

COLORADO HIKING TRIP REPORT

edited by Bruce Bente

Summary

Twenty CMC hikers and friends enjoyed a great 11-day trip to Rocky Mtn. National Park in Colorado. 17 hikers stayed for the entire period, while three joined the group for part of the time. During this time, we hiked about 15 trails, hiking about 75 miles total with a total ascent of about 15,000 ft. Weather ranged from temperatures of 30 to 65 degrees, with winds up to 60 mph, and snow depth from none up to knee-high. Not the summer weather we're used to in North Carolinas!

Testimonials

*Another (the 3rd) of great hiking trips arranged by Jack & Susan Fitzgerald. This trip was different from the others in that it was all high altitude hiking. The high elevation made for some challenges in the elevation climbs which were numerous. To see a reading on my GPS of over 12,000 ft and recording all thirteen available satellites the first time was interesting to say the least. Thanks to all that I hiked with throughout the most strenuous hikes in the high altitudes. What great supportive comrades to be hiking with. Truly an experience that will be remembered for years. –Carroll

*Rocky Mountain National Park was beyond my expectations. Its majestic mountains kept changing with the weather and/or ones location. I was surprised at the openness of the meadows, wild flowers still blooming, lily pads on lakes, elk bugling, snow, aspen leaves turning color, not only yellow but red. Getting to go to the Juried Craft Fair was interesting and comparing Western NC art to the West--the Baldpate Inn with its unique key room and menu were interesting--a hot tub and a wonderful condo with friends all around--a great trip. –Mary

*Just a couple of thoughts on the trip. As you know I was in Whitefish MT trying to decide whether to come home on the northern route and add the last of the continental states that I have yet to visit....ND, WI, MN. Well I decided that my hiking buddies are more important than lists of states so I headed south to CO. Glad I did. Loved the hike to the Twin Sisters and dinner at the lodge. What a charming place that was. I agree the hot tub was a nice touch. I was in 8 National Parks this summer. Rocky Mountain is really special. –Jane

*Our favorite hike was to the boulder field on Longs Peak. It was a 12 miler with a 3700 ft ascent to 13,000+ ft. It was a spectacular hike in every way -views and accomplishment even though we didn't make it to the Key Hole like Tommie and Joe did. –Elrose and Sue

*Rocky Mountain National Park reminded me of the Canadian Rockies in Glacier, the grasslands and animals of Yellowstone, and the rock faces of Yosemite. While my previous trips have been social experiences in geography and nature, two hikes within

RMNP became a self discovery of my abilities (and decisions) on steep and rocky trails in adverse elements. First hike: See the description of the (almost to) Long's Peak hike, after "Wednesday, 9/20" later in this report.

The second hike that challenged me was Flat Top Mountain. Snow and high winds turned back five of us hikers from the summit so the hike was short but intense. It was a relief to see all the hikers in my group decide independently to turn back for safety reasons. That was the day I learned a few new things about my fellow hikers. –Tommie

*The majesty of nature provided joy and serenity for me at RMNP. I was totally enthralled by the gold and orange hues of the quaking aspens and the purity of the snow covered mountains, the mystical spirals of the summits and reflecting pools of the glacier lakes and ponds. Hiking on a high windy ridge in a white out makes one realize the power of nature. With all this beauty about how could you not have a happy group. - Joanne Tulip

Logistics

17 people flew out to Denver on 9/12 or 9/13 on five different airlines, and met at the Alamo rental car lounge at Denver Airport. Only one plane was late, to our relief. Three vans and one car were rented for the drive to Estes Park. Later in the week, two hikers drove up from Denver to hike with us for three days, and later another drove down from Montana to hike for a few days before continuing on her travels. The rest of us flew home on Saturday 9/23 on the same five airlines—most got back on time, except the unlucky American Airlines folks whose trip is described below:

*Jack, Susan, Paul and Joe, after arriving at Denver Airport two hours early to navigate the Security Maze, had the pleasure of waiting 4 hours for a mechanical problem to be fixed. A disquieting event occurred when, after completing repairs, the airline announced that they had to take the plane out "for a spin" to see if the repair worked. We, of course, missed our connecting flight from Chicago to Greenville, SC. But we luckily got rebooked on the last flight out of Chicago to GSP, leaving at 8:30 PM. But at 8:30 PM the pilots were not yet in Chicago. Finally left for Greenville at 10:50 PM. But over Greenville we circled the airport for about 1/2 hour while the pilot pleaded for someone to turn on the runway lights (they thought all flights had already arrived for the night). Finally landed at 2:00 AM, 8 and 1/2 hours later than scheduled. Had to wake up the parking lot attendant to get car out of lot. Bed at 4:30 AM!!! -Jack & Susan

