



Colorado 14ers and Other Mountain Hikes

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When it comes to hiking in Colorado, nothing is more rewarding than ascending a mountain peak. And among the many thousands of summits that rise skyward in Colorado, it's the 14ers that draw the most attention.

The exact number of 14ers in Colorado is a matter of some debate. In the past several years the number has changed from 52 to 53, and not because a cataclysmic earthquake pushed a new summit past the threshold. Simply put, the definition of an individual mountain versus a shoulder summit is a matter of geological debate. Some say the number is 54, others 58, but for now we'll agree on the generally accepted 53.

The very first 14er I ever attempted to climb (I always use that term loosely because the vast majority of mountain ascents are long vertical hikes and are not technical climbs requiring specialized equipment) is among the most famous: Longs Peak. The 14,255 foot mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park is perhaps the Front Range's most photogenic (I featured it in a [painting of that park](#)) with its diamond face.

The year was 2000 and I hadn't moved to Colorado, or even California yet. I was out of college and working at a small company in Iowa. Bored and wanting adventure I left on a July Friday and drove overnight to Colorado to specifically make this hike (underestimating it and overestimating myself in the process).

But in a way I was also testing my stamina and fortitude for what was coming at the end of the summer by backpacking in Europe (and more than once going without sleep in the process). That will be a great story to tell once I get to writing about it.

(Needless to say, however, never, ever drive all night. Crash somewhere at 11PM and resume at 6AM. If you can't get a motel room, a motel parking lot is the next best option for the road weary).

Being that I was young (24 to be exact) and had both an overabundance of energy and stupidity I assumed I could make the full hike starting at 10:00 am. I quickly learned that you could not.



Longs Peak from the boulder field

From the photographed spot on the boulder field I was approximately 2.5 miles from the summit. In the photograph you'll see a notch on the right side of the mountain that cuts into the smooth descent from the summit. That spot is known as the Keyhole.

It was at the keyhole that the trail passes to the opposite side of the mountain and the trail is narrower and more difficult. It was also the spot at which I and every other hiker on the trail was turned around by lightning.

Which brings me to my first point. In Colorado afternoon thunderstorms in the summer are almost a given. To complete a 14er summit hike (or most any hike above tree line you must start early and summit close to 11am to be safely below tree line when any weather hits. That means starting at 7AM or earlier depending on the length of the hike.

By the time this photograph was taken it was around 1PM and I was quite honestly so tired from the drive that is was for the best that I turned around anyway. Shaky legs at high altitude are a recipe for injuries or worse.

Since I moved to Colorado in Dec of 2011 after many terrific hikes in California over the previous decade, I've completed three 14er hikes and counting. And one non-14er hike in Rocky Mountain as well. As time goes by and we have the chance to get out for more, we'll add them to the page.

Mount Elbert, 14440 ft

















In July of 2022 my now almost 16-year-old son and I set out to remove Mt. Elbert from our bucket lists (itâ??s been on my list longer). I took a vacation day from work and made a motel reservation in Leadville, CO to give us the best chance to accomplish this father-son hike.

The motel air conditioning went out in the middle of the night and the heat of the room was so stifling that I called the front desk at 4AM when we could no longer tolerate the heat of the room. They promptly responded and said a breaker had flipped and the room became tolerable enough to sleep a couple more hours. But that loss of sleep and time was unfortunate.

I decided we could start a little later, closer to 8AM. We both needed some additional sleep and a stop at Safeway in Leadville to get a few more bottles of water. We then drove to the trailhead and found the parking area already full but there was space right off the roadway.

We started making good time and were above tree line by 10AM. As with all 14er hikes things slow down dramatically from there. This was Danielâ??s first real 14er hike after the short and quickly squelched Grayâ??s Peak hike 3 years before.

We encountered a lot of great people and utterly beautiful scenery. Daniel and I were really enjoying ourselves. But as we slowly made our way up to 14,000 ft storm clouds were gathering. Rain was visible to the south and north. Still we pressed onward, all the way to the very last stretch (visible in the third from last photo). Just that little bit left.

It was now 12PM. Thunder filled the skies and reluctantly I decided we had to turn around. So close. Less than a quarter mile. The final peak only a stroll away. Daniel protested. â??Itâ??s right there!â?•

I started down but he held fast and remained, intent on going alone. I yelled and told him to get down now. He relented. We walked back in light hail and rain, knowing we had essentially been to the summit anyway and that only a thunder storm stopped us from reaching the marker. We had ascended to

14,300 ft and were only .1 km from the summit according to a mapping tool.

We both consider this a summited mountain, but I think weâ??ll be back one day. And get that marker photo and stand together for a photo.

Mount Bierstadt, 14065 ft

The first mountain I climbed in Colorado was Mount Bierstadt Sept of 2014.









If the 14ers are ranked on level of ease, Mt. Bierstadt would usually come up in the top-5. From the Guanella Pass parking area to the summit is only around 3.5 miles, but it is a steep ascent and there is a section of boulder scrambling that can be a bit challenging.

