

Mt. Eolus and North Eolus

Difficulty:	Class 3
Exposure:	■■■■■
Summit Elev.:	Mt. Eolus: 14,083 feet N. Eolus: 14,039 feet
Camp Elev.:	11,100 feet
Elevation Gain:	3,200' starting at Chicago Basin 6,300' starting at Needleton drop from Train
RT Length:	5 miles starting at Chicago Basin 19 miles starting at Needleton
Trailhead:	Needleton drop off from Silverton train

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Rick Peckham

August 5, 2014 updated Sept 2

This is a two-part story. Our first attempt was August 5th when we turned around at the “catwalk” due to poor weather conditions. Second attempt was successful September 2nd.

Mt. Eolus is a challenging mountain in the beautiful but rugged San Juan Range. It is named after the Greek god of the wind Aeolus, whom Zeus had made keeper of the Winds. Getting to it is the first challenge as it involves driving 5 hours from Aspen to either Durango or 4 hours to Silverton and then taking the Denver & Rio Grande narrow-gauge train (in operation since 1880!) that operates between Durango and Silverton. We paid the extra “hikers” fee for it to stop in the middle at a ghost town called Needleton where you jump off with your full pack. The train leaves immediately and you then backpack 7 miles and 3000' up to the Chicago Basin. There you set camp and get ready for a climb early the next morning, weather permitting.

We'd been to Chicago Basin two years ago with my brother Wayne, my son Brett and friend Rick Peckham. At that time we successfully summited Sunlight Peak, a hard 14er that Brett helped us to get up, see: <http://rickcrandall.net/wp/mt-eolus-and-n-eolus-exposed-rock-climbing/>). The history of the train is also in that story.



This time, Rick Peckham came down again for a month from Alaska to be my climbing partner on several peaks.

For our 2nd and successful attempt, we decided to chance taking the train from Silverton (shorter drive from Aspen) which let us off at Needleton at 3:40pm. That gave us only 4 hours to backpack to the Chicago Basin, find and set camp before dark. Rick P. raced ahead of me and got both our tents up in time for me to haul in at faster than my normal speed right at 7pm as the sun set.

Rick P. in Silverton

The town of Silverton (at 9305') gives the visitor a great feeling of authenticity for an old-time Colorado silver mining town. The buildings are authentic, although now mostly selling T shirts. The town, population 530, is now included in a federally designated National Historic Landmark District. Silverton no longer has active mining, but subsists on tourism.



Silverton framed by Silverton Mountain behind

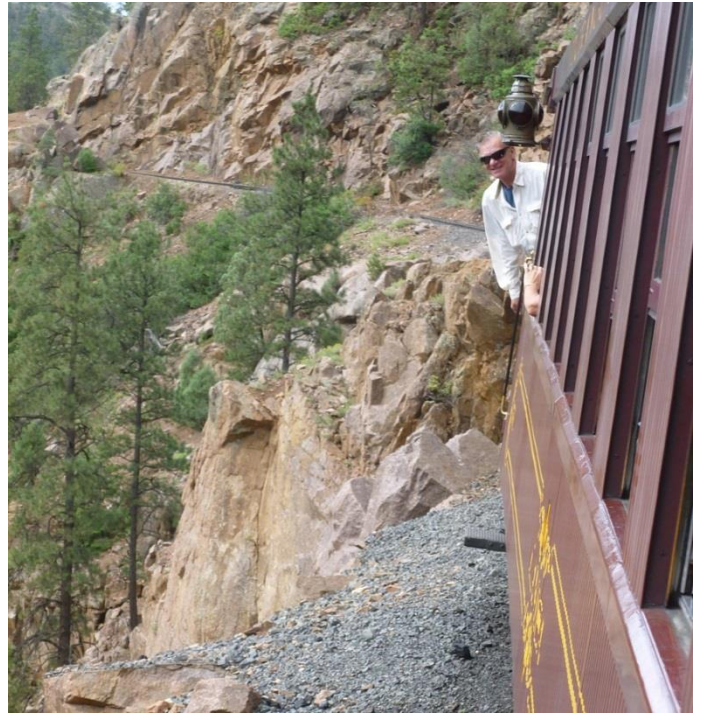
Silverton Mountain was the setting for some of Shaun White's 2010 Olympic training where Red Bull set up a private and initially secret half-pipe for the snowboarder.