Lodging & Meals

Most of us stayed at Wildwood Inn (www.esteswildwoodinn.com), which is located on a mountainside just west of Estes Park and only one mile east of the Falls River entrance to Rocky Mtn. Natl. Park. We stayed in four different units, with great views of the mountains from the rooms. The units varied in size from 2 per room up to 5 in fully-

equipped units with fireplace, full kitchen, etc. What a nice place to stay, and walking to a separate building and then soaking in their hot tub really felt good after a long hike.

Most of the hikers made breakfasts and prepared trail lunches in their rooms. About half went out to restaurants for supper, with the rest preparing suppers in their rooms. A variety of good restaurants was easy to find in Estes Park and vicinity.

Animals

Many animals, large and small, were encountered along the way, both off-trail and on-trail. Elk were everywhere, in herds consisting of one bull Elk, 20-30 cow elk, and some fawns (Is that the right name for young elk?) It was a fascinating experience to hear the bull elk bugling to keep his harem and attract more females, and how he would herd them if they strayed. Of course, the Natl. Park was full of various herds that came out in the evening to feed, but the surprise was to see herds wandering through the town of Estes Park. Elk were spotted feeding on grass in front of motels and condos, on the golf course and even eating plums (?) from trees in the Safeway parking lot.

And then there were the moose. Groups of 2-3 were seen off the main road on the west side of the Continental Divide, plus one at 10,000' near Ouzel lake on the east side of the divide and one family east of Rocky Mtn. Natl. Park. The one at Ouzel Lake was a surprise not only to us but to the Park Rangers to whom we reported it...moose had been introduced on the west side of the Continental Divide, but this one had apparently crossed over the Continental Divide about 13,000' and then down 2000' to Ouzel Lake.

Mule deer were spotted in the woods from time to time, a fox was spotted around the Inn, and for small animals, there were the bold ground squirrels and chipmunks, and higher up, pikas and marmots.

Hiking

Wednesday, 9/13: After first checking in at the Inn, by 5:00PM we were off on a 3.4 mile hike from Fern Lake Trailhead to "The Pool". This was a good moderate walk to stretch our legs after riding in airplanes all day, and it gave us a chance to acclimate to walking at 8200' elevation and to learn how to breathe again.

Thursday, 9/14: Another moderate hike to acclimate. Bear Lake Trailhead to Nymph, Dream, Emerald and Haiyaha Lakes, with spectacular views of Longs Peak and aspen trees with bright yellow leaves. 5.8 miles.

Friday, 9/15: Now the fun started! 10 miles and a 1700' climb up to Sky Pond from a start at 9200'. Passing a big waterfall and wow views from the Loch, we found work crews busy doing big-time trail maintenance along the way, building "turnpikes" as they call them. Then by following amazing rock steps ascending steeply through a boulder field, we got to Timberline Falls, where it was necessary to scramble uphill over huge boulders next to and through the falls to the next level and up to Sky Pond.

Saturday, 9/16: Since 80mph winds and snow had closed Trail Ridge Rd., we changed the original plan and instead drove south to Wild Basin . There we hiked up to Ouzel Falls and were surprised to hike up into a snowfall. Some folks hiked back down at this point, but some continued to Ouzel Lake, another 4.5 miles uphill. At one point, male mule deer were antler-wrestling near the trail. This section was again spectacular—it went up onto a ridge that a forest fire had cleared 20 years ago, and gave 360 degree views of the mountains. The snow got heavier, and then near the Lake, it suddenly turned into a high-wind, heavy snow event. At this point, our leader put his hand up for everyone to stop, when he spotted a bull moose near the trail who was watching us closely. After a couple of quick photos, we decided it would be prudent to leave the area. On the way downhill, with the wind at our backs, everyone was enjoying the fierce weather and counting our luck at being able to experience such a storm.

Sunday, 9/17: This was a one-way hike, using the Natl. Park shuttle bus service to return to Bear Lake Trailhead. From 9500', we first hiked up 1200', then down past Odessa Lake (one group ate lunch here, and the rest ate at Fern Lake beyond.) There was a lot of ice and slippery traction on the narrow trail from the storm the day before, and cold temperatures too. To our surprise, this did not stop dozens of other hikers from being up there, including one couple with an infant in a backpack who had apparently camped the previous night in the cold and snow.

