

Along the Colorado Trail

– Dan Styer

In 1967, when I was twelve years old, my parents took our family on a road trip that included Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. The alpine scenery on Trail Ridge Road was impressive. But also impressive was an interpretive sign placed where that road overlooked the Forest Canyon of Big Thompson River. The sign said that, despite the rocks and the snow and the severe alpine weather, the ridge was actually easier traveling than the swampy, densely forested valley below, which is why the historic Indian trail stuck to the ridge (and hence the name Trail Ridge). The sign went on to say that, even today, few parties explored Forest Canyon.

That interpretive sign made a deep impression on me. In an era when men were preparing to walk on the Moon, there was a rarely-visited, difficult-to-access spot right here on Earth. It instilled in me a desire to explore the vast range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains: the alpine ridges, the steep slopes, the deep valleys – all of it.

Back in 1967, I had no practical way to realize this dream. But in 1973 a plan was hatched to build a "Colorado Trail," and that trail was finished in 1987. At some point, my amorphous desire to "explore the vast range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains" crystallized into a desire to "hike the Colorado Trail, 486 miles from Denver thru to Durango."

I realized this dream in July and August of 2012. Here I share only a few of the highlights from that long walk.

Day 1: Monday, 9 July

In the end, it was the scent that convinced me I was in Colorado. I had spent weeks on intense, detailed preparation for this backpacking trip: purchase new equipment, repair old equipment, make plane reservations, find a way from the airport to the trailhead, take care of the mechanics of spending 40 days away from home, say goodbye to my sons, arrange for food resupply, make sure the equipment in my pack satisfied the regulations for plane luggage (no matches), etc., etc. I could hardly believe it when I finally got onto the plane in Cleveland. Then in Denver I went from plane to bus, from bus to light rail, from light rail to taxi, and when the taxi dropped me off at the Colorado Trail trailhead, I still had to repack my pack from "airplane luggage mode" to "walking mode," make a last telephone call to my wife Linda, and find a passerby willing to snap a photo of me at the first trail sign.

So I walked off in a daze, mechanically pacing up the trail. There were plenty of things to tell me I was no longer in Ohio – the sharp peaks, the rock outcrops, the cascading stream, the dry air, the unfamiliar birdsong – but I was too distracted by my tasks and too numbed by my preparations to let them sink in. It didn't really hit me that I was off on

the Colorado Trail until I was struck by the scent: a mixture of sage, cottonwood, and willow unlike anything I had smelled in the East. I slowed my mechanical pacing into a rolling stroll, kept my eyes open for wildlife and wildflowers, and began the long slow process of being absorbed into the landscape.

New wildflower identified: Red Fairy Trumpet.
Daily travel: 9.3 miles.

Day 2: Tuesday, 10 July

Concerning friends: My freshman year in college, I told my academic advisor, Professor Livingston, that I wanted to take the course in plant taxonomy. He said to do it. “You’ll learn 150 of the 300 families of flowering plants (accounting for 95% of the plant species) and after learning them, anywhere you go in the world you’ll recognize a plant friend.”

He was right. Here in Colorado I know almost none of the plant species, but most of the plants I see I can assign to family. I have a small wildflower field guide, the *Rocky Mountain Flower Finder*, but I have vowed to use it only once a day, lest I spend all my time botanizing and none walking. (As you’ll see, I adhered to that vow for only 5 days out of 39.)

I’ve observed huge middens of Douglas Fir cones, presumably gathered by squirrels, and as I was resting and napping, I noticed a small gray-brown squirrel with mouse ears, a white belly, and a white eye-ring watching me and chattering at me. I thought this might be the Douglas Squirrel, which was John Muir’s favorite (he called it “a hot spark of life”), but when I returned home I found that it was the related Spruce Squirrel, a subspecies of the American Red Squirrel. Regardless, I would think of it as a friend throughout my walk.

The views here are extensive but puzzling: some of the rock exposures are crumpled and irregular gneiss. Others are granite domes as smooth as a baby’s bottom. What’s up with two kinds of rock? A few miles after asking myself that, I ran into a hiking couple, Ralph and Cheryl, retired geologists. They explained the granite intrusion into the gneiss. I camped with them, and now I have two more human friends.

