

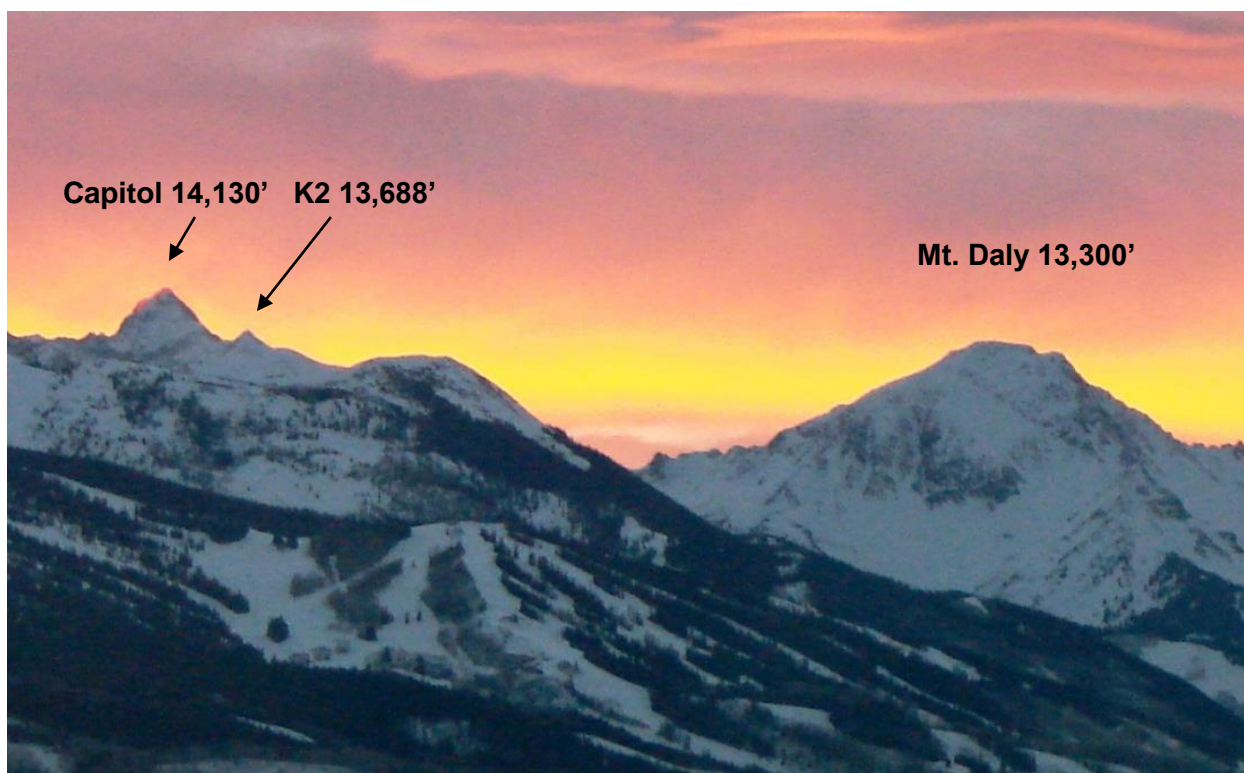
K2 and Capitol Peak

Difficulty:	Class 4
Exposure:	■■■■■■■■■■
Capitol Summit Elev.:	14,130 feet
K2 Summit Elev.:	13,688 feet
Trailhead Elev.:	8,450 feet
Elevation Gain:	5,800 feet to Capitol
RT Length:	17.00 miles
Trailhead:	Snowmass Creek

Climbers: Rick Crandall, Rick Peckham, Andy Mishmash and Susan Meunchen Sept. 6, 7 2014

Capitol Peak, most climbers would agree, is the scariest and most challenging of the 58 fourteeners in Colorado. It is a soaring granite peak with airy ridges, steep rock faces, and a sharp summit that, along with its nearby 13er companion peak, K2, offer stunning views across the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness Area. Capitol Peak not only looks like a big mountain, but it climbs like one too.