Hiking down past Fern Lake into warmer weather, we reached the Pool that we had hiked to on Wednesday. At this point, one group hiked down to Fern Lake Trailhead to board the shuttle bus. Another group turned uphill on the Mills Creek Trail, hiked over the ridge and boarded the bus at Hollowell Park. To everyone's surprise, we boarded the same bus as the first group, who wondered how we had gotten to that point. The bus driver said we were the biggest group she had carried all day.

Monday, 9/18: For a change of pace, we drove north to the Cow Creek Trailhead at only 7800' elevation. From here, we hiked up a dry, open meadow with nice moderate views and many wildflowers, and then up a side canyon to Bridal Veil Falls. A nice moderate hike on a warmish day with blue skies, with time to hike slowly and enjoy the very different terrain. The trailhead is the former MacCraw Ranch, now owned by the Park and converted for use by scientific researchers. The old ranch buildings are used for offices and occupancy by researchers.

Tuesday, 9/19: The weather warmed, wind died down, the snow mostly melted and Trail Ridge Rd. was open! We drove this amazing and scenic road up from 8000' to beyond timberline and into the tundra, with stops at various scenic points. At the Rock Cut Trailhead at 12,110', we hiked the 0.5 mile Tundra trail (doesn't sound like much but try it at 12,110') to the strange rock formations and then climbed up a rock formation to the Toll Memorial at the top. Next was a stop at the Alpine Visitors Center, surrounded by snow. Photographing two Rangers in September shoveling 3' of snow was strange...

Next we drove down past Grand Lake and hiked to lunch by Adams Falls. For the first time, it actually got warm enough to hike in a T-shirt, as some of us hiked up the beautiful East Inlet Trail to a great view down the valley to Grand Lake itself in the distance. Supper afterwards was enjoyed at the funky Sagebrush Restaurant (peanuts on the floor, Rocky Mtn. Oysters on the menu) in Grand Lake, then back over the mountain to the Inn.

Wednesday, 9/20: On this day, we split into two groups, going on two different hikes:

Boulder Field and Keyhole on Longs Peak:

Long's Peak, highest point in the park, was closed to non-technical hikers after September 15. Tommie and others were scheduled to camp in the Boulder Field September 19th, and hike to the summit September 20. The only part of Long's Peak available on the scheduled hike date was the Keyhole. Another CMC hiker and I reached the Boulder Field by lunch time and after close scrutiny of weather coming directly over the peak, we both made the decision to attempt the keyhole. The elevation was then 12,500' and would ascend to 13,100' at the keyhole. The mere 600' gain slowed me down to climbing over a half dozen rocks, then halting to catch my breath. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, my head gained what felt like a pound every ten yards, every scar on my body throbbed, and my inner voice was gasping "what ARE you doing up here?" The last 30' of the climb answered "You're going die, idiot." As I lay draped over the jagged rim at the keyhole, butt toward Twin Sisters Peak and head toward the glacier bowl, I couldn't conjure up any victorious feelings. The only thing on my mind was facing the climb back down. By the time I descended to the Boulder Field, snow and wind were pushing me sideways and I found myself trail running to stay ahead of a whiteout. Extreme elements can produce extreme emotions, and I went through more than a few that day on Long's Peak Trail. And yes, I learned a few new things about myself. –Tommie

My recollection of the hike up to the Keyhole on the route to Long's Peak begins with arriving at the point where one could look down on Chasm Lake and across at Long's Peak and huge snowfields. From that point, Tommie and I headed across the very large open area of Granite Gap, which seems interminable, and then up towards the Boulder Field, which is a huge expanse of car-sized boulders at nearly 13,000 ft. The base of the Boulder Field contains two high-tech privvies which incorporate solar panels to aid in the processing of waste material. (See photo showing the Park Service Volunteer with his pack of Alpacas. He has the delightful job of cleaning the privy and supplying toilet paper at the Boulder Field campsites. The Keyhole is visible slightly above his head and to the left.).

There are several campsites, each consisting of a ring of rocks about 3 ft. high to provide some protection from the wind and each site is furnished with an animal-proof food container chained to the rock (See photo with Tommie sitting in one of the circular rock "campsites" at the Boulder Field). The Keyhole, our final destination, was not far off above us, perhaps 500 ft., but we had to scramble across the large field of huge boulders to get there so we decided to leave our packs at the campsites to make the climbing a

little easier. At that point we were both feeling the burden of climbing with reduced oxygen and we were tiring more quickly.