The summit of Mt. Bierstadt is nearby the summit of the higher Mount Evans (about a 200 foot difference), but unlike Evans, there is no road to the top. You can see the astronomical observatory built on Mount Evans from Bierstadt too.

This is a great first 14er hike for any Coloradan and any out-of-state traveler wishing to bag a memorable peak (it was actually my second 14er officially since I had previously summited Mount Whitney in California). The scenery starting at Guanella Pass all the way to the summit is outstanding. Just be sure to arrive very early to the parking lot (6 AM is your last chance to park in an actual space).

One more thing worth mentioningâ? A few days after I completed this hike a guy took his german shepherd dog to the summit. Owing to the rocky trail and the boulder scrambling near the summit, the dogâ??s paws were injured. To make matters worse, he decided to start out the hike around noon when any wise climber would be leaving the summit.

Since his dog was injured, when lightning began to flash in the skies (as it always does in summer), this guy decided to save himself and abandon his dog on the mountain while he hiked down alone. Fortunately a group of courageous hikers carried the dog dog to safety.

To abandon your dog like that is cowardly. But the more important thing to remember is that these trails are largely composed of sharp rocks and rough boulders. We are wearing thick soled hiking boots. Dogs are great companions in most places, but I would never take a dog on a mountain hike. Itâ??s just not good for them and they will be happier going to a grassy park to run around.

Flattop Mountain, 12,361 Ft

In the summer of 2015 I went with the whole family to Rocky Mountain National Park and chose what I thought would be a good family hike. Actually, they all decided to turn around about 1/3 of the way to the top. But I carried on and made it to the summit. I did drop my camera and broke my lens (which explains the strange faint lines in the photos).







Flattop Mountain lacks a real summit of note other than a well, flat surface of tundra. Nearby Hallet Peak is an easy extension to the hike but I needed to get back to my family. For first time mountain hikes, this is a great way to get started.

Quandary Peak, 14,271 Ft

The second 14er I summited in Colorado is Quandary Peak near Breckenridge in Sept of 2018.













Even on Sept 3 there was a bit of snow in the air and the aspens were already changing. The hike to the summit was straightforward at about 4 miles from the parking area to the summit, with no significant boulder scrambling.

What made this hike enjoyable was the presence of mountain goats. Not just one but dozens and standing right along the trail to the summit. They seemed completely oblivious of the summit hikers which allowed me to get a close-up photograph even with a smart phone camera. There were also many pika along the way that chirped their presence known.

While I would say that I am in good physical condition, there were some super-athletes actual running the trail to the top. At an altitude of 14,271 ft that's a pretty incredible display of stamina and conditioning.

Grays Peak, 14, 278 Ft

My third Colorado 14er was Grays Peak. Many Coloradans consider this to be the easiest 14er hike and in terms of the trail, I might agree. It's a straight hike to the top. You can also cross a short saddle to a second 14er (Torrey's Peak), which I didn't have time to do.

It took three straight weekends to actually complete this hike in Sept 2019, and not because the trail was difficult.

First, let me discuss the road to get to the trailhead. It is an absolutely awful road with immense potholes and large rocks lining the road's surface. I had just bought my new truck a couple months before driving this horrendous road and I believe it aged it at least a year. It's really that bad. I saw some people trying to drive the road in sedans and bashing their cars' undercarriages.

The second difficulty is the parking area and the crowds of cars all trying to find a place to park. There is a tiny parking area but hundreds of cars lining the road on either side. There is literally nowhere to park if you arrive even at 6am. Since this peak is relatively close to the I-70 and Denver, it receives more hikers than probably any other 14er trail. Chances are you will even get stuck trying to turn around on the narrow road as you desperately try to wedge your vehicle into a space.

Once I did get parked on the roadside the first time, the skies opened up and a steady rain began to fall. Determined to press on anyway, I put on a poncho and decided to chance it and hope it would clear up. About a mile into the trail I realized the rain was not going to let up and visibility at the summit would be effectively zero. Reluctantly, I turned around.

The following weekend I returned with my 11-year-old son Daniel.





I really wanted to complete this hike with my son. He was excited to go and I felt he could complete this first 14er.

A couple things were apparent though relatively quickly: 1) It was unusually cold and windy and we were ill prepared for the conditions (you can't see the wind and the cold in the pictures). Those people summiting on this day were wearing winter gear. 2) The ascent was probably a bit too much for him at his age. We needed a couple easier hikes to build up to this hike.

We turned around at about the halfway mark and even though I still hadn't summited I was glad to have spent time on the trail with my son. The wildflowers were certainly a sight to see along the way.

The very next weekend I put my truck through the hell of that road one last time. The weather was nice and warm and clear. It was time to get this peak out of the way.







The third time was the charm and I made it to the summit of Grays Peak. The mountain goats were out too and were a friendly sight along the way.

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Author

jsde