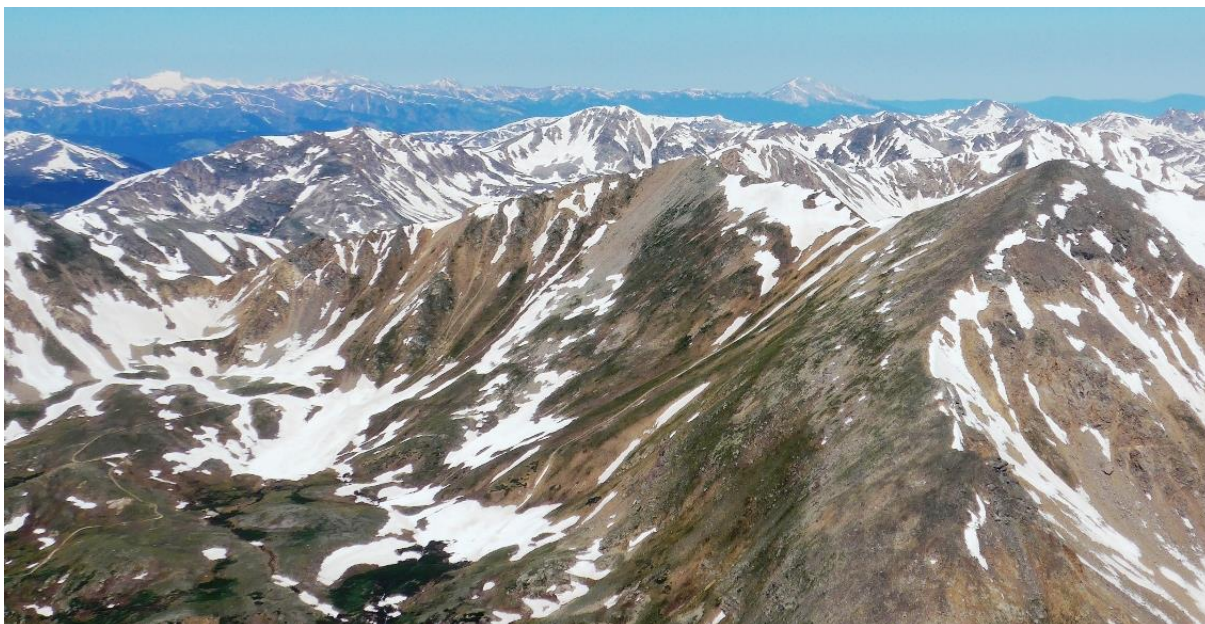
La Plata, another fourteenner, is in the background – it wouldn't be until 2009 before I would go for that one ... and eventually all 58 of them.



This is the message I send from summit from my DeLorme GPS emergency communicator..



Some views from the summit- looking north to Mt. Massive, another fourteenner topping at 14,428'. Some tried piling rocks on its summit to claim it as the tallest in Colorado, but others tore it down as not natural – so Elbert still holds the title by 12 feet.



View west towards Aspen's Elk Range – the all-white peak in the distance upper left is Snowmass Mountain; The big distant peak on right is Mt. Sopris.



Views in every direction – but after a bite to eat, it's time to head down.

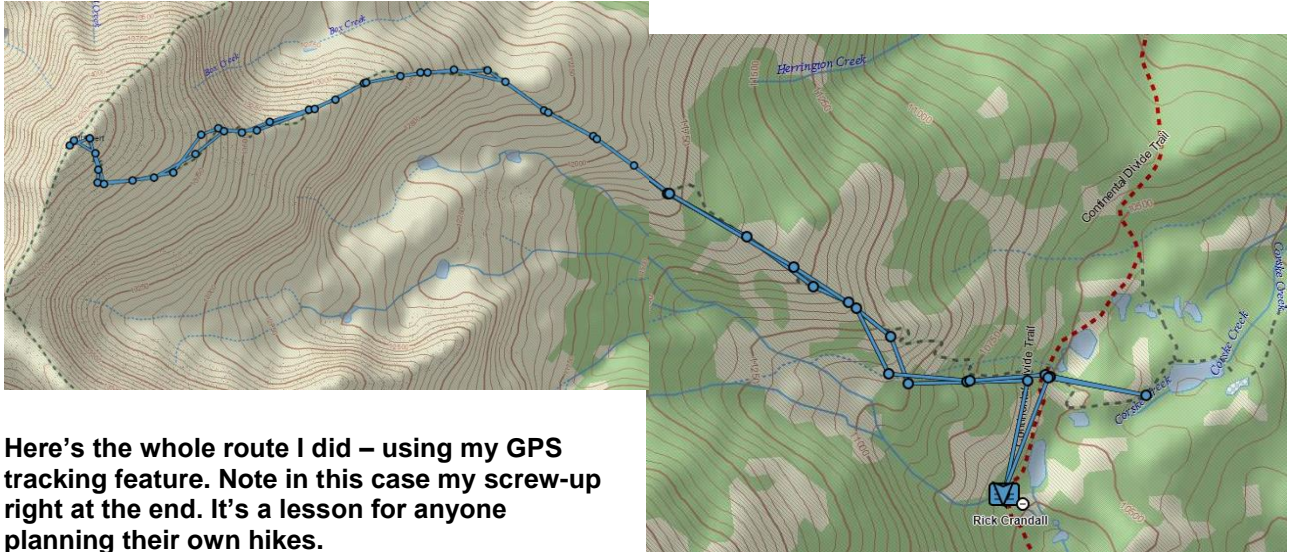


I'm always running into interesting characters on climbs – halfway down from Mt. Elbert, I see this chap Brendan on the way up with his daughter Anastasia on his back! He'd already left two other members of his party further down, who could go no further.

He was taking her up the whole mountain that way – I can't imagine it.

He's here from Papua New Guinea – high up in the mountains where the natives still have a taste for humans. He said he's safe there though – he works for the Catholic Church and claims to have integrated well with the natives.

That's one tough dude!



Here's the whole route I did – using my GPS tracking feature. Note in this case my screw-up right at the end. It's a lesson for anyone planning their own hikes.

When I started in the early morning it was still pretty dark – and I didn't have a good visual on a stream crossing not far from the car. Upon return I hiked the stream one way and the other – finally figuring it out. Higher up in these mountains getting lost is all too easy and can be critical – which is why I'm always prepared with maps and photos of milestones along the way.



I was very happy to see my 4Runner patiently waiting for me at 2pm.

So this was 4 ¼ hours up and 3 ½ hours down, faster than I'd prepared for - on a gorgeous-weather day and back to Aspen in time for dinner. I'm thinking I'm pretty close to ready for the much harder mountains on tap for mid-to-late summer.