There is no actual trail thru the Boulder Field, there are simply cairns left by many other hikers marking the routes they chose. Some of those routes looked good, and some daunting. It becomes a matter of keeping your eye on the Keyhole, and choosing the most direct route that you can handle.

I felt a real sense of accomplishment when we finally made it to the Keyhole, and we both were surprised to see the very well made stone shelter just to the left of the opening. The shelter bore a bronze plaque stating that it was erected as a memorial to a renowned woman climber who lost her life in the 1920's while ascending the summit.

Tommie and I went thru the Keyhole and took in the vast panoramic views on the other side. At that point I think we were at about 13,200 ft. elevation, and thus only about 1000 ft. from the summit. Thoughts enter your mind of making an effort to reach the summit. But the next section of "trail" is not encouraging; it's narrow, steep, and very rocky and marked with a bullseye blaze painted on rocks for the remainder of the ascent. (Refer to photo...the "trail" continues behind Joe). Also, it was about 2 p.m. and big bad clouds were closing in. So we enjoyed the views, got some photos, and headed back down. After retrieving our packs at the bottom of the Boulder Field, the dark clouds were overtaking us and as we went further down, visibility behind us became zero and we had some snow flurries.....good decision not to try to go any further. -Joe

Twin Sisters, a mountain on the other side of the valley from Long's Peak: Excellent views of Long's Peak were on the west side of the valley, and we could see the slope where the other group was hiking. Our trail climbed through a spruce and pine forest at the bottom, eventually giving way to ancient Limber Pines with twisted gnarled trunks (to learn about these pines, see <http://home.earthlink.net/~swier/LimberPine.html>), and then the trail popped above the timber line into an big rocky boulder field that stretched up to the 11,430' summit. After a scenic lunch on the summit, next was the long down-down-down to the trailhead; afterwards, we reassembled at the nearby Baldpate Inn (good views of Estes valley) to see their famous key collection and then for an early soup-and-salad dinner, complete with delicious homemade pies. An interesting place and worth coming back to—see www.baldpateinn.com for a better description and the interesting history of their key collection.

Thursday, 9/21: Again a day with two different hiking groups.

The first group hiked across Moraine Park and up to Cub Lake, enjoying the bright yellow aspen colors on the way to this small Lake, nestled between low mountains.

The second group decided to try to hike to Flattop Mtn., on the Continental Divide at 12,300', despite the intimidating weather that we could see ahead at higher elevations. We hiked up through spruce and pine forest, stopping at an overlook to see Dream Lake far below. Then up into steadily worsening snow and wind to the spectacular Emerald

Lake overlook, a steep 1300' below us. Continuing above timberline, the weather got worse, with wind gusts approaching 60 mph, horizontal blowing snow and snow drifts that got deeper and deeper. As we approached one ridgeline at 11,600', the wind got up to 60 mph, snow was knee-deep and it was not safe to proceed. Flattop Mtn. will have to wait for us to return. One odd side-note: As we turned back in wild weather, two Park Rangers were casually standing there with a radio antenna, trying to pick up a signal from collared big-horn sheep, looking unconcerned about the weather.

We got down from this hike early, so went over and hiked the Cub Lake trail to round out our hiking for the day.

Friday, 9/22: Since this was the last day and people had packing to do for the next day, we went on a moderate hike. The 81-year old husband of one of the Inn desk clerks volunteered to lead us on a hike to an abandoned village site outside the Park, so we drove east down the Big Thompson canyon, then up to Dunraven Trailhead. This trailhead is remarkable for having an emergency call box and 2-room outhouse...out in the middle of nowhere. We expected a slow pace due to the leader's age, but were we surprised—he moved out at a pace of someone 15 years younger. Hiking up past a closed-for-winter boys' camp and along a creek, we were brought to a halt by a moose family grazing along the trail. First the cow appeared on the trail, then her calf, and finally a big bull moose stepped out of the woods to protect them. The family slowly walked away from us up the trail, with the bull at the rear stopping and turning occasionally to be sure that we were far enough back for safety. They crossed a trail bridge over the creek, then turned left and evaporated into the woods—a sublime and unexpected encounter which everyone enjoyed.

Saturday, 9/23: Everyone up and out early to get to their planes. One group unfortunately had to leave at 2:45am to get to their 6:10am plane. The next groups left at 6:00am and 7:00am, and had time to have a hearty breakfast at the Big Horn Restaurant before leaving Estes park and descending below 7000' elevation for the first time in 10 days.

A great time was had by all!

-written by Bruce Bente and co-hikers on Colorado trip