

VIEWS FROM 14 THOUSAND FEET



THE OUTDOORS PAGE

Climbing Mount Sherman, one of Colorado's majestic peaks

By STEVE POLLICK and JEFF BASTING

PHOTOS BY STEVE POLLICK

LEADVILLE, Colo. — If you want to feel like a god and view the world like a soaring golden eagle or Zeus, hike up a “Fourteener.”

A Fourteener, or 14er, is one of the 14,000-foot-plus peaks of North America, and the best place to ascend one is in Colorado, which has 53 (maybe 54, it's debated) of them.

By comparison, California has 12 Fourteeners, Washington 2, Canada 15, and Mexico 8. Alaska has 21 of these highest peaks, 12 of them exceeding 15,000 feet. So Colorado is clearly Fourteener Country, and a cult of “peak baggers” sets out to ascend them all. An updated measuring system known as NAVD88, used here, even has tweaked upward the elevations of some peaks.

On a summer vacation, two mountain-boy sons and a game, fit son-in-law — who later admitted during a rest at 13,900 feet that he was petrified of heights — agreed to escort The Old Man up the 14,043-foot Mount Sherman in the Rocky Mountains last month.

Sherman is a Fourteener in the Mosquito Range, which looms above Leadville (elevation 10,200 feet) on the east and which is connected by a knifelike saddle to the 13,748-foot Mount Sheridan.

West of Leadville, across a broad high-country valley lies the Sawatch Range, which includes the 14,440-foot Mount Elbert, the Rockies' highest peak, second only to California's 14,505-foot Mount Whitney among top U.S. peaks outside Alaska.

It often is a stiff hike up a Fourteener, not for the faint-hearted but doable if you are in reasonably good condition. Some of these peaks take more than will, fitness, and good boots. Routes to their summits require climbing gear and know-how. Sherman is considered a good peak to start with, presenting more of a hike than a climb.

Take plenty of water to stay hydrated in the ultra-dry alpine climate, rest often to catch your breath in the oxygen-sparse air, and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Uh, you may not want to look down, either, at least until you are on the summit. OK, peeking is allowed.

Starting out at trailhead above the timber line at 12,000 feet, the ascent physically is akin to climbing a stairwell in a 200-story building — with a 20-pound daypack, in thin air. Piece of cake, once you get “in the zone.” Take some energy bars — you'll need them. And trekking poles; they allow you to ascend and descend “four-legged.” Much safer and sure-footed.

These magnificent ranges are timbered with conifers and aspen to the treeline, at an elevation of about 12,140 feet in southern Colorado to about 10,500 feet in northern Colorado. Above this, only alpine vegetation grows. But put that “only” in quotes, for the alpine vegetation includes a profusion of bright wildflowers that ranges into the spectacular.

The climate is like that of treeless subarctic tundra, though Colorado's Rockies lie perhaps 1,500 miles south of tundra by latitude. As you go up, you go “north” when it comes to vegetation and climate. Snow remains on the peaks into mid or even late summer.

Above the treeline here the wildlife is hardy, mostly relatives of rabbits and woodchucks called pikas and marmots respectively. Summer birds include golden eagles and ravens, among a few others.

But breaking it all down into facts and figures and bits and pieces misses the point. This is as much a spiritual experience as anything, deeply moving — to stand atop the roof of North America.

You leave a piece of yourself up there, aside from your name and the date scribbled on the waterproof paper in the weatherproof cylinder that hangs on a steel cable on the summit. On top, you drink in a view fit for a king, or a god. The four-wheel-drive truck that is back down at the trailhead looks smaller than an ant.

Just looking at the photographs brings back the feel of your muscles pulling up the steep grade, or the teeter-totter balancing on tiptoes across the boulder fields, and cushioning for the knee-shocks of descent. And the blessing of water, a breather and an much-needed energy bar.

You can't wait to climb another Fourteener, to again envision the world as far as the eye can see and the golden eagle can fly.



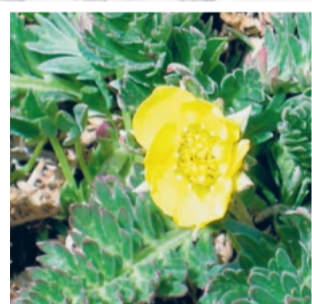
Top: Hikers descend Mount Sherman, with Mount Sheridan in foreground and Sawatch Range in the distance.

Above: Climbers ascend a knife-edge saddle toward the Mountain Sherman summit.

Below: Steve Pollick visits with 8-year-old Abby Fennell atop Mount Sherman.



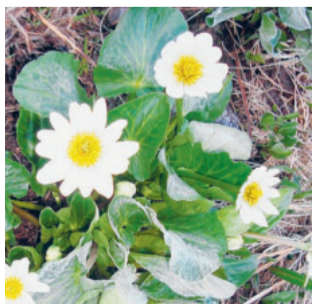
Alpine kittentails.



Mountain avens.



Alpine primrose.



Mountain marsh marigold.

Mountain Life Zones

Peak: 14,000 feet

Alpine: 12,000 feet above treeline.

Sub-Alpine: 10,000 feet, dense conifer forest

Montane: 8,000 feet, general forest

Foothills: 6,000 feet, dry scrub and woodlands

Plains: 4,000 feet

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