

Colorado

After seeing the eclipse with my parents, I had six days remaining in Colorado. I had arranged a weekend with Stephen, the president of my undergrad climbing club during my time there. I'm not sure if any polytheistic cultures had a god of climbing, but I think that's how most of us viewed Stephen at the time. A lot of the things I thought were cool in undergrad seem kind of lame with the wisdom of age (haha), but my view of Stephen hasn't changed much.

I rather fortuitously discovered that Link was going to be in Colorado at the same time, so I arranged to climb with him in Eldorado Canyon for two of the remaining days. I considered whoring myself out on mountainProject, but I decided (correctly) that I'd be pretty tired after climbing for 4 days straight, and anyway, there was a backpacking trip I wanted to do.

Eldorado Canyon

As someone whose understanding of the American climbing scene is derived primarily from an unhealthy amount of time spent reading mountainProject forums, Eldorado Canyon, or "Eldo", occupied a pedestal in my mind that was slightly out of proportion to the actual amount of rock there. Don't get me wrong - it'd be awesome to have that in your back yard; I had just somehow expected it to be a bit bigger. Anyway, I had determined, based on the number of times people talked about it on MP, that the Naked Edge was the route to do there. Unfortunately, it earned an "S" rating in the guidebook.

Eldo was apparently too special of a locale to be described using the normal PG/R/X system, instead, climbs were discussed using the cryptic "S", and "VS" ratings, which I took to mean "severe", and "very severe", though I was never clear on that point. Anyway, I didn't know what the Naked Edge's "S" rating meant, and it sounded scary, so I whined to Link that I wanted to do something else first. After some discussion, we decided to do the northwest corner on the Bastille. I was dismayed to read that some of the fixed pins on the crux pitch were gone and someone "heard a story of someone whipping, ripping the gear from the slippery flared pinscar, and falling past the belay". But someone else claimed to have placed some gear that "looked good".

The crux pitch went well, in part due to someone helpfully hanging a long sling on the bolt at the top of the hard part, so I could do the last few hard moves with the comfort of a bolt. P4, which was rated 5.9- (with no safety rating) caused some problems however. The crux was protected by an old-looking piton driven upwards into a small flake. It could be "backed up" by some mediocre cams in the same flake, which was also a key handhold. The move seemed committing and hard, and the thought of the pin failing and the resulting 20-foot ledge fall seemed plenty "severe" to me, so I bailed left into an off-route corner system and bypassed the pitch. The last pitch featured runout, juggy terrain to an s-rated 5.10 slab move that I again avoided on easier terrain.

Naked Edge

The Naked edge is supposedly 5 pitches long, but the first pitch is 100 meters of fairly unremarkable climbing (including a long stretch of 3rd class) off the ground. The first real pitch was a short, less than vertical thin crack that felt surprisingly powerful given that description due to a lack of quality footholds. This was followed by two easier pitches of excellent exposed climbing crossing back and forth a few times over the arete.

This put us at an awkward stance below P4 - the 5.11a/b S pitch I was concerned about. The gear turned out to be less of an issue than I had feared - there were several OK-seeming pitons, and the place people had talked about ripping out a yellow alien took a dubious-looking BD .4 that held two short falls. I'm a little surprised the alien came out, as I would have expected an alien to work better in the shallow placement.

So while the gear was mostly unremarkable, the climbing was quite unusual. The business involved getting into a bombay chimney that flared both down and out. I struggled with it, and strained something in my chest that was sore for a few days afterwards.

The last pitch is just fun - good gear and exposed steep climbing...first a bouldery sequence up a sloping ramp, then an overhanging crack in a dihedral that widens from thin hands to fists. Overall, I thought the route was very good, but I had gone into it with slightly inflated expectations. I guess it just goes to show our local climbing at the Gunks is competitive with the best cragging in the US. The trip was great fun. It was a bit bit disorienting to have just left Princeton for good, and see someone I'd only seen before at Princeton all of a sudden appear halfway across the country, but I'm glad it worked out.

Longs Peak

Longs Peak dominates Rocky Mountain National Park, with its distinctive square summit and precipitous east face. A very long time ago, I think after my freshman year in high school, I went hiking in Colorado with my family. We attempted the third class "Keyhole" route, but got turned around by ice on some exposed ledges. On our way down, we hiked to a place where we could see the "Diamond Escarpment" - a smooth, vertical diamond-shaped cliff of orange rock that goes nearly to the summit, perched above yet more steep cliffs, a snowfield, and Chasm Lake. My mind was blown, both by the mere existence of such a scene (keep in mind that I grew up in Connecticut; not exactly known for its natural marvels), and by the fact that people apparently climbed it.

In the intervening years I thought about it occasionally, and browsed the routes on mountain-project. The best-sounding route that I had any hope of getting up in good style was D7. It was the original aid line and still sports a remarkable number of fixed pitons. It follows one crack (with a minor jog right) for nearly the entire face, before ending a bit lamely on table ledge (where the route traverses left to 4th class).

We started the trip on Saturday by getting bivy permits and walking to Chasm Lake. I could barely walk a normal pace (perhaps Stephen would say I couldn't walk a normal pace, but if he was annoyed he did a good job of hiding it), and my chest hurt from the unpleasantness I had subjected

it to the previous day on the Naked Edge. We did 2 5.10 pitches on a formation near the lake, and gasping for air following the second one, it was not clear to me how leading a number grade harder 1500 feet higher was going to go.