These headstones are a riot – a cemetery right in the middle of the oldest part of town.



Rick C. with the steam locomotive at the station ready for the ride.



The drop-offs along the train route are quite amazing, particularly given that the route was carved out of the side of the Animas River gorge over 100 years ago!



Unloading our packs at the Needleton ghost-town stop. That car was old!



We heard the day before the train picked up 90 coming out of the Basin and when we dropped off there were 63 waiting to get on the train!

Our chosen date was September 2, Labor Day. We'd heard that Chicago Basin was popular not only for the 14ers accessed there but as a recreational camping spot. We figured we'd miss the crowds, by arriving at the end of the long weekend.

The strategy paid off – the next day for our climb we were the ONLY climbers on the mountains. Incredible.



Rick P. at the bridge over the Animas River. The bridge and a few old structures are mostly what's left of Needleton.



I got to Chicago Basin ½ hour after Rick P. and that's with my pack weighing 30 lbs. and his clocked in at 40 lbs. He had both tents set up and coffee ready to heat!

13ers and 14ers are in the background.

The wild goats native to the Basin watched carefully – they know that some campers carelessly leave their food around. That has caught many a camper short of food, stolen by the goats or the marmots. We hadn't heard of many bear problems at this elevation. We camped at 11,100'.



We set camp – but they were watching!



in our first attempt we witnessed an extended lightning and thunderstorm during the night lighting up our tents. This time the weather was perfect, skies clear and starry. Taking that as a hopeful sign, we hit the route at 6:00 am in the dark.



Rick P. taking a momentary stop 1300' up from camp at Twin Lakes. The views in the San Juans are stunning! They're known to be the most beautiful range in the state of Colorado.



This is most of the remaining route from Twin Lakes to get to Mt. Eolus. There are several segments to the climb involving rocks, tilted slab-walking and then the crux of the climb, namely the Catwalk and final rock climb to the Eolus summit.



Rick P. at the "slabs – they were grippy underfoot except where wet or steep in places.



Now this goat had no problems with the slabs – or any of the rocky features.



Past the slabs there was still another 800 feet up to get to the “Catwalk.” This is a very narrow ridge (the yellow arrow) with steep drop-offs on both sides that starts about 2 feet wide and narrows from there. It’s a head trip.



On our earlier attempt, we met another three climbers at the start of the Catwalk – the two younger ones went on, the third just sat down and freaked out: *“I’ve been wanting to see this feature for two years, and now that I do, I’m not doing that.”*

It’s not that it’s technically difficult, but the exposure on both sides is dramatic, so it can be a mental challenge to go across.

Rick C. starting the Catwalk on our earlier attempt – just as the weather started to descend upon us.



The scene quickly became surreal. It looked like a trip into a space-walk with total mystery on the other end.

How’s this shot for drama ... Rick P. pushed further, tight-roping the narrow bits, but then visibility went to about zero so we turned around (earlier attempt) without going for the summit.



On our Sep 2 second attempt the weather was perfect. Here is Rick C. heading towards some of the narrow parts of the Catwalk.



Here I'm thinking: *"Maybe four points (hands and feet) on the edge is a better plan!*". That's North Eolus in the background.

The route instructions were, *"from the end of the Catwalk traverse left under some cliffs and then climb up in a zig-zag line staying in the middle of the face – if you go too far left or right you're into even more serious conditions."*



We got to the end of the catwalk and looked up at the remaining climb. This picture doesn't do it justice, but



This picture does! That's a climber in red in the middle of that face – for perspective.



