

Rocky Mountain Trek

6 September 2008

My father, Tim Dunnahoo, and I, Blake Dunnahoo, as well as Mark Coladonato and his son, Tom, of Venturing Crew 345 in Round Rock, TX recently joined up with Venturing Crew 890 of Dallas, TX for a Rocky Mountain National Park high adventure backpacking trip and we all had a blast. After rendezvousing and spending the night alongside the Arkansas River at a KOA in Colorado, we enjoyed a great introduction to the crew by wrangling some class 4 and 5 rapids through a Royal Gorge rafting outfitter. Walls of white cold rapids broke against our skin, but the sun quickly warmed us up as it beamed through the canyon. The trip organizer, Mr. Squyres of Crew 890, even noted that in the decades that he has been making this trip he has never seen the rapids rage so high at this time of year.



The next day while heading to Colorado Springs, we made a stop at Garden of the Gods, an interesting formation of upright red rocks towering out of the earth with large crevasses serving as a haven for climbers and sightseers alike. Rocky Mountain National Park the following day, we split up into one advanced and two intermediate crews, with those of us from Round Rock being assigned the tougher of the intermediate itineraries. We were accompanied with an experienced adult, Kerry

Moskop from 890 as we acclimated by day hiking a total of six miles reaching various lakes below Hallett Peak, my favorite being Lake Haiyaha surrounded by large boulders and with a peculiar old pine that survived a fire 100 years ago. It was this night where the most severe symptoms of altitude sickness swept through several members of the crew. The next morning en



route to our Timber Lake trailhead both intermediate crews piled into the 15-passenger van rented by Crew 890 and stopped at scenic locations above the tree line and at the Alpine Visitor Center, the highest visitor center of any national park at 11,796 ft. After noon, we were off on the trail, starting at about 9,000 ft. Being from central Texas, we enjoyed the unique opportunity to experience campsites such as Snowbird that were half covered in snow, and in the middle of July! The next morning we attempted Mt. Ida, but due to the thin air and time restrictions, only my dad and I managed to summit the 12,880 ft. peak. We found ourselves bushwhacking later that

day through a dense and challenging mile-or-so after crossing Long (and very wet!) Meadows. Later, on the trail, we found a puma paw print that reminded us that we weren't alone in the wilderness and that we needed to respect the local wildlife and not neglect the job of setting up the bear bag. That day we arrived at Lower Granite Falls campsite after dark, not fun, but we were rewarded the next day with a

short trek to one of Backpacker's Magazine top 5 campsites, Haynach (Llamas permitted). We began our trek the following day shortly after 5:00 am and enjoyed breakfast near the Continental Divide when we reached a flat area on alpine tundra accompanied by 80 or so elk. After meeting up with the other intermediate crew some of us made the short summit of Hallett peak (12,713 ft.) and then we set our bearing and headed across the Bighorn Flats to Andrews Glacier where we faced an enjoyable slide down on plastic bags (called glissading). We then split from the other group to trek on to Boulder Brook campsite, thus covering nearly 15 miles on this day. After sleeping in the next morning we happened to meet up with the other crew again as we headed to our own campsite, Battle Mountain, where we camped with the advanced crew in preparation for the next morning's attempted summit of Longs Peak.

Although the advanced crew awoke at 2:00 a.m. and set off, we enjoyed our extra two hours of sleep and left at around 4:30 a.m. leaving the adults to put away crew gear and take their own pace to the Keyhole. We joined the parade of headlights headed toward the summit, approximately five miles from our camp. Sunrise over the distant horizon was amazing and shortly afterward we reached Boulder Field (highest US National Park campsite) where we met up yet again with the other intermediate crew. Once reaching the Keyhole, a kind of gateway or turnaround marker to the peak, three other youth and I plus two adults



headed across "The Ledges". We had to climb across cold rocks aiming for the targets that lead our way with a slanted drop-off to our right. Later we ascended "The Trough" and we quickly noticed the thinning air. Once crossing "The Narrows" with a steep drop-off to our right and a wall to our left, we noted the approaching clouds, a sign for climbers to get off of the mountain, but we pushed on in a cautious rush to "The Homestretch", the most frightening section for me that consisted of following a series of cracks up a steep granite ledge for about 50 yards. The long and flat 14,259 ft. summit

was simply breathtaking; a view that stretches well across the park and Rocky Mountains. Although it only lasted about 10 minutes due to the incoming clouds, my time at the peak was by far the highlight and climax of this trip. We descended and made the 5-mile journey back to the Battle Mountain group site where we picked up our packs and headed down 2.5 miles to the Longs Peak Ranger Station where my dad and the Coladonatos were waiting to depart for home.



This trip was a great experience that I thoroughly enjoyed and I am glad that Crew 890 was able to open up its doors and welcome us to join them in their annual adventure. At the beginning of this trip, I honestly believed that Philmont was the most hardcore backpacking experience that was available to Scouts in the US, but after reflecting on my 2006 90-mile trek, Philmont in comparison now seems somewhat of a theme park for introducing youth to the fun of backpacking. Visit Rocky Mountain National Park northwest of Boulder, CO and you too will have your breath taken away.

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