

Trip to Weminuche Wilderness, San Juan National Forest, Colorado

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Friday 16 July 1999

Jeff Barish (JB) and I departed Boulder at 12:45PM, picked up Jeff's friend Peggy at her home in Broomfield, then drove to Jeff's brother Larry's home in Denver. We followed Larry to Colorado Springs to pick up Larry's former student, Tom. We caravanned south on I-25 with Larry and Tom in Larry's SUV, and JB, Peggy, and me in my SUV. Turned west on US160 to Alamosa for dinner, then on to Durango.

Saturday 17 July 1999

Woke up at 6AM, had complimentary breakfast at motel, and arrived at the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad station around 7AM (elevation 6520'). We made a last-minute decision to switch to the Elk Park drop-off instead of Needleton in order to avoid the probable weekend crowds in the Needle Creek area, so we switched to the 8:15AM train which stopped at Elk Park instead of the 7:30AM train which stopped at Needleton. We loaded our backpacks in the baggage car. A group of seven hikers (2 men, 5 women) also loaded their packs, giving a total of 12 of us to be dropped at Elk Park.

The train ride out of Durango and through the Rockwood Cut was quite enjoyable. We reached the drop off at Elk Park (about 8800' elevation) around 11:30AM, with scattered clouds in the area. Several members of the other hiking group broke out cigarettes after unloading their packs from the train, and they encouraged us to go first up the trail. That group was intending to do the same trail loop to Needleton that we were planning, but with seven nights (and no 14ers) instead of the four nights we had planned.

We departed Elk Park about 11:45AM, with JB and Peggy in the lead, and Tom, Larry, and me following. We faced a steep climb on the Colorado Trail along Elk Creek. It was very scenic, with tumbling water, conifer forest, lots of wildflowers, and glimpses of high peaks to the south and up the valley to the east. We were hiking mostly in trees and occasional open meadows to reach an area of beaver ponds at 1:30PM after 3.5 miles (elevation about 10,000'). After the beaver ponds it was less steep for a while, then we began to struggle up some steep switchbacks at about 10,200'. We were splashed with a little rain before finally reaching tree line at about 11,200'. We put on rain gear and continued up the narrowing valley with the intention of reaching an old miners' cabin at 12,000', as reported in Larry's trail book. The last half mile of the valley involved a small stream crossing and an interesting hike up through a narrow rock groove used by the dormant mining operations as an access route. The mine tailings on a high hillside were visible from down in the valley.

We arrived at the miners' cabin (with Tom in the lead) about 4:30PM. Beyond the cabin the switchbacks up to the continental divide were easily visible on a grassy slope to the east. The view to the north was of grassy hills and rock outcroppings. To the south was a rocky ridge and waterfall coming down from Eldorado Lake (not yet visible on a ledge above). The creek in the valley below the cabin provided access for filtering drinking/cooking water. Two Texans were in

the cabin, but only to eat and to store some gear out of the rain. We set up tents near the ruins of other mine buildings. The Texans camped in a grassy clearing out of sight a bit higher to the north. We cooked pasta for dinner, then rain started to fall at 6PM. We retreated to the cabin to finish eating, then scrambled into the tents before it got dark. The rain continued during the evening, soaking the tents leaking onto our clothes and sleeping bags, but the cabin provided good shelter for our backpacks, boots, and other gear. I slept restlessly, but OK.

Sunday 18 July 1999

Woke up at 6:30AM to no rain but high overcast. All of the nearby peaks were visible so the cloud deck was at least above 13,500'. Then fog/cloud groups started rising up the valley and some light rain started. Our breakfast and pack-up was slow due to the rain and fog so we did not actually depart the camp until about 9AM.

We hiked east from 12,000' up 27 switchbacks in beautiful wild flowers to reach the continental divide at 12,840'. Larry was in the lead, followed by me, Tom, and then JB and Peggy. The low clouds gradually burned off, leaving a tremendous view in all directions. Several large lakes were located to the west above 12,000' not far (but not visible) from our mining cabin camping area. To the east there were old jeep trails and the Beartown area was visible. To the south the trail continued up over a bump toward Hunchback Mountain.

We regrouped, then hiked south over the bump and then descended east toward Kite Lake. We had a great view west down to Eldorado Lake from the trail along the continental divide. We stopped for lunch at Kite Lake about 11:30AM. There was another old mining structure there, which provided a place to sit and drop our backpacks. There were lots of flowers in the area, including numerous Columbine clusters in the rocks around the lake.

