

## **A Labored Day on Mount Meeker**

My hike on Labor Day was CRAZY. We were up at 2 in the morning, dressing and stretching under star and moonlight in Rocky Mountain National Park. It was a gorgeous morning and many people were already in the parking lot preparing for their day when we arrived from our campground. Despite the closure signs posted everywhere, people all seemed to be headed for Long's Peak. Only two cars had turned around, seemingly unwilling to test the Forest Service's authority. We had spoken to the ranger the night before, who had told us about an unprepared hiker who had gone missing two days ago. He informed us that he had been found earlier that day but could tell us no more, and with a grim look on his face said "you figure it out." This new information shook us up but we refused to be turned away. Just next to Long's Peak is a 13,911' peak called Mount Meeker and the Ranger Station had some information and photos of this route, so we decided to climb that mountain instead. The campground host let us in on more of the story, claiming that the missing man had been dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes, grossly unprepared for conditions she said required ice axe and crampons. The ranger had said nothing of such conditions on Meeker, despite its proximity to Long's, so we forged ahead.

When I signed the register at Long's Peak trailhead the next morning, I was surprised to see that eight groups had already started out, all headed to Long's via the Keyhole route. It was Labor Day and we were in a National Park, so in retrospect it is understandable. We started out at 3 am, hauling up the trail at my standard morning pace. The rest of the party, Brendan, Matt, and Marisa, were not so pleased with my pace and sent me to the back where I could no longer lead. We continued to make good speed, though, and trucked along the rises and switchbacks, spotting a multitude of headlamps in the distance ahead and behind us. Once we rose above treeline we glimpsed the city lights of Boulder behind us in the plains, and the more densely packed bulbs of Denver further to the South. The lights scurried about like ants, twinkling in the eternal daytime of the city. About a hundred yards up the trail Long's Peak crept into view, moonlight reflecting off new fallen snow, the rugged peak glowing with energy in the pre-dawn darkness. Our eyes widened and jaws dropped as we stared at the massive wall of stone in front of us. The sheer East face, a legendary climbing route known as the Diamond, drops off 2000 vertical feet below the summit and is the largest in Colorado. It is the most extreme mountain that I have seen in my journeys in Colorado. I now understood why this area was sanctioned under National Park status, and agreed it was more than worthy.

We reached Chasm Junction at 5 am, two hours and about three miles from the trailhead. The junction is where the trail splits, one North 5 miles toward the Keyhole and on to Long's summit, and one West .7 miles to Chasm Lake in the valley below Long's gnarly East face. The route to Meeker's summit began just South of the Lake, so we took the left fork toward the jagged slopes ahead. The view on this trail is utterly staggering, Long's countenance directly ahead, sharply adjoined to Meeker's looming hulk to the left, all dusted in snow. The steep cliffs at our sides crept up the ridges to the peaks and dwarfed us as we walked deeper and deeper into the chasm. The trail wound along the northern side of the valley, cut out of the sheer southern face of Mount Lady Washington. Hanging over our heads were enormous spires of rock clouding out the stars and below us a sharp drop into a small alpine lake below. We passed a gorgeous

waterfall cascading off a rock face into the darkness as we ascended higher and higher. Our surroundings were illuminated by the light of the waxing moon, half full on this morning and shining brightly overhead. As we rose in elevation the cold got sharper and the wind gusted down from above to blast our hunkered bodies. We began to see more snow on the ground with each step toward the iced over drainage that was to be our route up Meeker.

Ahead we could see an enormous tower of stone splitting the valley in two. One drainage to the right seemed to lead up to Long's unclimbable face (for us) and the left to our destination, so we bore leftward. By this time we had lost any semblance of a trail in the darkness and climbed over boulder and light patches of snow toward our goal. Behind every large block of stone was a group of people, resting and sheltering themselves from the chill morning wind. As we eased behind one ourselves, I looked off to the North and saw a small lake above several head lamps. At the time we thought it too small to be Chasm Lake but looking back I think it was.