New wildflowers identified: Mountain Gumweed, Sulfur Flower, Mountain Harebell, Miner’s Candle, Tall Chiming Bells, Ball Cactus.
Daily travel: 12.0 miles.

Day 3: Wednesday, 11 July

Bathe in Buffalo Creek, walk half a mile beyond and camp far off trail – in grassland with views to the east and south. I feel like Aldo Leopold on the Gavilan. The grass is unlike any I know from the East, and when I get home I find that it’s grama grass. And indeed, Leopold mentions grama in his essay on the Gavilan!

New wildflowers identified: Mariposa Lily, Shooting Star, American Monkshood.
Daily travel: 15.5 miles.

Day 4: Thursday, 12 July

This was a day of OOPS! as far as nature study goes. Last night I was awoken by a raucous laughing and screeching up in the trees. What was that? Coyotes? That made no sense. I went back to sleep. In the morning I walked two miles before breakfast, as is my habit, and near my breakfast spot I saw a cluster of tiny perfect saxifrage flowers launching out from a mossy bank. I looked up the species – it's not a saxifrage growing on moss, it's a saxifrage with moss-like leaves! A bit later I found unusual fern leaves – unlike any I've ever seen. I pondered for a mile until I came to the same leaves, but blooming! No fern, it was lousewort! Soon after this I heard raucous laughing and screeching in the trees. I looked closely and got just a glimpse. Steller's Jays!

New wildflowers and shrub identified: Dotted Saxifrage, Colorado Blue Columbine, Lousewort, Larkspur, Black Twinberry, One-flowered Wintergreen, Little Red Elephant.
Daily travel: 12.9 miles.

Day 5: Friday, 13 July

When I was ten years old, my parents took our family on a trip to California. In Sequoia National Park I saw my first alpine meadow: lush green, spangled with flowers, edged by conifers, and surrounded by distant peaks. Since then I've visited numerous mountain meadows (my favorite was in Cedar Breaks National Monument) but every time I was driving. I always wanted to walk for miles through a mountain meadow, but it never worked out – until today. In the cool of the morning I hiked three or four miles along the meadow of the North Fork of Lost Creek. The most prominent flower was yellow Shrubby Cinquefoil, but there were hundreds of others.

Later (at segment 5, mile 4.2) I was buzzed three times by a falcon who dove to within three or four feet of my head. Beautiful bird, but I took the hint and left. At home, I looked up the species, Merlin, and subspecies, Prairie. David Sibley, in his *Guide to Birds*, calls the Merlin “compact, powerful, and very aggressive.” I agree.

New wildflower and shrub identified: Shrubby Cinquefoil, Silvery Sage.
Daily travel: 15.1 miles.

Day 6: Saturday, 14 July

During my lifetime, I have been in many beautiful and renowned woods: Redwoods, Sequoias, Tulip-trees (Joyce Kilmer Forest in North Carolina), Rhododendron-filled Birchwoods (Seneca Creek in West Virginia), Johnson Woods in Ohio, Hobo Grove in Idaho, and others. The most beautiful was not the most renowned: Near Rainbow Lake in

Maine the Appalachian Trail passes for a quarter mile through a forest of pure White Birch, underlain with pure Spinulose Wood Fern. There are no shrubs, so there are long views into the forest. The woods I saw today were second in beauty only to those Maine woods. These were of pure Quaking Aspen – trunks light yellow-tan in color – with no shrubs but underlain by grasses spangled with wildflowers: orange Indian Paintbrush, white Forget-Me-Nots, deep blue Larkspur, pink Nodding Wild Onion, white Porter Lovage, magenta Fireweed, yellow Sunflower.

It has remained this way for eight miles, although the very peak of beauty was in the mile or two east of Kenosha Pass (US Route 285). Today is a beautiful Saturday, and as you might expect a lot of Coloradoans are out enjoying it. The most exciting part was the two miles west of Kenosha Pass. So many children! All ages, and all colors too: white, brown, yellow. Just like the wildflowers.