At 12:30PM we returned to the trail and descended to the Beartown trailhead. There were two SUVs parked there and a horse caravan could be seen nearby. We started up the winding trail toward Hunchback Pass from 11,800' at the Beartown trailhead. A hiker descending from the pass told us that the trail down along Vallecito Creek was good, but the trail up Johnson Creek to Columbine Pass was very steep. Something to look forward to tomorrow...

We found a clump of at least 12 backpacks piled at Hunchback Pass (12,493')—some sort of youth (Outward Bound?) group and guides—when we stopped for a short rest. The hikers were huddled in the drizzle above the pass to the east, apparently eating their lunch and waiting to be hit by lightning. About 1:45PM we donned our backpacks and started down Vallecito Creek with the intention of reaching the Johnson Creek area about 9 miles away before dinner time. The trail was quite wet, and Larry and Tom got well ahead of me, JB, and Peggy. At several stream crossings Peggy chose to take off her boots and wade across in her Tevas rather than risking falling from makeshift log bridges.

At one point I jogged ahead to check on Larry and Tom since we realized that they were not carrying a drinking water filter. I caught up to them waiting near Nebo Creek at a crossing that required walking on a log while using ones hands on an overhead rope nicely left by some previous hikers. By this time there was a light rain falling, so Larry and Tom decided to proceed ahead to Rock Creek while I waited at Nebo Creek for JB and Peggy to arrive at the crossing point. 15 minutes later I was about to backtrack up the trail to see what was keeping them, but

just then JB and Peggy arrived. JB had slipped and fallen during a previous creek crossing. He was wet but fortunately OK. Peggy waded Nebo Creek rather than attempting the overhead rope crossing. After we were safely across I pressed ahead again and caught up to Larry and Tom a mile later just after another creek crossing. They were convinced it was Rock Creek. I left my pack, gave them the water filter, and returned back up the trail to find JB and Peggy. There was no obvious trail branch at what Larry thought was Rock Creek, which was clearly indicated on the map. I took sightings on several nearby peaks and determined that we were actually still a mile north of Rock Creek. We re-watered and set out again, this time as a group.

We reached Rock Creek where we all had to cross via wading in our Tevas. The creek was about 30 feet wide, flowing swiftly, and pretty cold, but the crossing was uneventful. We reached some grassy meadows and clearings in the aspen trees just south of where Sunlight Creek joined Vallecito Creek. Larry's trail guide indicated ample camping spots in the area, and we found a good location about 50 feet east of Vallecito Creek, elevation 9600'. As we arrived it began to rain pretty hard. We sat on a small mossy slope under evergreen trees to avoid the rain as best we could. I set up my poncho as a makeshift shelter. Neither Larry nor JB had pack covers, so this helped a little to keep things dry. JB also pulled out the rain fly from his tent to use as additional shelter. After about 45 minutes it let up and we set up our tents—still quite wet from the night before. We cooked dinner, filtered more water, and got cleaned up. It started raining again and we retreated to our tents about 7:30PM.

Monday 19 July 1999

Awoke at about daylight to hear rain gently falling on the tent. Low clouds and fog. During a short rain gap at 8AM we had breakfast and considered proceeding. About that time it started raining hard and we were forced back to our tents by 9AM. We all snoozed, read books, and generally passed the time in our damp tents. After several discussions and intervals of rain, we finally decided to break camp at about 4PM. We loaded up our soaking tents, wet clothes, and wet sleeping bags. We decided to head for the place where Johnson Creek joins Vallecito Creek at which point we would turn west and head up Johnson Creek toward Columbine Pass.

Larry and Tom discussed the situation and came to the conclusion that we should split up on Tuesday so that Tom and I would have at least a chance to complete the 14ers—weather permitting—before heading to Needleton for the train pick-up on Wednesday afternoon. This plan made sense to me, although the weather still had me doubtful. We had to wade across Roell Creek, which was very rapid and rocky. I found the visually disorienting effect of the water moving over the rocks to be the biggest problem. We finally made it to the bridge over Vallecito Creek (9200'). After some discussion we came to the consensus that we should at least proceed another half mile to cross Johnson Creek before stopping again for the day. Johnson Creek was absolutely roaring due to all the recent rainfall, and the logs laid across at the trail crossing were actually partly under water and floating up and down. We found that by sitting on the highest upstream log and using our feet on another, lower log, we could “walk” our behinds across the creek. JB preferred to stop and camp right after the crossing, but Tom wanted to continue another half mile farther up Johnson Creek to the point where Grizzly Creek joined. Tom went ahead to check it out while the rest of us talked about stopping to fix dinner. Then it became clear that by the time we cooked dinner and cleaned up it would be too late to go up to Grizzly Creek if Tom

happened to find suitable camping there. So we all set out after Tom, figuring that we would either camp in Grizzly Gulch or return with him back down to the Johnson Creek crossing.