We continued up the drainage and the amount of snow and ice increased consistently. We began to hit patches of black ice and at that point decided we were very happy we hadn't attempted Long's, for we likely would have ended up like that unfortunate hiker. From afar in the dawn light it was hard to judge how much coverage there truly was on our ascent route, so we sat behind one large boulder and waited for the sun to rise and melt some of it. The skies over the plains began to morph as sunlight arrived, bathing us in a full spectrum of colors for us to enjoy. Rosy pinks and reds melded with yellows and blues in the pollution hanging over the Front Range cities. It was a gorgeous sight despite what it truly represented; the man-made poisons clouding the air over Denver and its outlying settlements. The moon still beamed overhead, creating a perfect backdrop for our midmorning rest. A tiny mouse, spotting our Clif and Nature Valley bars, kept us company as we squatted in the shelter and watched daylight emerge. The cold pressed into our veins, though, and motion became necessary, so we got up and kept going.

As we reached higher elevations we noted much more snowfall than anticipated, but we deemed it safer to keep ascending and to come down an alternate path than to descend this treachery. We hugged the northern cliffs to avoid the worst of the accumulation down in the valley, but this turned out to be a bad idea. Ice abounded on this route, making hand- and footholds dangerously unstable. As the sun rose higher in the sky it began to melt the south-facing walls first and the overhanging cliffs bombarded us with icicles. I was afraid to look up for fear of catching one in the eye, so we tucked our heads and scurried on as the mountain tried to repel us with its ice. By now the wintry conditions had erased our goal of summiting Meeker. Our upward motions were driven by the hope of finding a pass over the spine that would allow us to traverse North back into the Chasm valley and to a potentially safer descent. As we neared the top, though, we realized there was no such route and that we had climbed ourselves into a precarious position. The shelf that supposedly led to the summit of Meeker had been spotted ahead and looked wide enough to hold us. From our angle we couldn't judge the conditions or the depth of the path, and there were few outs if it was unclimbable. Our other option was to descend the snow filled drainage and that seemed unintelligent and highly dangerous. So we opted for the high road, not quite sure where it would take us or how we would get down.

At this point ice covered nearly everything and snow drifts were four feet deep in the cracks. Thanks to the trekking poles Brendan brought along and helping hands amongst the group, we managed to ascend onto the shelf, where we found a cairn marking the trail up to Meeker. Looking back down the valley, I was amazed we had made it this far and wondered if any of my companions had envisioned this when they awoke several hours earlier. The three groups behind us that had been mulling about, confounded by the situation, noted our initial success and followed in suit. As a result of our confident moves we became the unwilling leaders of a train of people probably as unprepared for the conditions as we were. But we marched on anyway, using the poles frequently as anchor mechanisms whenever we felt that we were unsafely exposed. The snow and ice made the route rather dangerous, creating an unstable surface on a shelf that dropped off several hundred feet into basin below. Regardless, we free climbed and trekked our way upwards, our brash confidence making our every move solid. Through patient persistence and reasonable route selection we managed to make it to the saddle between Long's and Meeker, labeled the Loft. To the West the view was breathtaking. Needle nose mountaintops covered in snow surrounded us and obvious glacial influences were everywhere, represented by sheer cliff faces and walls blatantly torn from the mountainside. Way off in the distance I could see Grays and Torreys, two fourteeners along the Continental Divide by Loveland Pass that I have yearned to climb, and the Williams Fork mountains North of them. The month that I have been resting at school has allowed for a quick seasonal change above twelve thousand feet. Everything was capped in new snow and the sight was illustrious, quite a contrast to the snowless summer conditions I had gotten used to. We rested and ate in the saddle, taking in the wondrous glory around us, then decided to summit Meeker and do our serious chilling at the top. And as we were headed up the ridge of Meeker something terrible went down.

Matt went to grasp a stone wedged underneath a large boulder for a handhold and it came out in his hand, releasing the enormous mass above him. It was the size of a washing machine and tumbling directly at him from a foot away. Instinctively he dove to the side, the boulder nearly pinning him to the ground. A jagged edge sliced into his thigh before the bulk crushed his right foot into the rocks below. Brendan and I were about twenty feet ahead when we heard the shifting Earth, a deathly eerie sound that foretold the magnitude of what moved. As we turned we could only see Marisa, who shakingly stated what we needed to get down there NOW. The two of us slid down the slick rock as fast as we could, almost going down ourselves, before arriving at the scene. Matt was on his back, writhing in pain, his face taugth with worry as he glanced up at us. Marisa was down next to him, trying to soothe him with comforting words. I looked up at Brendan who was already staring at me. Our eyes met and wordlessly exchanged the shock and fear that filled us both. Seconds later we snapped back to reality and crouched down to get Matt's shoe off and check his leg. The ankle was already beginning to swell and there were lacerations on both sides of his foot from the incredible impact. Brendan grabbed some Neosporin for the wounds on his ankle as well as his wrist from the fall as I dug through my pack to find extra bandanas to bandage him up. Brendan wrapped the swelling and bruising flesh tightly and taped it for what little support we could offer. Matt's Carrhart pants, incredibly sturdy, had been torn wide open and there was a long, deep laceration in his right thigh that thankfully was not bleeding heavily. We kept his foot elevated while we tried to formulate some coherent thought about what to do next.

