

Granite Peak
Eastern Beartooth Range, Montana
(12,799 feet)
July, 2014

"If you get a bunch of 40 year olds together, something is bound to happen."

The seed for climbing Granite was planted in 2010 while Patty and I were drinking wine in a hotel room in Jackson Hole, WY. We just got done climbing Gannett and feeling invincible. It took until now to get the crew together and make it happen. Paul, who also climbed Gannett with us, was in, along with Patty's hubby, Jamie, and her friend Carol Ray. The only problem was now Patty could no longer join due to a bad knee (and she was scheduled to guide a trip upon our return, so she had to rest it) – bummer! Apart from missing Patty, this could not have been a better team for the events to come!

Day 1 – Starting out (aka Sucking Air)

We headed out the door at 5AM with blankie, coffee and Patty's wonderful Asparagus-Tomato-Egg-Bake in tow. We had a 3-hour drive to the trailhead so car provisions were a must.

We hit the trail at 8AM from the Phantom Creek parking at 6,152 feet. Damn, I'm feeling that I just flew from sea level the day before! My Aconcagua pressure breathing techniques were used extensively the first day. The sights were beautiful, the weather perfect, but this was mostly ignored by distracting efforts to exhale as much air as possible from my lungs to allow room for fresh oxygen. There was also a heavy focus on self-coaching in order to keep my concern at bay about my aching knee (that had been giving me trouble all week) and a quad that felt like it was about to pop (due to compensating for the knee). It did cross my mind the day before to join Patty for a couple of days relaxing and drinking wine – but I already packed the gear and it seemed a waste not to use it. Besides I think my subconscious really wanted this, so my consciousness was complying and finding a way to push on... so I push on.

Lucking out on Froze-to-Death Plateau

After 7.5 hours of hiking (with a few much needed breaks sprinkled in, including a short nap at the junction), we arrived where we would call home for the next couple of nights on Froze-to-Death Plateau. Ever since I heard that name, I have been secretly dreading and fearing these nights. I pictured howling winds with obscene speed and frigidity - I didn't know how I was going to handle it. But after having Patty gawk and chuckle at my mention of bringing puffy pants did I think I might survive (assuming it wasn't going to be cold enough to use them). We completely LUCKED OUT! The weather was perfect, the breeze was just slight enough to keep the bugs away, and the bogs were trickling easily assessable water all around us. It could not have been better and we knew this was a rare event! Our short evening (I hit the sack at 8PM) was full of good food, lively chat and a plan for the next day. It was peacefully uneventful and relaxing.

Day 2: Tempest Mountain – Climbing a Mountain to Find a Mountain to Climb

We started out just before 6AM with full bellies of trail smoothies and coffee. The sunrise was gorgeous leaving a nice golden pink glow on the ground – it felt magical. I was still trying to baby my knee and quad as my concern about both did not fade overnight – they were not fully cooperating and getting on board with the plan. I was slower than desired but keeping a

respectful pace... considering I'm 40! (HA! I thought that might make many of you roll your eyes).

We arrived at the ridge of Tempest Mountain gaining our first full gaze of Granite Peak. It was across the valley and the route did not appear simple. We negotiated a route together (Ok, the truth is they all decided the route while I caught up, went pee, ate half a bar and took a bunch of pictures... then they asked if I agreed and all I had to do is say "Yup"... I knew my place, leave the route finding to the experts and don't ever whine about it). Oh, but how I wanted to whine!

Side note: Some of you may already know this, but before I climb a mountain I do what I can NOT to know too much. It's a fine line because you need to know enough to figure out what gear to bring but I don't want to know the details of what makes the mountain hard. I can't change the mountain and I don't need to lose shuteye fretting. Besides, I'm always with others that know the route much better than I and are experienced in the mountain range, so my knowledge is typically not necessary for the route finding. Staying ignorant on the topic is not as easy as you think either. Anyone who finds out you're climbing a particular mountain and knows anything about it wants to tell you. Others simply ask a lot of questions (and it feels sort of lame not answering any of it). But I try to maintain my ignorance until the reality unfolds in the field... and it's unfolding quickly before my eyes.

So here I am, getting my first realization of how difficult climbing Granite will be, the first of many realizations to come. We now have to traverse over boulders and loose rock and lose all the elevation we just gained on Tempest Mountain to get to the other side of the valley in order to start climbing Granite Peak. So we just had to climb a mountain in order to find Granite so we could climb a mountain. Apparently I'm not the only one surprised, they seemed to have left this detail out of the short route description everyone else read two nights before. And so it begins.