New wildflowers identified: Nodding Wild Onion, Porter Lovage, Fireweed.
Daily travel: 13.0 miles.

Day 7: Sunday, 15 July

Today, for the first time in my life, I walk up to the Continental Divide. I sit cross-legged on the trail eating breakfast in an alpine meadow. To my right the ground slopes down to the Atlantic, to my left the ground slopes down to the Pacific. And directly in front of me is a tiny Alpine Forget-Me-Not.

A few minutes later I walk off, and a few minutes after *that* the sky opens up and spits down hail the size of rice grains. They strike the meadow (I'm still above timberline) and then bounce up a foot, so the meadow looks like it's full of tiny hopping ice bunnies.

New wildflower identified: Alpine Forget-me-not.
Daily travel: 16.8 miles.

Day 8: Monday, 16 July

Walk to Colorado Route 9 and take the free bus to Frisco. Mail letter to Linda, buy groceries at Safeway, eat snow peas and chicken, sleep at Frisco Lodge. Rain. Wash socks.

New wildflower identified: Blue Flax.
Daily travel: 10.0 miles.

Day 9: Tuesday, 17 July

Over the first big mountain range on the Colorado Trail: the Tenmile Range. The mountain scenery is stunning. The rain down in Frisco last night had been snow up here, so the rocks are etched in fresh clean white. See Gray Jay, Pika, Shorttail Weasel (very active, popping in and out of cracks in a rock pile), White-crowned Sparrow, Moss

Gentian (a tiny, deep purple eight-parted flower), and Old-Man-of-the-Mountain (a sunflower about four inches across on a stem about three inches high). That evening, the slanting sun etches the tops of the conifers in silver.

New wildflowers identified: Moss Gentian, Old-Man-of-the-Mountain.
Daily travel: 12.3 miles.

Day 10: Wednesday, 18 July

In a meadow I identify Rose Gentian and Rocky Mountain Fringed Gentian. Moments later I meet a day hiker. I show off my wildflower finds, and she asks about my journey. She says that a friend of hers is training in an attempt to run the entire Colorado Trail in ten days. I think about that: 500 miles in 10 days is two marathons a day, ten days in a row, over steep and rocky trail, at high elevation. I say “If your friend can pull it off, that would be an extraordinary athletic achievement. But I can’t help thinking that she will miss some wildflowers.”

On day 9, I ripped my old “Monongahela National Forest” tee shirt irreparably (by attempting to take it off without first removing my pack). Fortunately, on day 10 the trail touches the edge of Copper Mountain Resort. I walk into the Peak Sports concession, and they have one “wicking” tee shirt in my size, a solid blue North Face. When I try it on, the clerk says: “That’s a good color for you; it brings out your eyes.” I buy the shirt (not that I had any choice) and will find that it is indeed a good color – not because of my eyes, but because of hummingbirds. In the weeks to come, it would grow commonplace for me to put on that blue tee shirt, and within seconds have a hummingbird fly up to investigate.

New wildflowers identified: Rose Gentian, Rocky Mountain Fringed Gentian,
Death Camas, Rosecrown.
Daily travel: 7.1 miles.

Day 11: Thursday, 19 July

Walk for five miles above timberline today, including Searle and Kokomo Passes. Pikas, Ptarmigan, Marmots, Chipmunks. Wildflowers galore. Snowbanks. When Ralph and Cheryl pass me, they point out the sedimentary layers (remnants of the ancestral Rocky Mountains) on the tops of the surrounding mountains. At Cataract Falls, take a very brief shower – the water is frigid. And why not? I had seen it as snow just an hour ago.

New wildflowers identified: Kingscrown, Parry Clover, Arctic Gentian, Parry Gentian,
Parry Primrose, Alpine Speedwell, Parry Harebell – it’s Parry’s Day!
Daily travel: 14.9 miles.