Capitol and K2 are part of the Elk Mountain range near Aspen. They are among the important peaks that I see from my house windows every day. Here are a few photos in various lighting conditions taken from my deck. Perhaps you can see why I've been committed to climbing them.





Capitol Peak was named by the 1874 Hayden Survey for its resemblance to the United States Capitol Building in Washington DC. Although the Hayden Survey named Capitol Peak, they made no attempt to climb it. As one member of the survey team, Henry Gannett, put it: the peak's *"prism-shaped top and precipitous sides forbid access."*

The first recorded ascent of Capitol Peak was by pioneer climbers Percy Hagerman from Colorado Springs and Aspen and Harold Clark, an Aspen lawyer, on August 22, 1909.

K2 is the smaller peak just before the infamous "knife edge" ridge on the way to Capitol Peak. It is named "K2" for its resemblance in shape to the world's second highest peak in Pakistan. Despite the scary exposure of the knife edge ridge, the actual casualties that occasionally do occur, they are more often due to falls near the loose summit of K2 and by lightning strikes.

The standard trailhead access to the climbing route is a 6.5 mile backpack up 2200' to Capitol Lake. We chose a lesser-known approach which is a 5.5 mile backpack up 2800' to treeline (and no nearby water) for a more private experience using the Snowmass Creek trailhead.

Snowmass (also known locally as **Old Snowmass**, which is different than Snowmass Village the ski resort) is an unincorporated town and a U.S. Post Office located in Pitkin County. It is situated in the valley of the Roaring Fork River, near the mouth of Snowmass Creek between Aspen and Basalt. It consists largely of a post office, several commercial businesses and surrounding houses and ranches. Estimated current population is 1365 happy souls.

Given the challenge-factor of Capitol Peak I happily waited until friend and expert mountain climber, Andy Mishmash freed up from his construction contracting work to lead us. His friend and experienced Class 5 climber Susan Meunchen and my friend of many of these climbing stories, Rick Peckham, rounded out our party. Clearly I was the junior member (from a climbing skills standpoint☺) but all were patient with my determined yet slower speed.

Rick P. and I had just completed a hard, successful climb up Mt. Eolus and N. Eolus, two Class 3 fourteeners in the San Juan Range. We had only two days of rest before the Capitol opportunity with Andy popped up, but we went for it.

At just after noon on a Saturday we loaded up our backpacks and started the somewhat uncharted back-country trek from the Snowmass Creek trailhead. We followed Andy's nose rather than any trail map that usually is my guide.



1 ½ miles into the trek we needed to cross the frigid creek which numbed our feet almost immediately.

There are trails – many of them – mostly caused by animals. In the lower reaches we crossed private ranches and their cows, requiring us to dance around the many “cow pods.” In higher reaches there were occasional signs of Elk and bear.



Susan adding constant cheer to our trek up towards the West side of Mt. Daly.

We headed generally towards Moon Lake, a high alpine lake at about 11,000' but chose to hike higher up on the Mt. Daly shoulder for a more direct approach to the endless boulder field we would face in the morning.

At just about tree-line we found one of the few nearly level areas to set up our three tents. Rick P. immediately started scouting rocks to make a fire ring while Andy and Susan dragged enough dead trees for our fire to last us much longer than our one night campout.



Rick P. trimming his fire ring with rocks.



It was then that we got to see the wonders contained in Andy's huge backpack. It would literally have qualified as a mini Whole Foods store. There seemed to be no limit to the weight Andy would carry, which we learned even more about the next day.

He had large bags of hydrated (i.e. heavy) vegetables of all kinds, many bags of sugary gummies, chocolates, etc. for energy the next day, dessert cookies, four corns and the six 8 oz hamburgers and buns I'd purchased for a great cookout.

Andy cooking our hamburgers and the corns were roasting along the front sides of Rick's fire ring.



We ate and warmed at the fire as night approached, although we had no need for headlamps as the full moon gave us a huge amount of light.

Note on Rick P.'s left the two bladders of wine which is our tradition – this time we had Walter Hansel Pinot Noir and Kobalt Cabernet Sauvignon.