Stashing Gear

I'm not scared. I'm too winded to be scared! I'm scaling the ridge of Granite Peak trying to suck every bit of oxygen from the air in front of me. Wow, I have not felt my sea level lungs like this before. Paul is chuckling at my noises of sighs, moans and gasps. He says I'm making him exhausted listening to me (when I visit him in Colorado, I can get off the plane at night and hike a mountain with him in the morning, keeping up just fine – so he knows I'm struggling and is a bit surprised). He asks if I want to stash my pack (which means he'll carry the bit of food and gear I need to bring to the top) and without hesitation or even a second thought I stop, say "YES!" and toss off my pack. As I hand over the bit of stuff I think I need I realize, most of what is in my pack is not needed. I'm now floating on air! My second wind comes and suddenly everyone hears from "California" as I suddenly have opinions on routes I know very little about and encourage others to follow me (which was later deemed the Natalie sketchy route – I guess I don't mind the exposure as much as others – fearless or stupid? – it remained undecided).

Snowbridge – Crampons vs. Ropes

We get to the snowbridge, which is our first opportunity to rope up and use the gear lugged to the top. I'm thankful for all the climbing experience I have around me! I can usually hold my own and try not to be a liability, but I leave the technical set up to the climbers – we have the right crew together! As I'm looking at the snow I'm wishing I had my crampons with me (I feel much more comfortable on snow than scrambling the unstable rocks). But it's always a tough call to

know the conditions at the top and what gear to bring, so I'm glad we have the rope and experience behind it.

Class 4? I don't think so!

Once we cross the snowbridge, the real climbing begins. This is NOT class 4 as some of the route guides apparently explained – it must have been an old description that hasn't been reclassified. I knew there was some climbing involved, but I was anticipating it to be a short route as we neared the summit. I had no idea it would be for most of the climb up. I was climbing up to 5.7 free-style without a second thought on a ridge heading to 12,800 feet with no forgiveness on either side. My arms were strong (thanks to Crossfit), my knee and quad shut up for awhile, my fear was on vacation and I was in the zone! I felt awesome! This is definitely the most technical and longest duration of technical climbing I've ever done on a mountain.

The Summit

We landed on the summit at 12:30PM. We were chuckling how long it took us and that all of us thought we'd be there in a couple of hours (little did we know). We thanked the weather gods again for allowing us clear skies and a relaxed climb down. We were beat and we were only half way - down climbing was going to be tough. We hung out for awhile, wrote in the summit book dedicating the climb to Patty, replenished some of our lost calories and took lots of pictures (including a group pic that required me jumping from one ledge to the other before the 10 seconds were up, it took a couple of tries but I finally got there in time – it's all about the photos).

Down Climbing vs. Rappelling: Raps Win

The only thing more difficult than climbing a mountain is coming down from a mountain after summiting. You're exhausted, summit fever has worn off, it's simply harder to down climb, and all you dream of is relaxing while eating and drinking. The good news: the weather is perfect without a cloud in the sky so we have all afternoon and there are several sections we can rappel – whoo hooo!

We end up rappelling three sections before running out of anchor stations (which are pre-established by very kind folks, because no one wants to leave their highly priced safety gear). The rappels were a little awkward to start but fun once you get over the edge and so much easier (and safer) than climbing down the chimneys we came up. But like all good things, it came to an end way too fast and down climbing continued.

Loading Up – The Locals Win

As we descended further we needed to find my pack (which was “eco-friendly” by blending in nicely), which we left by the “big rock” near the middle of the snow patch (yes, it was that vague). Amazing that we found it with a lot less effort than I thought it would take. We decided it was snack time so we all dumped out what little food we had left as none of us expected to be out this long. As I sat there munching on a Tanka bar I noticed my strap was a bit worn, which seemed odd as this was a new pack. As I pulled my pack closer for inspection I noticed the whole darn strap was eaten, along with the other strap and back... holy smokes Batman, who wants to eat a pack when I have pretty good food inside (of which none was touched or even attempted to retrieve)? Darn locals (Pika or Marmot is suspected) attacked my pack and they won! The poor pack was only on its second excursion. Everyone chuckled in disbelief (at least it was still usable). We continued to share and eat what we could before heading down for further abuse.