Day 12: Friday, 20 July

Camp by a small pond, less than an acre, surrounded on three sides by spruce woods, and on the fourth side by a sheer cliff dropping down from Galena Mountain. I'm opposite the cliff, and when I glance up from cooking or chores I gasp at the sight. Ralph and Cheryl camp here also, as does Bill, whom I met today. Bill had a food pickup this morning. His wife mailed him the usual, and his daughter mailed him three pounds of home-made chocolate-chip cookies. Not wanting to carry three pounds extra, he gives five cookies to me.

New wildflowers identified: Heart-leaved Arnica, Yellow Waterlily, Brook Saxifrage, Tansy Aster (?), Cowbane, Triangle-leaved Senecio, American Bistort, Subalpine Jacobs Ladder.

Daily travel: 15.3 miles.

Day 13: Saturday, 21 July

When I enter the Mount Massive Wilderness area, I fill out a Forest Service form that's largely routine: When do you intend to exit? Where do you intend to camp? How many dogs are with your party? But one question was "Why did you choose to visit Mount Massive Wilderness?" I wrote down the first thing that came to mind: "Because the Colorado Trail passes through." In coming weeks, I would become more and more dissatisfied with that answer, so I thought up a new, deeper, answer: "(1) beauty, (2) adventure, (3) challenge, (4) contemplation, (5) inspiration".

New wildflower identified: Ladies-tresses.

Daily travel: 13.0 miles.

Day 14: Sunday, 22 July

Today I climb a side trail to the summit of Mount Massive, 14,421 feet high – second highest peak in Colorado, third highest in the contiguous 48 states, twenty-second highest in the US, and the highest I've ever been on Earth's surface. It's a stiff climb (3180 feet in 3.5 miles) but well worth it, with wildflowers, views, and people.

Wildflowers: I identified eleven wildflowers new to me, plus saw many I had already identified, plus didn't bother identifying all the new ones that I saw. The greatest find was the last one. Way, way up high, where the wind is constant, the air dry, the temperature low, and the soil thin or nonexistent, I found a purple flower the size of a quarter blooming gaily on stalks three inches tall. As I fingered the flower, my thumb brushed its tightly curled leaves and came away with an exquisite scent: the odor of conifers, but with a rich and complex undertone. Perhaps a wine connoisseur could describe this scent, but I can only call it mesmerizing. This wildflower was not only blooming at the highest elevations, but it was on the *windward* side of the ridge, rather than sheltered in the lee. The blooms were tossed and battered in the unrelenting wind. John Muir often described alpine plants and birds and animals as "brave," and I've

always disliked the anthropomorphism. But I found it impossible to think of these wildflowers in any other way. Their name is Sky Pilot.

Views: I walked up Mount Massive from the east, where the mountain slopes down from rockfield to meadow to spruce woods to aspen woods to pine woods to flat, shortgrass prairie. When I reached the ridge, I looked west to a whole different world. Peak upon peak marched off to the horizon, and even the valleys between peaks were above timberline. The enormity of the Colorado Rockies became clear to me. I could hike for years and not begin to know these magnificent mountains.

People: Coloradoans love their peaks, and I was not surprised to find others on the summit with me. But I *was* surprised to find three dogs. And I was especially surprised to find a young woman wearing a little black dress that would not have been out of place at a cocktail party.

New wildflowers identified: Pinnate-leaved Daisy, Alpine Sorrel,
Dwarf Mountain-bitterweed, Stemless Goldenweed, Moss Champion,
Alpine Sandwort, Alpine Bistort, James' Buckwheat, Pink Plumes,
Alpine Avens, Sky Pilot.

Daily travel: 0.0 miles. (Side trip to Mount Massive, 7.0 miles.)

Day 15: Monday, 23 July

I walk through a grove of Quaking Aspen. An endurance runner with her dog asks me whether she's still on the Colorado Trail – she's distracted. "I can't keep track of my location because these woods are so beautiful ... no, that's not exactly the right word." I suggest "elven" and she agrees. A few yards later, I find a spring with Bog Orchid growing in it. If only that runner had seen this, she would have confirmed that the grove was truly elven!

New wildflowers identified: Strawberry Blite, Yellow Monkey Flower, Bog Orchid.
Daily travel: 17.4 miles.

