

Haystack Mountain

I admit it, I am hungry. I'm a glutton for mountain summits, for ranges that sling rough-hewn anatomies across valleys that dare to bear them. But deep down I crave the strong, silent type. Haystack Mountain, the highest point in the Boulder Mountains, slakes all appetites.

The Boulder Mountains raise a reliable backbone west of Boulder with most peaks cresting between 7,000 and 7,600 feet. The range crosses four counties – Deer Lodge, Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Silver Bow – and though the high points lack craggy features, its four tallest peaks are homegrown, residing in Jefferson County at elevations between about 8,600 and 8,800 feet.

Haystack Mountain at 8,821 feet is the workhorse of the range. Where more glamorous mountains flaunt jaunty peaks, Haystack heaves up and holds ground, unassuming in a hunky spine of upswells. Its rounded upthrust gives rise to the Little Boulder River while Bison Creek brushes its western foothold, both major tributaries of the Boulder River. And the crest carries clout historically. From the late nineteenth century its slopes were the only place logged for private homes in the burgeoning valley community of Elk Park. The site of a U. S. Forest Service fire lookout from 1936 to 1977, Haystack Mountain was designated in 1979 as a National Recreation Trail.

The footpath, closed year-round to motorized travel, begins as many routes do, by sidling up to the trickle that defines it. The mountain steals your breath from the get-go as it launches you off from an elevation of just over 6,700 feet, higher than most area hikes. Captivated by blooms of groundsel and white geranium, you may not notice the altitude as you cross a footbridge over a thin stream coursing down into Bison Creek.

From grassy slopes of aspen, alder, fir, and whortleberry, the trail climbs steeply. If you think a healthy stride will win your welcome at the summit, the first mile lets you know that it won't come easy. With an average grade of 13%, a maximum grade of 20%, and just over 2,000 feet of elevation gain in about three miles total, the trail surface can be loosely pebbled and slick underfoot, especially at the start. And there are rocks. Lots of them. Half-buried, hooking your boot toes. Stealing your breath all over again.

Gain ground above the creek into the drier realm of lodgepole pine. Straight, spare trunks packed like corduroy texture the slopes. At 0.6 miles the path levels into an everyday walkway unspooling the fruity balm of ripening whortleberry just when your lungs need air and your calves could use some loosening. It's a gift that carries you barely a quarter mile more where you meet the creek again before you leave it for good. Cross a second footbridge here. The trickle grows to a gurgle, the water flecked with gold.

But don't be lulled. This mountain is still sizing you up.

The trail climbs moderately again before resuming its steep and stony pitch. After a mile of almost unrelenting ascent, the rocks that stud your path gain girth and crowd the slopes alongside you in greater abundance. But the uphill grind is checked with unforeseen doses of charm: low mats of huckleberry, panicles of vivid penstemon, clumps of purple lupine.

The trail mellows at a mile and a half. At 1.75 miles, cross a muddy seep. The wetter ground hosts currants and thigh-high Labrador tea. Just shy of two miles you feel like you're topping out as the path backs off of its incline and traces a contour instead. Skirt a rockslide on your left with rubble the size of small cars. After 2 miles, accept that the trail will challenge your gait for the final mile to the top through varying degrees of steepness as hulking mounds of boulders gain a presence amongst the trees.

Just when you think the boulders can't get any bigger, the peak begins to assert itself. Gaze off through subalpine fir and whitebark pine where the trail becomes more exposed above the forested ridges and swales of the Boulder range pooling between you and the Boulder River drainage. Just short of the summit at 3 miles an orange arrow painted on a gigantic rock directs you up through a notch. Over eighty years ago the top portion of trail was blasted out of huge boulders for horses to pack up the necessary equipment to build the 14 x14-foot fire lookout tower, including water to mix concrete and windows to surround the structure. All that remains of the lookout are a piling or two, a few weathered wood planks, coiled cable and rebar passing to rust. Don't trip over the debris as you mount the rock pile of Haystack's crest and bound from boulder to boulder, confronting your hard-won vista.

If you're not already weak in the knees by the time you summit, the view will do it to you. From a reef of slumped granite slabs, feast on such distant panoramic delectables as the Tobacco Root Mountains hazed with sun, the Elkhorn range crowned with cloud bank, the pool of Whitetail Reservoir and its snaking, boggy inlets, the signature of the Little Boulder River drainage. A clear day offers a banquet of additional ranges and valleys.

Because of the bare and rounded nature of the peak, any vantage includes prominent angles of boulders beneath your feet. Haystack Mountain is the highest peak of the Boulder Batholith, an eroded outcropping of granite bulging up in various locales between Helena and Butte. Along the summit's southeastern sight-line the boulders stand in massive shards like half-toppled monuments. The wind roars up then sheers away across surfaces that are pitched, fractured, exposed. So you don't expect the grace: Raspberries claim footholds in crags. A dragonfly flits by. Lichen catches sunlight on rock faces, pine duff mellows ragged clefts. Across the stoic slump of rock there is a softening you did not know you longed for.

On another day, passing below the peak on I-15, you'll be hard-pressed to point out the mountain that just thrilled your core. Haystack remains humble in all its rugged allure. It's enough to whet any appetite. And feed it again and again.

Directions

From Boulder take I-15 south 26 miles to Elk Park (Exit 138). Pass left beneath the interstate then turn left again at the stop sign onto the frontage road (East Elk Park Road). Continue 4.6 miles and turn right from pavement to dirt onto Haystack Road. Keep immediately left following a "Dead End" sign. In less than half a mile the road narrows to a wide two-track. Continue another 0.3 miles to the dead end and a gated road on your right. The rest of the drive is not suitable for two-wheel drive vehicles. Park here and hike in the rest of the way or continue through the gate 1.2 miles to the trailhead. After crossing through the gate there is an abundance of standing dead trees alongside the road. Be aware of the possibility of deadfall.