As I put my pack on, I realized why I quickly took it off when Paul suggested it on the way up – it was heavy (apparently I was expecting a winter storm with all the layers I was carrying) and very awkward as I tried to navigate the down climbs. I was not a happy camper (but keeping it to myself) and feeling pretty clumsy. We finally managed to down climb to the base of Granite without incident and we were all feeling pretty good about it. We said goodbye to Granite and started our ascent and traverse of Tempest Mountain (down climbing a mountain to climb a mountain to descend again – this is true Alpine climbing). It was a slog, but I started my self-coaching again telling myself this is the last climb of the day. As I arrived to at the ridge of Tempest, Jamie was sitting there with a strange smile telling me he had bad news... the hiking poles I stashed at the trail head had been eaten, most likely by goats. What? Again? Who would have thought goats would want to eat the hand padding of hiking poles?!? We hadn't had a single incident with the goats overnight, and yet they are coming out with a vengeance! Score: Locals 2, Gear 0.

We now had the rolling downhill hike to camp and we were home. The hard part was over.

Paying the Price for Loosing Focus

Have I mentioned Jamie is an EMT? Apparently I needed to test his skill in the field. As we approached some of the flattest part of the trail, I started dreaming of camp and loosing focus even though we were still scrambling rocks (albeit much smaller than what we were doing but still nothing to ignore – duh!). I tripped, stumbled and finally landed... on my head (I should have left my helmet on). As I rolled over, holding my head, hoping it wasn't bad and talking to myself (out loud) saying it wasn't bad, that I didn't black out. I caught my breath and suddenly realized, my head wasn't the thing to worry about – my leg was on fire and the other leg was jack-hammering in sympathy. I really didn't want to look, but did... as I rolled up my pant leg I saw Jamie's face which was something sort of like "ooooohhhh that's not good" although no sound was made – coming from an EMT that's not reassuring. I put the pant leg down and decided to sit there for a moment and ignore the current situation – maybe it'll go away or I'm just dreaming. Jamie returns, as does Paul to assist, with medical supplies in hand; its time for me to go to my "happy place" and let them do their thing patching me up. Thank goodness for Jamie and his sweet supplies (note to self: buy steri-strips) - Jamie ROCKS! As for my head, no blood (thanks to my "on-so-functional-but-geeky" hat that they were teasing me about the entire trip) just a bump on each side of the head, which are manageable – so glad I took Advil and Bayer about an hour before, so I'm set for now.

Almost Home – Not! (aka Karma can be a bitch!)

On our first night as we were all enjoying the view, when we noticed a guy wondering around on the ridge – he appeared to be dazed and confused walking very slow but too far away to communicate with. We speculated about his summit success and were blown away how long it took him – almost chuckling how long it took him (yeah, we were cocky back then). Well Karma has a way of teaching lessons and this is one none of us will forget. As we thought we were close to approaching our camp, we realized it was nowhere to be found and we really weren't sure what direction it was in. Jamie's GPS was out of juice, Carol Ray and I were relying too heavily on the experience and skill of Jamie and Paul for us to help in any confident manner and Paul and Jamie weren't sure either. Jamie and Carol Ray thought it was to our right and Paul and I, not entirely sure, nor convinced it was that far right, thought it might be down further or more to the left. Didn't we walk further across the Plateau the day before? Weren't those mountains smaller? We didn't have a view of those mountains to our left, so what angle do we need to hike

to get the correct view? We wandered the plateau, up and down ridges, down and around hills. It was not a flat plateau and it was huge full of rolling hills and valleys with mounds speckled about impeding our view. Every angle looked unfamiliar in a familiar way. We tried to orientate ourselves by recreating the views we saw the night before, which was not an easy task, even after viewing the pictures I took on my camera.

Eventually we took Jamie's hunch as the primary and went down and around "Paul's Mountain*" to come out the other side and see the valley we camped in. It was a beautiful sight! I started to have Montana headlines run through my head of "Four missing climbers found dead on Froze-to-Death Plateau only ¼ mile from their campsite" or "Missing climbers still missing but Goats found campsite and ate it." Whew! We all stumbled into camp and I had my priority list in my head: 1. Warmth - Put on down jacket, 2. Leg - Ask Jamie to patch up my leg since all the hiking ripped off the bandages and it had been bleeding down my leg for the last hour, 3. Water - I've been out for awhile and knew I was a bit dehydrated, 4. Eat. I knew I had to organize my thoughts and create my priority list or I would sit down and not move. Taking care of yourself when you can barely think straight is extremely important in the mountains or it just gets worse.