Day 16: Tuesday, 24 July

Tiny blue butterflies atop goldenrod – I try to snap a photo, but the butterflies are off before I can even get the camera out.

New wildflowers identified: Golden Smoke, Milkvetch, Silvery Potentilla.
Daily travel: 13.5 miles.

Day 17: Wednesday, 25 July

My right leg suffers from shin splints – a common running injury, and I'd been doing exercises to make it go away. For relief from pain, at Cottonwood Creek, I dunk that leg into frigid water and soak it. While doing this, I meet thru hiker Mike, who is between a

Master's degree in environmental science at West Virginia University (Morgantown) and a Ph.D. in environmental policy at the University of California – Davis. We chat about careers at liberal arts colleges versus universities. Mike is young and fast, and I didn't think I'd ever see him again, but he goes into town to resupply more often than I do, so in fact he passed me several times, and each time it was a real intellectual pleasure to talk with him.

New wildflowers identified: Fendler Sandwort, Yellow Stonecrop, Star Gentian, Brookcress.
Daily travel: 12.8 miles.

Day 18: Thursday, 26 July

About noon I'm keying out a wildflower when Giff and Jess pass me. Right now they're unemployed – “hiking until the money runs out” – but they're interested in outdoor careers. As with Mike, I don't think I'll ever see them again, but as with Mike, in fact I meet them a number of times and we become fast friends.

I stop to camp for the evening and realize that my blue shirt is missing. Soon afterward four people set up camp beside me: Sunrise and Lola, Scarface and Ox. They had passed me back in the Tenmile Range on day 9. All four had worked for ACE Adventure Resort of West Virginia, as New or Gauley River guides, climbing instructors on the Endless Wall, etc. Both are clearly committed couples, and when I send off a satellite message to Linda confirming that I am OK (as I do every night), they ask about Linda, and about my boys, and in general about lifetime commitment. I recall that, when I was in my thirties, I'd see a hiker in his fifties and think, “I hope I'm still hiking when I'm his age,” and then I'd ask him, indirectly, about how he had pulled it off. And that's exactly what they are doing to me. They exhibit a touching concern for Linda.

Names like Sunrise (a man) and Scarface (a woman) might surprise you. It's common for thru hikers to adopt “trail names.” Mine is “Grain,” from this quote, modified from Dostoyevsky: “Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love the atoms, the trees, the storms, the stars. The more you love them, the more you will grow curious about them; the more you are curious, the more you will learn; the more you learn, the more you will love. Until at last you will love the entire universe with an overarching and resilient love founded upon wonder and understanding.”

These hikers tell me that they had seen a blue shirt on the trail register 4.5 miles back.

New wildflowers identified: Orange Sneezeweed, Ragleaf Bahia.
Daily travel: 13.3 miles.

Day 19: Friday, 27 July

Up early. Stroll back to get shirt then return! “I'd walk nine miles for a tee shirt.”

New wildflowers and grass identified: Pinedrops, Evening Primrose
(*Oenothera albicaulis*), Colorado Rubber Plant, Blue Grama Grass.
Daily travel: 9.7 miles. (Plus 9.0 miles to retrieve shirt.)

Day 20: Saturday, 28 July

I'm eating lunch on the Little Browns Creek bridge, and Mike arrives! Linda had sent me four oranges with the food package that I picked up on day 19. They were getting heavy, so I give one to Mike, to his great delight. Then Jess and Giff arrive. Giff says that his parents are driving up from Denver with his resupply and to celebrate his 27th birthday, and that Mike and I are invited to attend the celebration that evening at Angel of Shavano Campground. It didn't take any convincing.

A day hiker arrives and tells us about a waterfall on a side trail. I enjoy waterfalls, so I walk there. I bathe in the cold water, then wash my socks. Clouds of dirt emerge when I squeeze the socks underwater.

I'm resting on the side of the Colorado Trail. A hawk with a dark eye stripe (Goshawk?, Osprey?) silently flies to sit on a branch 30 yards in front of me, perches for 10 seconds, then silently flies off.