Matt's hasty reaction had saved him from almost certain broken legs, but his ankle was still very serious and our first aid knowledge was minimal. Our situation was dire.

It was 9:30 am and we were just under the summit of Meeker at 13,900', and Matt was in no condition to walk. The rocks were still very icy, covered in surface hoar crystals and making it very hard to maintain stable footing. Going down the way we came up was out of the question, especially with an injured party member, and the ridge from the summit we had originally intended to walk around and back down into the Chasm valley was a knife's edge, which Matt definitely could not traverse. So by default we decided to go down the backside of Meeker, full of talus and scree but dry, into an unknown valley. We knew the valley led back to the highway we needed to get to but we did not know if there were any trails down there to get us back quickly. Regardless, time was a factor, so we slid Matt's shoe back onto his bloated foot and began to carry him down the rocky slope. Brendan and I helped him, one under each shoulder with trekking poles in our hands, wherever the slope was sturdy enough, Matt hopping along on his good foot, huffing with each heavy step. When the slope was too steep or consisted of loose stone and gravel, which were the predominant conditions, Matt slid down on his butt while Brendan and I tried to clear a path. Marisa wielded Matt's pack, shooting ahead to scout preferable routes for us to go down safely. Since she had to shoulder Matt's and her own packs, her balance was way off and her descent as tricky as ours. The moving was slow and labored, especially for Matt who dealt with the undoubtedly excruciating pain he must have been experiencing surprisingly well, and the boulder fields never seemed to end. We descended the first section with surprising speed and fortunately found a spot in the spine that we could cross over into a second drainage that would funnel us closer to the highway. The second boulderfield had mildly better terrain, made up of either large boulders or loose gravel. These are preferred for downward travel, making it either very stable or very loose. The in between stuff is what gets dangerous, when medium sized stones, usually jagged, can be dislodged and start a slide. This second boulder field lasted an eternity. I think we got into it about 11 AM and didn't get to the bottom until about 5 PM.

Matt was in serious pain the whole way, and Brendan and I tried to help wherever we could, offering shoulders whenever the ground permitted. Once we got lower there was a short section of grass that we hauled down, Matt on our shoulders, making speedy progress, but that was the exception. Rocks ruled the day. We kept good spirits throughout most of the journey, joking and smiling, but there were definitely points where we got bummed. When the accident happened I was concerned that the injury was critical and Matt wouldn't be able to move at all. But we quickly realized we had to get him off the mountain as fast as possible and we got our heads straight and made some decisions. Once we started moving it was a mental game, the physical march had to be done so we accepted it. From then on we had to focus our spirits and keep positive attitudes to drive us onward. We were also fortunate enough to pack ample food and water to keep us somewhat energized throughout the whole ordeal.

During our descent several rescue helicopters and planes circled Long's summit. We waved at them but they definitely did not see us. We continued to trudge our way down the slope, stopping whenever Matt needed to rest and chatting away about the infinite impossibilities we wished were true. Through our delirium we began to hallucinate, creating mirages down in the valley that we needed to reach. Some of these

included telephone poles, a parking lot, a highway with cars, houses (a large birdhouse housing a similarly sized bird was one), amongst other things. All of these ended up being rocks, the cause of our troubles and the bane of our existence. There were times our insanity overtook us in giggling, yelling, stumbling about and falling over, and wild conversation. We embraced it, though, loving every second of the madness and using it to lighten our rather dismal situation.