When I stumbled into camp Jamie had more news for me... this time it was my flip flops – unbelievable! The goats chewed on one and the other was missing so I couldn't even wear them. Carol Ray also discovered her shirt was eaten. Score: Locals 3 , Gear 0

We were all in good spirits although completely exhausted. We sat in a circle drinking water, snacking and waiting for the hot water to boil for dinner. The sunset was gorgeous and it was a beautiful evening. The last mishap – the stove no longer worked. We had lukewarm water, enough to make our backpacker meals wet but not fully cooked. But I didn't care, dog food would have tasted amazing and so did my meal which I inhaled. I was too tired to stay up drinking tea anyway so didn't care about not having hot water - I just headed to bed.

Day 3: Hiking Out

We all needed a little extra time in the morning after the previous extended day. No coffee or hot drinks (darn stove) but it was a gorgeous morning, the sort that wipes away any reason to whine. My body was stiff and I decided to ignore what I could - can't do anything more about it. I knew I had a long trek ahead of me at a slow rate, so embracing and accepting was the only option. We all loaded up and headed out about 8:30AM, a respectable time. I had a fair amount of self-coaching to start but soon enough Carol Ray entertained me with chit chat and the first few miles melted into history fairly quick. At the junction, where the "easy" trail began, I was relieved and happy; it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Jamie renamed me "Hop-A-Long" which unfortunately fit to well to argue – so I answered to it. The final 6 miles were gorgeous, uneventful (except for a few stumbles that amounted to nothing more than a bit slower pace) and I must admit seeing the houses and eventually the parking lot was a relief. Such a beautiful, sweet sight... cold beer is in my very near future (Jamie put some in a cooler in the car – very smart man!). I was the last to arrive to the car (duh) and the crew gave me a round of applause as I hobbled in. First order of business (after taking off the pack) – remove the shoes (borrowing Jamie's extra sandals) and crack open a beer. Damn that tasted good – so cold! We all loaded up for the short drive to the river for a jump in to remove the first layer of nastiness. It felt so good and certainly helped knowing the next 3 hours we wouldn't have to smell each other (we stank – amazing what 3 days can do). What an awesome trip!

“Not only is Granite Peak the highest peak in Montana, but also it is often purported as technically the most difficult climb of all of the fifty states’ high points”.... Hmmmm, didn’t read that in the book until I got back, it’s a good thing too!

Stats:

- Phantom Creek parking elevation: 6,152 feet
- Vertical elevation gain: 7,330+ feet (actual elev. climbed 8,000+ feet)
- Total distance estimated (Round-trip): 30 miles

Loss:

- 1 chewed pack
- 1 set chewed hiking poles
- 1 eaten flip flop and 1 chewed flip flop = useless pair
- 1 half eaten hiking shirt

Gain:

- 9 stitches, 2 bumps/dents in the head and countless bruises and scraps (we won’t even mention the blisters as those are a given)
- Amazing pictures and memories = BIG SMILE
- New friends and bonding experiences to last a lifetime
- The knowledge that maybe a GPS is a good thing but extra batteries are even more important

*Jamie named the extra mountain we hiked around as “Paul’s Mountain” because apparently Paul called Jamie and Carol Ray back although Carol Ray was ahead and over the ridge looking at the valley we were camped. Since she wasn’t sure what she was looking at and if it was the right valley (couldn’t quite make out the tents), only her gut said it was, she listened to Paul as he was pretty convincing that we needed to go a different direction. So we went down the plateau a bit more, around a mountain and came out to the original valley (eventually because Jamie was convincing us we needed to continue right not down). Everyone was pretty good about the whole thing – Paul calling himself a schmuck right off the bat and no one being upset. We were all trying to do the best thing we could. Although I had to tease Paul that he called Carol Ray away when she was practically in her sleeping bag and convinced her it wasn’t her tent. It was also interesting that Carol Ray didn’t run away from Paul, trusting herself more. I was just happy we were all safe and during the whole thing no one was a jerk in a potentially very bad situation- an awesome team!