Giff's parents are delightful, slightly older than me. We all eat gobs of a Mexican dish, and salad, and dessert. We build a fire after dinner and talk into the night about old backpacking adventures, about plans for future backpacking adventures, about the London Olympics, about Ohio Indian earthworks, about Colorado mountains.

New wildflowers identified: Scarlet Penstemon, Tall False Dandelion, Sticky Gilia.
Daily travel: 14.0 miles.

Day 21: Sunday, 29 July

New wildflowers identified: Tansy Mustard, Fringed Parnassia, Corn Husk Lily,
Least Pryola, Wild Strawberry, Bigelow Groundsell, Rocky Mountain Gentian.
Daily travel: 13.0 miles.

Day 22: Monday, 30 July

During the day I follow the Continental Divide closely – crossing it nine times. I start in Atlantic drainage and cross an odd number of times, so I camp in Pacific drainage – just barely: the Divide is about 10 yards from my tent. I'm camped in a meadow dotted with spruce. Just after I arrive, a Cooper's or Sharp-shinned Hawk flies off with a mouse in its talons. Then rain and thunder.

New wildflowers identified: Golden Aster, *Valeriana capitata*.
Daily travel: 12.0 miles.

Day 23: Tuesday, 31 July

Wake up at night. Notice light under the tarp so I zip it open to see what's up. The near-full Moon is up, illuminating the meadow and the spruce in silver. It also illuminates, between the stars, some big cumulus clouds, which occasionally flash with lightening. The whole thing is majestic in the extreme: "the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night."

Noontime: Hail the size of grapes. Midafternoon: Smaller pieces of hail, but more of them. I set up my tent early, hunker down, and keep warm.

New wildflowers: Saw three new wildflowers, but couldn't identify any of them.
Daily travel: 10.2 miles.

Day 24: Wednesday, 1 August

New wildflowers identified: Rock Primrose, James Starwort, White Marsh Marigold.
Daily travel: 14.0 miles.

Day 25: Thursday, 2 August

Walk down ranch roads where I smell conifer even in the middle of the road.

New wildflowers identified: Hemlock Parsley, Owlclover.
Daily travel: 16.0 miles.

Day 26: Friday, 3 August

Camp in a meadow above Cochetopa Creek (at elevation 10,240 feet). Campsite has a very "western" feel – flower spangled meadow, edged with conifers, looking up and down a rushy stream with occasional beaver ponds. Dozens of White-throated Swifts wheel and soar above the creek. And, on the horizon, the 14,014 foot peak that I intend to climb tomorrow.

New wildflowers identified: Mouse-eared Chickweed, Purple Jointpod,
Tufted Locoweed.
Daily travel: 16.8 miles.

Day 27: Saturday, 4 August

Up before sunrise. Walk for miles up Cochetopa Creek, then take a side trip to the summit of San Luis Peak. I start off with spruce, wrens, swifts, bluebirds, and ferns. One by one, the species change with elevation. Above timberline are willow thickets, then meadows full of flowers, then rockfields with occasional flowers, then rockfields with lichen. Yet even here there is life. In addition to the lichen, there are Ravens (sometimes flying as pairs) and White-crowned Sparrows.

San Luis Peak is not like Mount Massive: I have the summit to myself. I stare out over vastness and feel myself as part of the Earth around me.

New fern and wildflowers identified: *Woodsia* fern, Whiskbroom Parsley, Reclining Sandwort (*Arenaria lanuginosa*), Mountain Parsley, Alpine Starwort, Dandelion Senecio, Alpine Chiming Bells, Colorado Cinquefoil, Silky Phacelia, Big-rooted Spring Beauty.

Daily travel: 13.8 miles. (Side trip to San Luis Peak: 2.6 miles.)

Day 28: Sunday, 5 August

Coming off the rim of Snow Mesa, I find a Pika only two yards from me. I stop and watch. It inches even closer to me. Then I see a second Pika down by my feet, carrying a bunch of greens in its mouth. I watch that one. I hear a chirp. The first Pika has crept even close to me – only a yard away – and seems to want the attention back!