Once we FINALLY got down the boulderfield and off the mountain, it was 5 PM and we were confronted with an endless forest with no known trails. In our first turn of fortune for the day, we ran into a couple of hikers who gave Matt some ibuprofen and alerted us to a trail nearby that would lead us back to civilization. Unfortunately the trail was five miles long and we were moving at a snail's pace. We had been out for 14 hours and were pretty exhausted, but the prospect of an actual track to follow was exhilarating. The skies had stayed clear all morning with few threatening clouds and thankfully looked to be continuing the trend into nightfall. We kept on trucking through the meadows and over streams, one of which Matt hucked himself across like a sack of laundry, catching us all off guard, and eventually found the trail which was not maintained at all. It was about a foot wide and there were tons of downed trees on it and other brush blocking our advancement. Because the trail was so tight, we couldn't fit a single person next to Matt on the trail to help him walk. So he took one of the trekking poles we had and began to hobble down the trail like an old man, using it as a cane.

This went on and on and on, undulating over stone and tree, following the stream to salvation until the trail finally widened out about two hours later. By this time Matt had gotten in a rhythm and really didn't need our help (so he claimed). After bumping into those two hikers our spirits had risen and throughout this hike we were talking and enjoying ourselves, keeping an eye on Matt and inching slowly along the trail. The sun was setting now and it began to get colder, our energy waning quickly with each step. Over every hill we expected to see a parking lot and civilization, only to be disappointed by more trees and rocks. By 8 pm we were beat, falling asleep on our feet as we crawled down valley. Brendan and I had inadvertently pulled ahead of Matt and Marisa so we stopped to rest along side the trail, checking out footage we had gotten on Brendan's camera earlier that day, when two forest rangers rolled up into view. The hikers whom had helped us earlier had delivered word of our injured party and had sent them in our direction. The rangers also told us that Shannon, one of our original party members they stayed behind because of uneasy premonitions about the hike, had called in to the Forest Service and reported that we were overdue. Once Matt caught up the rangers assessed his wounds, patching him up and informing us that a horse was en route up the trail. Matt was ecstatic. They were unable to identify the extent of the damage although they both agreed he needed to go to a hospital as soon as possible. By now it was dark again and pretty chilly, so we threw on all our gear we were wearing earlier that morning and donned our headlamps. We had begun in darkness and now it was back to consume us once again. Once the horse arrived, Brendan, Marisa, and I began the trek back down the trail to the Wild Basin Ranger Station, eager to be off our feet and out of our boots. The rangers let us know the dismal news that we still had over two miles to go, which also meant that Matt had limped over two miles on his battered ankle. Amazing! This last leg in the darkness started out with fast speeds and much chatter, being invigorated by this

turn of events. But our newfound energy evaporated quickly, for the trail seemed to never end, this day continuing into eternity.

As we began stumbling and stubbing our toes, some lights finally crept out of the darkness and we near-sprinted into the Wild Basin parking lot, where Shannon awaited us much saner than we had expected. Although she had maintained her composure throughout the event, we were quite delirious by this point and ready to drop to the pavement. We explained to her the events of the day, quite an adventure by all of our standards, especially for Brendan and Matt who had done little high altitude hiking up to this point. Within ten minutes the rangers and Matt, horse bound, came trotting into the parking lot. It was 9:30 pm. We had been out for 18.5 hours and were utterly exhausted. And to boot, we had more to go. When Shannon had turned back early that morning, claiming she "had a bad feeling about the hike," we had stashed her gear a half a mile up the Long's Peak Trail and had to go back and get it. Marissa was responsible for it and therefore was required to get it, but I couldn't let her trod that last mile by herself, so I agreed to go with.

We drove several miles back to the original trailhead at the Long's Peak Ranger Station and nearly fell out of the car when the door was opened. The first few steps were cement blocks but after that Marisa and I got into the rhythm we had been in all day and somehow found some energy reserves deep within to power us up the trail. It was eerie, starting up the trail again in darkness, as we had 19 hours earlier, almost as if none of the day's events had really gone down. It was hard to accept that the ordeal had finally ended. I felt like it would go on into eternity, that it was the only thing I had ever known or ever would know. The final walk gave Marissa and me some time to reflect on the day's craziness, now that it was truly over and everyone was safe and together again. We speculated if returning to civilization was even a possibility, if our minds hadn't been unchangeably twisted into the wilderness mindset. Even today it feels like a dream, completely separate from real life and the real world. During our conversation we hustled up and down the last mile in 22 minutes. It was late and we were ready to go home.

The drive back to Boulder from Rocky Mountain National Park was a quiet one. Shannon drove as we sat, some sleeping, elated to finally be off the trail, but too tired to say it. She treated us to a much needed dinner at McDonald's (Brendan had been craving Chicken Selects for two days now) and we got back home at 11:30pm. What a day.

*Casey Flynn*