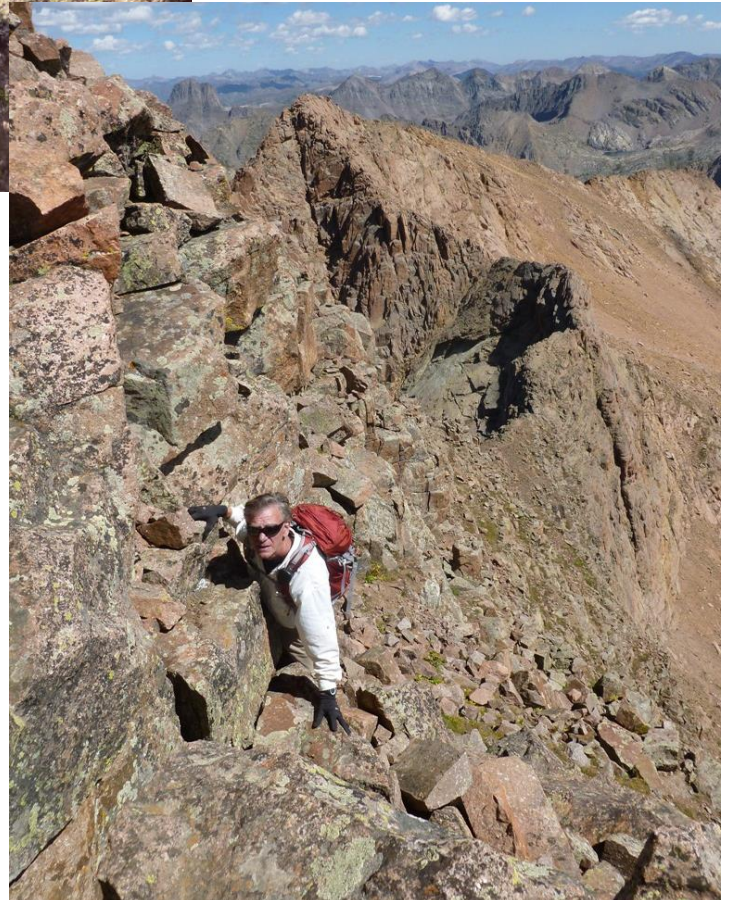
Rick C. starting the Class 3 climb up the Eolus South face. The orange ribbon is tied to a cairn meant to show the way but it turns out they showed several ways. One of them led us straight to the ridge we were supposed to avoid – so we got off it pretty quick.



... and here is Rick P. leading up an even steeper bit.

I figured “well Rick P. got up it, so here we go.” It was actually fun, mainly because, as advertised, the rock was solid and there were plenty of handholds.

Coming down was the same story, but it definitely helped to have Rick P. go first and call out where there was a good foot placement down below me at times.





And then, summit!

Summit Mt. Eolus, 14,083' at 11:45 am Sep 2, 2014 5 hrs. 45 min from camp at Chicago Basin



Rick Spot: Summit Mt. Eolus!!

37.62195 latitude, -107.62276 longitude



After 15 minutes on the Eolus summit we headed down the same South face, looping under the cliffs, across the Catwalk and then we headed up to North Eolus.

Rick C. starting up N. Eolus.



Going for #2 for the day.



Route to N. Eolus



The rock on N. Eolus was very different – exposed but very grippy. We got to summit from the Catwalk in 45 minutes.



Approaching the summit of N. Eoius



Summit N. Eolus, 14, 039' at 2:15pm, 2hrs 15 minutes from the summit of Mt. Eolus (behind Rick P's head)

Rick P. mastered the art of setting the auto timer on his camera which gives him 10 seconds to leap across the summit rocks and get into the summit photo, somehow avoiding catapulting right off the summit. We saw exactly zero other people climbing the entire day.

Here are some summit shots from this and the prior attempt:





We made it back to camp by 5 pm, making it an even 11 hour day. The sun was still shining and we had a bladder of wine to celebrate.

The next morning we headed back down the 7 miles to the train. Rick P. had wisely stashed a few beers in the Animas River at the Needleton stop, so upon return, as we waited for the train, we cooled off in the cold river sipping on our brews!

Rick P., beer in hand, pretending he's not freezing 😊



There is one chance to catch the train each day – as it approaches they require you to stand on the East side of the tracks and cross-wave your arms in front of your waist. Only then will he stop for a few minutes while you throw your pack in the baggage car and jump on.

So for those of you who think I'm totally nuts – we do turn around before summiting when advisable but we also don't give up when a better weather-day shows up.

Mt. Eolus is a tough mountain but not because of loose gullies and endless boulder fields – rather because of lots of solid-rock climbing and exposure that adds up to a lot of fun.