Fortunately, Tom had located a good campsite just after the Grizzly Creek crossing (9500'). We set up the wet tents, filtered water, cooked dinner, then cleaned up and went to bed about 8:30PM. The plan was that Tom and I would get up at 5AM, pack our stuff, and then set out for Chicago Basin at first light (6AM). I had a great deal of trouble getting to sleep, partly because I was a bit nervous about the plans for the next day, and mostly because the foot of my sleeping bag was very damp and clammy on my feet. The sleeping bag (holofill) managed to warm up fine, but still felt damp and terrible every time I adjusted my position. At least it did not rain that evening, and I saw a sky full of stars when I woke up in the middle of the night.

Tuesday 20 July 1999

My watch alarm rang at 5AM. I was already mostly awake by then anyway. I dressed, collected my belongings from the tent, loaded my backpack, ate breakfast, and got everything together. Tom woke at 5:30AM and took down his tent. We departed the camp at 6:02AM in twilight. No clouds in sight and sunlight just starting to hit mountain peaks to the south. The trail was excellent for the first portion: sandy, with very little mud and water, and no evidence of horse traffic.

We finally reached tree line at about 8AM and then engaged the exhausting climb to Columbine Pass on very steep trails out of the basin near Columbine Lake (12,300'). Reached Columbine Pass (12,720') at 9AM (6+ miles in 3 hours, with 3220' elevation gain). A hiker near the pass said that he had seen a large llama train go by earlier, but no llamas were in sight. We had a quick snack and rested for 15-20 minutes. We descended rapidly down switchbacks into Chicago Basin (good view of Mt. Eolus to the northwest) and by 10:15AM we reached the start of the climbers trail (11,200') branching north toward the Twin Lakes area.

The Twin Lakes lie above tree line in the basin between the Eolus, Windom, and Sunlight 14ers. We filtered several liters of water, changed socks, and I set out my wet clothes to dry on a grassy hillside out of sight above the main trail. We left our packs in the shade of a pine tree. There were about a dozen tent groups already visible in Chicago Basin, including several groups of morons who set up their camps essentially right on the trail. Tom and I were ready at 10:40AM and we began hiking up the steep trail toward Twin Lakes. Just beyond tree line we spotted a large group of mountain goats (several adults, some juveniles, and a few kids).

We had a moment of uncertainty about the trail directions, but we quickly picked up the main Mt. Eolus trail heading west on the level of Twin Lakes (12,500'). We hiked up into the basin east of Eolus along south facing cliffs, eventually reaching some snow near the top of the basin. We climbed north up the broad ledge and onto the ridge between Eolus and Glacier Point. Tom went up on the rocks and I went up on the snow to reach the Eolus-North Eolus ridge. The famous "catwalk" section of the ridge was not as terrifying as reported: the rock was very solid and for me this lessened the feeling of exposure. We used the recommended grassy ledge approach on the east face of the summit rather than the ridge climb. We spotted lots of cairns, and as usual some were good and others seemed to lead nowhere. We reached the summit (14,084') about 12:45PM (2 hours and nearly 2900' from Chicago Basin). The weather was starting to look a bit more threatening so we did not plan to linger long. I discovered in the

register that we were the first two climbers since Sunday, presumably due to the rain on Monday and apparently no other climbers so far on Tuesday. I noted in my registry comment that it was the 30th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing (7/20/69). We started down and rapidly returned over the snow to the east basin ahead of the building clouds. We looked for an alternate descent route directly to Chicago Basin as described in the trail book, but found none, so we followed the trail back to Twin Lakes and down along the creek the same way we had ascended.

We arrived back at our backpack cache around 2:15PM. We saw no sign of JB, Larry, and Peggy, but lots of new campers had arrived from Needle Creek. I walked around the basin to see if our crew was actually already set up somewhere but there were no familiar tents in sight. Tom and I were concerned that all the good campsites would be taken, so I scouted a campsite on a rock ledge area about 250 yards west of where we had left our packs. I had to chase mountain goats out of the area. I returned a few times and ferried my pack and gear to the site, with Tom napping near the trail and waiting for the others to arrive.