New wildflowers identified: Grays Angelica, Goldcup Potentilla, Willowherb, a pure white Geranium.

Daily travel: 13.0 miles.

Day 29: Monday, 6 August

New wildflowers identified: Lapland Gentian, Mat Draba.

Daily travel: 11.7 miles.

Day 30: Tuesday, 7 August

All day above timberline. I'm walking up the stunning valley of Lost Trail Creek, through a drizzle. I see some trash on the ground and, as usual, bend down to pick it up. It's a package for me, marked "Trail Magic for Dr. Dan"! Michael was afraid I was low on food. I had given him an orange, so he gave me two energy bars and a fruit leather.

I continue to the head of Lost Trail Creek Valley and then up into the next mountain range. It is still above timberline, still raining, and still mesmerizingly beautiful. The trail goes down into a cluster of lakes, lined with cliffs, and I have just enough time to set up the tent before it begins raining hard, then hailing.

New wildflowers identified: Alpine Chickweed, Alpine Buttercup, Field Chickweed, Snow Buttercup.

Daily travel: 12.9 miles.

Day 31: Wednesday, 8 August

At night the sky clears completely. I stick my head out from under the rain fly and see the Milky Way, the half Moon, Cygnus, Cassiopeia, the Pleiades, Jupiter in constellation Taurus. And then a meteor! I keep my head out for one or two minutes and see four meteors. Two years ago today Linda and I were married, and I think of this brilliant display as the universe making fireworks to celebrate our anniversary.

Spend all day above timberline.

New wildflowers identified: Alpine Smelowskia, Hall's Penstemon.

Daily travel: 15.7 miles.

Day 32: Thursday, 9 August

Elk Creek: Vertical walls hung with waterfalls, wildflower-strewn meadows, portions of valley floor that are flat and watered by a placid and meandering Elk Creek, portions where the cliff walls come right down to the turbulent and frothy Elk Creek.

I run into Mark, a wilderness skills instructor at Dartmouth. He's been up in the trail-less area near Vestal Peak. He likes to try out "old ways of backpacking": uses a Duluth Pack with tumpline, makes his own pemmican to eat. We have a very good talk.

A few hundred yards after parting with Mark: A fledging junco plops down on the trail in front of me. I step forward and the bird runs along the trail. It doesn't fly, it runs. And it doesn't run off the trail, it runs along the trail. So when I take a second step it has to do the same. This continues for five or six slow steps until at last it sticks out its puny little wings and flies into a nearby shrub. Upon landing, it sticks out its wings again as if to say "See what I can do!" Did I induce that young junco to take its very first flight?

New fern and wildflowers identified: Parsley Fern, Western Rattlesnake-orchid,
Violet, *Viola adunca*.

Daily travel: 13.2 miles.

Day 33: Friday, 10 August

New wildflowers identified: Burnt-orange Dandelion, Fragrant Gentian,
Monument Plant.

Daily travel: 9.3 miles.

Day 34: Saturday, 11 August

Every time I cross over a ridge I see a whole new set of mountains, each new set dramatic and breathtaking. I'm reminded of what John Wesley Powell wrote during his first boat trip through the Grand Canyon: "With each new turn of the river, some new marvel arrests our attention."

Except that when I get home I find that what Powell actually wrote was: "Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak-set glens, past these fern-decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder."

New wildflower identified: Mules Ear.
Daily travel: 14.0 miles.

Day 35: Sunday, 12 August

Walk through a meadow that falls off steeply on my left, and rises steeply to a ridgeline on my right. In the air over the meadow hundreds of White-throated Swifts wheel in flight.

New wildflowers identified: False Dandelion, Alpine Phlox.
Daily travel: 12.5 miles.

Day 36: Monday, 13 August

At camp, I realize that I'm missing the gray "Outdoor Research" cap that has served me so admirably during this trip. It was given to me by my brother Bill 24 years ago, after I showed up unprepared for a September trip we took to Katahdin.

New wildflowers identified: Sun Spots, Canada Violet.
Daily travel: 12.7 miles.