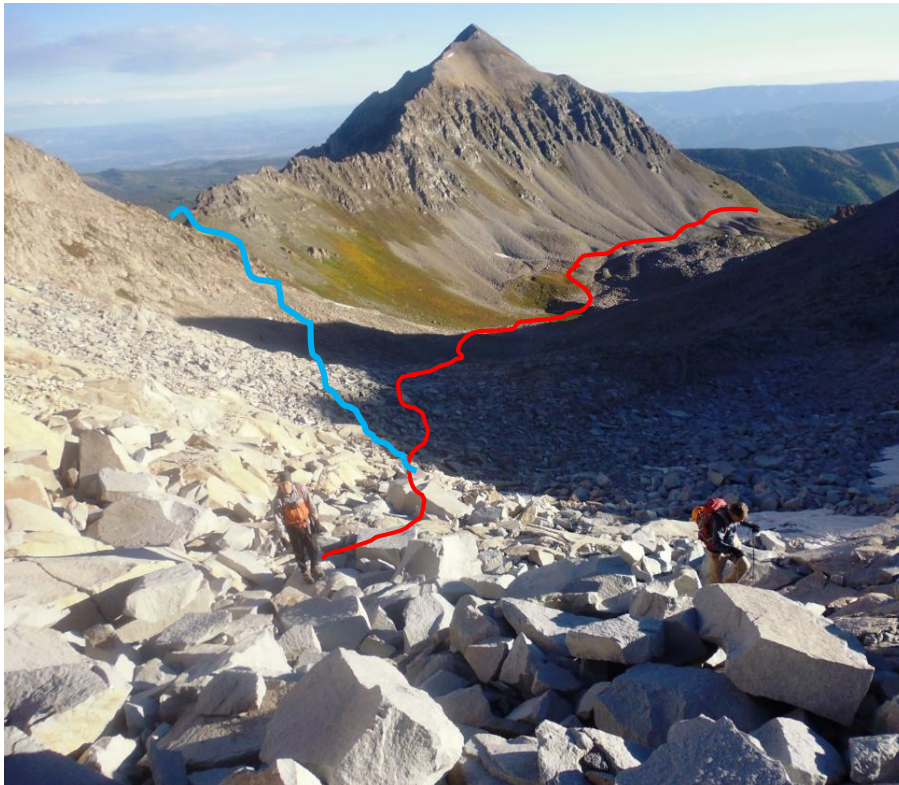
We were in our tents at about 9 pm to get some sleep before a very early rise at 3:00 am.



At 3:30 am we were on the trail in total darkness as the moon had set over Mt. Daly. Since we were well above Moon Lake and low on water, we welcomed coming across a small creek where Andy and Rick P. set about filtering water into our collapsible 2 gallon jug. They filled 3/4ths of it which I calculate at 13 lbs. and guess where it went?

Yup, inside Andy's pack!

We hiked uphill in the dark for three hours under the cliffs of the West face of Mt. Daly (the big mountain you see) and into the huge and miles-long boulder field. The blue line is approximately the standard route from Capitol Lake on the other side of the Capitol-Daly saddle. While we had a totally private campout, I'm thinking I might have had an easier day coming from the shorter Capitol Lake approach. We got to the point of intersection at about daylight at 6:35 am.



Rick P. (left) and Rick C. (right) scrambling up the "easier" of the boulders. They got a lot worse further up.

Somewhere in this huge mess of boulders, Andy found an almost perfect heart-shaped rock of size. He wanted it although not badly enough to carry to summit. So he placed it on top of another rock, like he was really going to find it on the way down. Tune in later in the story.



It was light but not yet sun on us, so we still had layers on as the boulder field got increasingly steeper. However, while long, these rocks were more stable than we'd experienced in recent climbs.



Eventually the sun warmed us – and the boulder field got steeper yet. Still our target was not yet in sight. As far as we could see at this point, perhaps 7 am, the weather was looking good, and we needed it because this was going to be a long day.