About 5PM Tom hiked up to the campsite, reporting that JB, Larry, and Peggy had apparently passed him and started to set up camp out in the middle of the basin field. They all moved to the rock ledge site, but did not like the tent spots very much. Still, it was better than being in the middle of the field. The sun did a good job drying our clothes and sleeping bags. We set up our tents and everyone did some relaxing prior to dinner. We had to chase the mountain goats away a few times—they found some urine in a hole near our camp and spent a long time licking! There was a nice sunset and great mountain views from the campsite. Some rain and thunder started at 8PM as we fell asleep, but it did not last long. For Tom and me the total elevation effort for the day consisted of: 3220' from Grizzly Gulch up to Columbine Pass (6 miles), 1520' down to Chicago Basin (2 miles), 2884' up to the summit of Mt. Eolus (2 miles), 2884' back down (2 miles) = 10,508'; 12 miles, and 8 hours.

Wednesday 21 July 1999

We woke at 5:30AM to find a perfectly clear sky. Our plan was for Tom and me to climb Mt. Windom and then Sunlight Peak, while JB, Larry, and Peggy departed a bit later and climbed just Sunlight. Tom and I set out about 6:15AM, leaving our tents and other gear at the campsite for later. The climb from Chicago Basin up to Twin Lakes was tiring but not quite as bad as it had seemed heading for Eolus the day before. We angled east up the basin between Sunlight and Windom, including crossing some slippery snowfields that had frozen solid overnight. We headed up south on rock and snow, reaching the west ridge of Windom as planned. It was a mildly strenuous rock scramble from there up to the summit (14,087'), which we reached at about 9AM.

We descended north off the summit and down toward the basin. We had a speedy glissade on steep snow from Windom's north face down to about 13,400', then we traversed northwest on snow and flat rock to the base of Sunlight. We spotted Larry near Sunlight's summit, along with JB and Peggy on the way down via the red couloir route. Tom and I ascended the steep rubble south of the summit, then we scrambled up into the summit area on nice, firm rock (14,059'). Tom went first to reach the actual summit block: onto the sloping block southeast of the summit, then across a gap to the block east of the summit, then a pull with the arms up onto the small summit block itself. I took a picture of him standing on the summit. My turn. My big problem

was getting from the sloping southeast block to the east block: not a serious fall hazard, but a bigger step for my 5'8" stature than for Tom's 6'5" frame! Once on the east block I immediately went to the summit block without hesitating. I had Tom take a picture of me standing on the summit! The worst part of the summit area for me was getting from the east block back onto the sloping southeast block. I finally had to jump across. Tom took a picture of that maneuver, too.

We had good views of Uncompahgre to the northwest, the Wilson group to the west, and perhaps even the Elk Range to the extreme northeast. We descended via the same rubble route we had climbed and eventually caught up with JB, Larry, and Peggy below the Twin Lakes area. We returned to camp and repacked everything, then departed for Needleton at 12:15PM. Larry and Tom went ahead. The trail was fine, but there were some muddy areas. I didn't find the trail quite as interesting as the Elk Creek trail but it was scenic nonetheless. We had some light rain along the route.

After reaching the Animas River we had to walk north about a half mile to reach the pedestrian suspension bridge and the train pickup point. We arrived there about 3:30PM (8135'). A large group of rafters were there, presumably from a river trip down from Silverton. After a few minutes it started to pour down rain, so we all went to a small shelter shack not far from the railroad track. Our packs got wet and we all got cold. I managed to pull out some dry clothes just prior to the train's arrival at about 4:30PM. There were insufficient seats available on the train, mostly due to people moving from open cars to enclosed cars to escape the rain. I realized that I had not had any lunch so I drank a hot chocolate and ate 2 hot dogs, then felt much better.

The train arrived in Durango (6520') about 7PM. Tom and Larry drove directly to Ouray (after a jump start of Larry's Pathfinder). Peggy, JB, and I had pizza at Fahrquart's restaurant not far from the train station. Great pizza and beer. After dinner we drove to Ouray in the rain, arriving about 11PM. Larry and Tom were already asleep in short bunk beds located in a small room off the main hotel room. We took well-earned turns in the shower, then fell asleep.

Thursday 22 July 1999

Woke at 7AM for a 7:30AM breakfast meeting with the architect of Jeff's new home in Telluride. JB, Peggy, the architect, and I had a good breakfast at a breakfast-only café on Ouray's main street. The architectural plans looked terrific. I walked to Box Canyon with JB and Peggy while Tom and Larry went to the Ouray hot springs. We looked at some galleries, and JB bought a print and a sculpture. JB, Peggy, and I drove back to Denver via Montrose and then US285 while Larry and Tom drove back separately. There was some rain along the way, but nothing serious. I arrived home around 8:30PM after dropping JB and Peggy at Peggy's house.