

Colorado's Dangerous Peaks



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have always had a strange, wild passion for the mountains. The mountains were visible from the window of my elementary school classroom. Whenever the boredom would grab hold of me, I would daydream, escaping deep into those mountains and far away from school.

The daydream would have me fishing a pristine section of a beautiful stream, while an elk bugled above me. There would be a wonderful camp set up, with a roaring campfire blazing in the foreground. The daydream of the mountains saved me from perishing from a loathsome childhood affliction: school.

Apparently, I am not the only person who is obsessed with the mountains. In the last several decades, the number of people climbing of 14ers, mountain peaks that exceed 14,000 feet in elevation, has soared, and so have the deaths. To qualify, a peak must rise at least 300 feet above the saddle that connects it to the nearest 14er peak if another exists nearby.

There are 96 14ers in the United States, and all of them are west of the Mississippi. Colorado leads the pack with the most, 59, (Using the 300-foot rule, 53 if you don't) and second place is Alaska with 29.

Mountain climbing enthusiasts seek out these 14,000-foot peaks to hike,



While a peak doesn't have to be a 14er to send you on the last train west, Colorado does a pretty good job. (Courtesy photo)

climb, and simply experience. At that altitude you will face all the normal challenges that you face on any other hike, along with the added potential of obtaining a case of altitude sickness for your trouble. In other words, because it's there.

Colorado Fourteeners Initiative released a report estimating that Colorado 14ers experienced 415,000 hiker use days in 2020. That number surged past 2019 by 44 percent, so the sport is growing. I might point out that all 14er mountains are not created equally.

Take for example Longs Peak, a 14,259-foot mountain nestled away in the heart of Rocky Mountain National Park. Despite Longs Peak being one of the most popular and heavily trafficked Colorado mountains, it is also the deadliest mountain in Colorado. It is a 14.5-mile climb that is very difficult and has huge drop offs.

Longs Peak has accounted for 67 deaths since the park was formed in 1915. 70 percent of those deaths were from falls, while the rest were attributed to exhaustion, hypothermia, and heart failure. None of these numbers mention altitude sickness as a contributing factor, but the possibility cannot be ignored.

More than half the climbers that attempt Longs Peak will never see the summit, making it the 14er with the highest failure rate. Longs Peak should not be attempted by beginners as the terrain is abnormally steep, rugged, and consists of mostly jagged rocks and uneven ground. While Longs is a very dangerous and deadly climb, it is not the most difficult 14er in Colorado, ranking No. 15.

The hardest 14er in Colorado to hike is generally considered to be Capitol Peak, located in the Elk Mountains near Aspen. Capitol Peak has an ele-

vation of 14,130 feet and is known for its technical routes, knife-edge ridge, rotten, poor-quality rock, and significant exposure.

Capitol Peak gained notoriety in 2017 when 5 people died on its slopes. Three of the 5 victims died because of selecting the incorrect descent route. The so-called "death gully" has lured people in the past due to its innocuous appearance from above and people's fear of crossing the Knife Edge on the return trip. There is no easier way down other than the standard route.

Not to be outdone in the Aspen Area, you will find another deadly 14er mountain, Maroon Bells, which is comprised of 2 peaks. The Maroon Bells are not only some of Colorado's most photographed mountains, but they also present an extensive challenge to climbers looking to traverse between the two peaks. To accomplish this feat, mountaineers must

bring climbing gear like harnesses and ropes to ensure a safe traverse.

The Maroon Bells have been nicknamed the "Deadly Bells," and is noted by the US Forest Service by means of a sign posted on an access route to these twin mountains. The sign cites "downsloping, loose, rotten, and unstable rock as the reason these peaks are so dangerous, and that the climb kills without warning."

The specific number of deaths that occurred on these peaks is difficult to track. They first earned their nickname in 1965 following 5 accidents resulting in 8 deaths, all in a single climbing season. Recent data puts the number of deaths on both peaks combined at 9 between 2010 and 2017.

Analyzing the cause of death for some of these 14er accidents can be a challenge, as often there are multiple causes, i.e., a falling rock strikes a climber causing them to

lose their grip and fall. Just about all the deaths involve a fall.

If you are going to take up this sport, start small, don't try the Deadly Bells or Longs on your first trip out. Keep your physical condition in mind, and don't lie to yourself. Climb in good weather, wear a helmet, start early in the day, avoid crowds of people, and be always very sure of your footing. Most importantly, when you feel like you may be over your head, or the altitude is catching up with you, turn around and descend. Remember, a mistake up there can immediately cancel all your life memberships.

I still have a great love for the Colorado Mountains, the best anywhere, but on a different level. I am not climbing a 14er unless there is a great fishing lake up there, or a secret hunting spot. I shall leave the "climb it because it is there" attitude to the younger crowd.

P.S. As a side note, I want to sneak a line in here to wish my wife a happy 48th anniversary and thank her for putting up with an outdoor adrenaline junkie all these years. This year, she and I will be hunting together on continent no. 5. That leaves Australia next, but Antarctica is out.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

Adventure without accidents: Tips for safe Memorial Day weekend outdoor fun

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

DENVER - Ahead of the holiday weekend, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) encourages state park and state wildlife area visitors to act as stewards to help care for the state's land, wildlife and water by balancing outdoor recreation with mindful conservation.

Below are a few tips on how to recreate responsibly to help you have a safe

and enjoyable outdoor experience.

Life Jackets Save Lives

The majority of water-related fatalities happen when people are swimming in cold water and paddle boarding or kayaking while not wearing a life jacket. Wear a life jacket. Regardless of age or experience level, cold water can quickly create a drowning emergency. So, wear a life jacket and protect yourself

from the dangers of cold water shock. Paddleboards and kayaks are considered vessels, and life jacket requirements apply. Heavy rain or snow melting in nearby mountains can raise water levels quickly and without notice. Check river flows at <https://dwr.state.co.us/Tools/Stations>. Only boat or paddle in water conditions you are comfortable and confident

See TIPS page B3



Ahead of the holiday weekend, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) encourages state park and state wildlife area visitors to act as stewards to help care for the state's land, such as Pearl Lake State Park, pictured here. (Courtesy photo)

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