You can camp more or less wherever you want between the lake and the start of the climb, with the caveat that you should not be easily seen from the trail. There are a few named bivies - the "cave bivy", and the "Hilton". These were taken, but we found an adequate site not too far from the Lake, and Stephen graciously allowed me to have the better site that was really nestled in under the boulder. We both had racing heartbeats as we were trying to go to sleep in the dusk.

I slept surprisingly well, and at 5 am, we were walking up the moraine. After a minor route-finding hiccup we were at the first hurdle - a short snowfield that lies below the North Chimney - all that remains of the Mills Glacier. Stephen had the crampons, so he climbed up it first, anchored the rope, and I hand-over-hand climbed the rope to the rock. There were several parties here gearing up for the north chimney, but everyone was friendly.

We soloed the north chimney, which I found a moderately unpleasant experience that enhanced the already strong feeling that I was in over my head. I was extremely glad to be following Stephen...he obviously wasn't going to do anything if I pitched off, but I didn't need to make route-finding choices, and knowing someone had just climbed what I was on without any issues definitely helps the mind-game. It was nerve-racking to climb on the crappy rock with a bunch of people below, knowing that this had been the scene of rockfall accidents in the past. Most of the other parties simuled, but I'm not convinced that's safer, given the ledgy terrain and rockfall hazard.

At any rate, we reach "Broadway" - a wide ledge system that runs between the lower east face and the diamond, and soon Stephen is off, leading up the first pitch, which is nearly vertical 5.9 for 50 meters. The next pitches are similar - steep, juggy (for granite...this is still what many sport climbers would call "slab", since it's not overhanging) and fun climbing lets us quickly gain altitude. The exposure comes quickly, as Broadway soon looks insignificant, and you feel 1,000 feet off the talus, rather than 300 feet off the ledge. On a related note, not having brought a wag-bag, or any reasonable substitute, I had begun to give some serious thought to doing a #2 in my chalk-bag.

Soon I see the crux, easily identifiable from the pictures I had browsed incessantly on MP while finishing my thesis. Twin thin cracks heading up a smooth vertical face. The cracks offer good gear, but are too thin to offer much help in the upward progress department. I made a desperate lunge to a surprisingly positive hold, and felt good about myself, hoping that was the crux. It turned out not to be and I was pretty sure I was going to fall off imminently at all points during the next 10 feet, but kept telling myself I'd do one more move, or place one more piece of gear before falling, and I somehow ended up at the no-hands rest after the crux, psyched (though irritated that I had held a few pitons lower down while clipping them, figuring I was bound to fall on the crux anyway so it didn't matter).

A quick look at the small selection of gear remaining on my harness convinced me that this was the end of my pitch. The next two pitches took us to "almost table ledge", and the end of the

hard climbing. The route traverses off left, but we decided to do one more 5.7 pitch before joining the 4th class route to the top. Stephen did an impressive job leading this while carrying the pack. While belaying, I was wondering why it was taking him so long, but once I started climbing and got a taste for myself of the rock quality and protection I had no trouble understanding, and was quite glad it had not been me.

A short 4th class scramble had us gasping for air, and deposited us on a large flat summit, at 3:30 in the afternoon. The descent wound its way between cliffs (with one rappel) back to the lake, after which it was an easy hike out on big trail. Even better, just below the lake was an open-air outhouse with a great view of the diamond.

Gore range

During that same family trip to Colorado years ago, we went on a backpacking trip. My hope had been to go to Cliff Lake in the Gore range. In retrospect, given the amount of exercise our family engaged in, and the difficulty of the terrain, this was a bit daft. That trip we managed to day-hike from the place we established camp to see Cliff lake from afar.

This time I was determined to do better, and armed with a map, food including several yogurts, and a queasy stomach full of grapes, I set off around 3 PM. I had a different route planned that I was convinced was going to save a significant amount of time. I was going to leave the trail about 2 miles earlier than we had last time and follow a stream up the mountain. Unfortunately the first stream I came to ended up being one not on the map, and led me almost back to the trail. The next stream was correct, and after significant thrashing over fallen trees (a sign at the trailhead warned about hiking in a windstorm due to the large number of trees that had died due to insects), I made it tree line, and shortly thereafter to a broad, confusing sloping plateau.

I wandered up the plateau, never exactly “lost”, but definitely wishing that the map were at slightly higher resolution, until I could see Cliff Lake. I had to head down (obviously, since I could see the lake), and across a rather steep slope. I guess this is why we didn’t continue last time. I made it to camp a bit frazzled just as it was getting dark. Figure 1 (taken the next day) shows the campsite.

The following day I climbed Eagle’s Nest Peak. It was a reasonably enjoyable scramble with outstanding views. Figure 2 shows Cliff lake, with the plateau I had crossed the previous day to the left. Figure 3 shows the view further south into the more rugged central part of the Gore range. The Gore range doesn’t get a whole lot of publicity...it has no 14,000 foot peaks (an obsession of nearly everybody in Colorado it seems), and not much in the way of technical climbing, but it seems one of the more rugged mountain ranges in Colorado, and well worth visiting.



Fig. 1.— Camp at Cliff Lake



Fig. 2.— Cliff Lake, with the confusing plateau to the left



Fig. 3.— Heart of the Gore range