Andy had warned me for the last two years that this would be the longest and most tiring boulder field in my experience and I needed to get especially fit for it. In fact many say the crux of the Capitol climb is getting to the K2 summit at the top of this boulder field.

Somewhere about here I was starting to see what he was talking about.



Finally around 8 am we had K2 in our sight although still a long boulder-field away but at least it gave us a target to aim at instead of just endless rocks.



These brown rocks were actually easier to climb up on since they were pretty solid and had some flat surfaces you could aim for. Further up where they get gray in color they change to very sharp rocks angled every which way and take much more care to avoid a fall.

As we got closer to the final approach to the K2 summit, we were high enough to look afield at weather conditions. This is because once at the K2 summit, the knife edge to Capitol is right on the other side and committing to that in impending poor weather is not a good idea.



The K2 summit is upper right. We were approaching from the far side you can't see. The knife edge is this side of the summit as you see. The exposure on the K2 summit and the knife edge is what everyone is talking about. Here's one description:

"It's a short, exposed section on the ridge that requires concentration and solid nerves. If you are spooked by exposure, this area may twist you in

knots. Scramble along the crest or walk along the left side while holding onto the ridge. Experienced climbers can carefully walk across most of the Knife Edge. The last portion of the knife becomes quite sharp."

"The K2 summit is a good place to take a serious look at the weather and make a go or no-go decision.

The summit isn't far away, but the remaining climb is time-consuming and not a place to be in bad weather."

Well if you've read other of these stories you know we've been pretty lucky with weather but still have had to give up on some summit attempts, returning to them on a better day. On this day, approaching the K2 Summit we looked in the distance and this is what we saw.



This was not good, although the weather was still far in the distance.

So we decided that Rick P. and Susan, both experienced climbers and much

faster than me – would move on ahead to go over the K2 summit and go for the Capitol summit. I would go at my slower pace to summit K2 and at least eyeball the rest of the approach to Capitol for a later

attempt – much as we did earlier in the year with Mt. Eolus which we did successfully summit only days ago.



Rick C. going for the K2 summit. There are Class 4 moves here which are rated this high due to the extreme exposure, steepness and loose rock. There were, however, mostly good hand and footholds.



Rick C. at summit of K2 13,688' at 9:30 am, 5 ³/₄ hours from campsite. Capitol Peak is about 480' higher and center-rear of the photo. Andy stayed with me (he took the photo) but we lamented later we didn't get a photo together this time.