Day 37: Tuesday, 14 August

While walking above timberline, I am overtaken by fast young walker Andrew, with smart phone, MP3 player, and solar panel. He says he saw my gray O.R. cap on the log where I suspected I had lost it, just south of Orphan Butte. He sends a text message to his friend Shannon further back.

I feel that I'm getting a good-bye from above timberline. Pikas and Marmots both come in close. I view Sharktooth Peak plus Centennial Peak, and notice a waterfall between the two. I'm about to leave alpine meadows for the last time on this trip when it starts to hail! I think of this as fitting symmetry, because it hailed when I first went above timberline at Georgia Pass way back on day 7. I find a new alpine wildflower – Alpine Dusty Maiden – within a few hundred yards of my last departure from tundra.

I admit to being nostalgic when I pass through timberline for the last time. But I stop at the first tree below the meadow – a huge conifer. When I sniff its rich aroma I'm reminded that there are benefits to being in woods as well as in meadow.

Set up camp at the Junction Creek Bridge. About 8 pm, Shannon and her boyfriend arrive. Shannon has my gray O.R. cap!

New wildflowers identified: Dusky Penstemon, Black-tipped Senecio,
Alpine Dusty Maiden, Wild Candytuft, Goldenglow.
Daily travel: 12.5 miles.

Day 38: Wednesday, 15 August

Set up my last camp in a Ponderosa Pine forest with understory of twisted Gambel Oak. After dinner I lie back on a convenient rock. Five Nighthawks swirl through the sky.

New fern and wildflowers identified: Male Fern, Mountain Caraway,
Leafy Jacob's Ladder.
Daily travel: 9.6 miles.

Day 39: Thursday, 16 August

A biker crosses me going uphill while I'm going downhill. He huffs and puffs and says "There's no air up here!" To me, the air here is so thick I could cut it with a knife and use it to butter bread.

Arrive at trail's end 10:00 am. Call Linda, send satellite message, and wait for someone to come and take my photo. Soon, someone does.

New wildflowers identified: *Eriogonum davidsonii*, Showy Four-o'clock.
Daily travel: 4.8 miles.

The next day (**Friday, 17 August**), I spend one hour in a jet plane flying from Durango to Denver, reversing the route that had taken me 39 days to walk. I see no wildflowers whatsoever (although I do drink a cup of much-coveted tomato juice). From Denver I fly on to Cleveland. Waiting for me at the baggage claim is my wife Linda. I run to her. We embrace, and my nostrils fill with her fresh, familiar scent, welcoming me home to Ohio.

Trip summary: Many miles, many mountains, many flowers, many friends.

Wallace Stegner wrote that, within the wilderness, “we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it.” Through this journey, I have begun to realize that ideal.

Botany summary: Identified 130 new wildflowers, 2 new shrubs, 1 new grass, and 3 new ferns.

Acknowledgements: I thank, first, my wife Linda who supported my walk logistically, who cheered me on with letters, and who admonished me to be careful by asking, before I left home, “Do you know how many years I’ve been searching for you?” (We met when she was 48 years old.)

I thank my parents for the 1967 trip to Colorado that kindled my dream.

I thank the hundreds of individuals who gave me a kind word or local advice along the way, but especially Andrew and Shannon, for recovering my gray O.R. cap.

I thank those people, both paid and volunteer, who had first the audacity to dream up the Colorado Trail, and then the guts to build and maintain it.

I thank the landowners who support the trail on their property. These include the Denver Water Supply Board, the Copper Mountain Ski Resort, the Bureau of Land Management, and others, but the largest landowner, by far, is the United States Forest Service.

And so I thank particularly the men and women of the Forest Service – past, present, and future – including those who molded the Forest Service into an organization that supports healthy forests, healthy watersheds, and healthy hikers all at the same time. This includes greats like Gifford Pinchot, Aldo Leopold, and Mike Dombeck, but I’m particularly thinking of President Teddy Roosevelt. Knowing how much Roosevelt loved both the outdoors and children, I can imagine him watching those many children of various sizes and colors west of Kenosha Pass (day 6), and saying “Bully!”