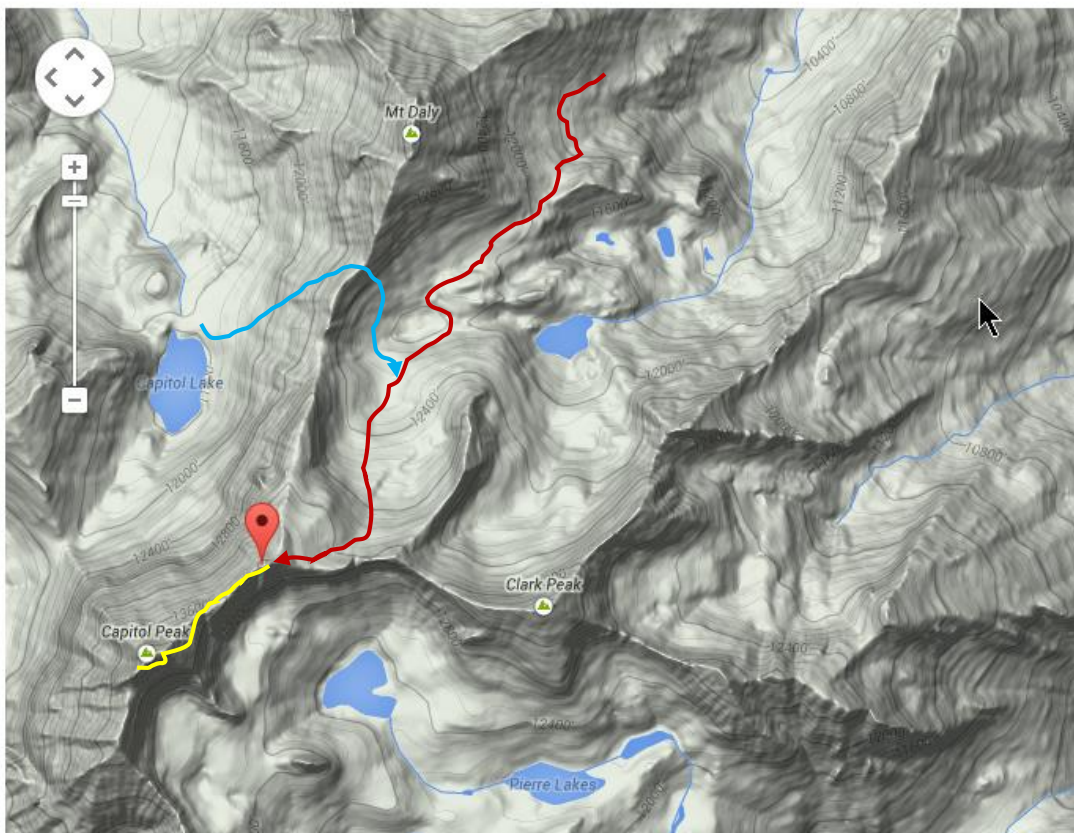


The views from K2 are tremendous. This is the horrendous, winding ridge from Capitol Peak to Snowmass Mountain shown on the far left, another 14er we'd just summited a month ago, see <http://rickcrandall.net/wp/snowmass-mountain/>



Looking down at Pierre Lakes and off in the distance are the Maroon Bells and Pyramid Peak, the latter being my most exciting climb, done with Andy earlier, see: <http://rickcrandall.net/wp/pyramid-peak-a-dream-climb-2/>

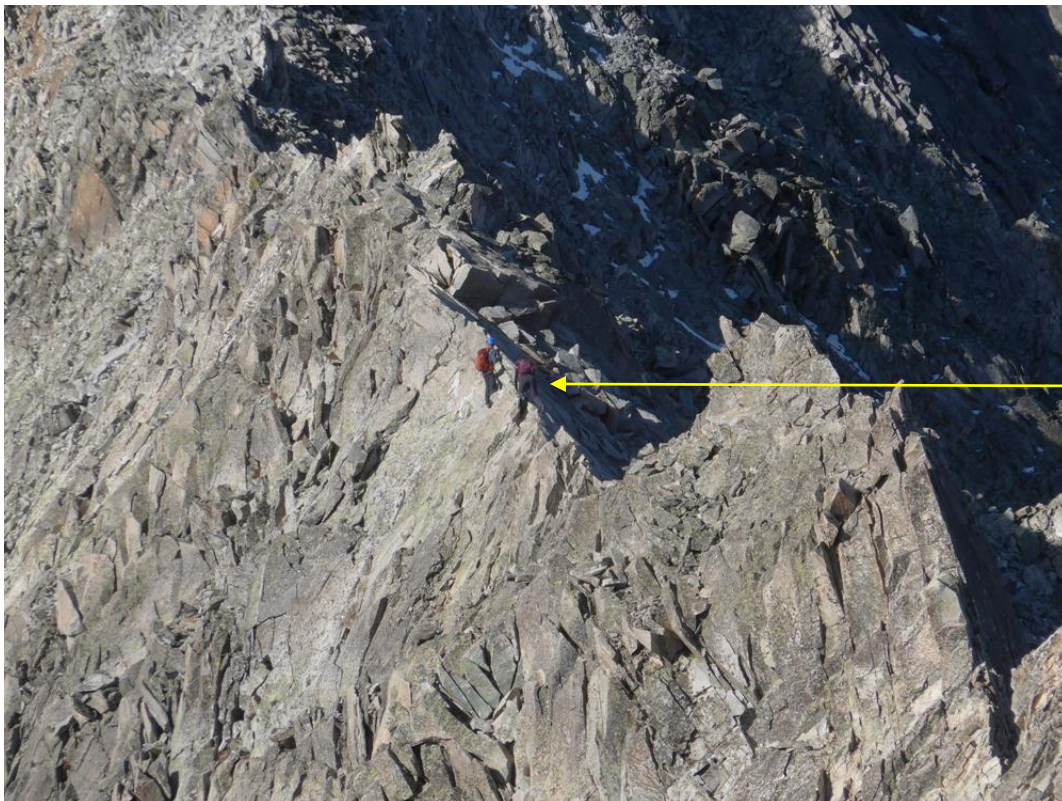
Rick Spot: Summit k2 not doing capital
39.15395 latitude, -107.07683 longitude



The SPOT message I sent from the summit of K2. The red is our path from camp on the side of Mt. Daly. The blue is the “standard” route from Capitol Lake. The yellow is the remaining climb to Capitol Peak taken by Rick P. and Susan.



So, while at the summit of K2 I turned around and there was the knife edge and remaining climb to Capitol Peak – so near yet so far. At my speed it was likely a 5 hour round trip from K2 to Capitol and back. It took Rick P. and Susan a fast 3 hours which they went for – hoping the weather would hold off that long.



Rick P. and Susan on the knife edge



Here's a close-up of that same photo. Rick P. in blue helmet is using one of the moves which is feet on the right side of the edge and hands on the "knife" while Susan is straddling. When Andy does it (which he has over a half dozen times) he actually tightropes it!



Susan on the knife-edge. The drop-off on both sides is 1500'.



Above: Rick P. (upper climber) and Susan past the knife edge and heading up the final summit pitch to Capitol.

Below: Reaching the summit. (note the skies are no longer blue).





Summit Capitol Peak, 14,130' approximately 1 ½ hrs from K2 summit. Congratulations to Rick and Susan for bagging Capitol.

As for me, having seen the remaining route, mostly what I need to get to the Capitol summit is to 1) reduce the approach time to K2 which I think I can do from Capitol Lake, and 2) pick a pair of days where good weather is guaranteed and not just "30% chance of thunderstorms."



In the meantime, apropos of the weather, today's story isn't quite done. As Rick P. and Susan headed off the summit of Capitol, and at the same time as Andy and I had descended from the K2 summit but were still in the large, gray, tricky boulderfield heading down, the weather descended on us both. Of all things it was a snowstorm! Actually what was coming down is called graupel – something between snowflakes and hail – but wetting and slippery nonetheless.

Both pairs of us proceeded very carefully and fortunately the precipitation didn't last longer than maybe 20 minutes and soon after the sun returned. Also even more fortunately it didn't get electrical – yet. After another 20 minutes the sun had dried the rocks and we all proceeded at a normal pace.



Rick C. back down into the “good” rocks with flatter surfaces.



OK, so remember the “heart-rock” that Andy found on the way up, miles down from our summits?

Well somehow he found it again!



And this time it went into his pack – another 15 lbs. in addition to the water, food and who knows what else was lurking in there.



By about 2:30 pm we were finally 5 hours down from most of the rocks but still ½ hour from camp – and it happened. A huge gathering cloud mass moving fast and gathering static electricity started throwing lightning bolts and exploding with thunder.

To a climber, an electrical storm is much scarier than exposed rock climbing – and we were in it. I was about to throw away my hiking poles (made of metal) when as though something magical from above obliterated the storm – it was over and the skies cleared.

The next thing that happened took our breath away – the brightest double rainbow, complete from end to end (one of the ends pointing to our campsite on the left) appeared as if to say

“I gotcha covered, enjoy the rest of your day!”



We hiked to camp, packed up and backpacked 2800' and 5.5 miles down to the stream ...



This was a 16 ½ hour day after an equally long climb in the San Juans several days earlier – I was tired. But it was a super two days I wouldn't have missed, despite my not getting Capitol Peak.



I now have a strategy for how to get it in future and I've since heard from Andy and from Rick that if one doesn't get me up it the other one will. That will be a day I'll never forget – but this was close.

