



## AAC Publications

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### The CDUL Traverse

Colorado, Rocky Mountains, Rocky Mountain National Park

**Last summer Tommy Caldwell invited me to his home in Estes Park to attempt an enormous linkup along the Continental Divide in Rocky Mountain National Park.** We'd each been locked down in our respective homes all season by COVID—I was exploring new limestone sport climbing areas around Las Vegas, and he'd been doing a lot of running in the Park. Joining up for a big climbing adventure seemed like a welcome change of pace. My wife, Sanni, and I drove out in our van and spent the whole month of July living in the Caldwell's driveway, podded up with them and a few of their local friends.

Tommy's vision was to traverse the range from Mt. Meeker over Longs Peak and roughly along the Continental Divide all the way to Notchtop, climbing as many classic routes as possible along the way and also summiting the peaks. A big source of inspiration was that much of the traverse was visible from his back deck.

We prepared by climbing almost all of the various sections of the traverse, which helped me to acclimatize, as almost the entirety of the traverse is between 11,000' and 14,000' in elevation. On our first forays I was noticeably slower and more winded than Tommy, who'd recently run up and down Longs Peak in under three hours car-to-car.

There were a several big question marks, like how to get over to Mt. Alice and back [the 13,310' peak and its big east face are well south of the main ridgeline in the Park] and which route to climb. Or how to negotiate the terrain around the Petit Grepon, Sharkstooth, and the Saber, each of which is a free-standing spire usually rappelled with two ropes. Or even simple things, like whether to summit Pagoda, which is a cool summit but wasn't really on the way.

Tommy had already done a few sections with our friend Adam Stack (and of course he'd lived in the area his whole life), so he had a decent handle on the terrain. I tried to catch up by studying the guidebook at night, frantically flipping between various peaks and trying to figure out which routes were on which aspects and whether they were connectable.

Two weeks after I arrived, we'd finished all of our basic route-finding. There were some sections we hadn't climbed—we'd just improvise on the go. We got a good forecast for July 17 and 18 and decided it was time to attempt the whole traverse.

Adam and our other good friend Maury Birdwell planned to meet us at various places along the way to resupply us with food and supplies, allowing us to climb with a bare minimum of weight. We were climbing on a 6mm static line (an Edelrid rope with some dynamic properties, which Tommy swore he'd tested and was OK for a lead fall—I never weighted it) and took a bare-bones rack. We each had ultralight harnesses and carried everything in small running backpacks. We were also in running shorts, which would come back to bite us later.

We got a normal alpine start and cruised up the Flying Buttress (5.9) on Meeker, then traversed over to Broadway and climbed the Casual Route (5.10a) on the Diamond. We hiked over the summit of Longs (14,259') and along the ridge to Pagoda, backtracked a little bit to access a gully, and descended to the base of Spearhead. Next up was the Barb (5.10a) and across the top to the base of

Chiefshead. We hesitated there because the clouds were building and it looked like it might storm. The next route was Birds of Fire (5.11a slab), one of the longer and harder routes of the day, and it would have been pretty committing in a storm. But after a few minutes of hemming and hawing we decided to go for it, figuring we could pioneer a new rappel route if we had to. Thankfully it didn't rain more than a few drops and we traversed the summit plateau over to Mt. Alice, the most far-flung peak on the traverse. We got lucky with snow conditions in a couloir and slid to the base, then climbed back up the Central Ramp (5.8) and crossed back over to the main ridge.

Arrowhead was next, and that's where things went a little sideways. We had planned to meet another friend at the base who'd have our pants, jackets, and headlamps for the long night of climbing to come. Unfortunately he got sick and bailed. We managed to top out Arrowplane (5.11a) right as it got dark, then clawed our way to the summit of McHenry's and through the notch to Powell in the dark, using only our iPhone lights to help with route-finding. Needless to say, down-soloing 5.6 in the dark, at 13,000', with a cold wind and only running shorts and light raincoats, was character-building. Thankfully, Adam Stack had backtracked along the Divide and showed up near Powell with snacks and real headlamps, both of which greatly improved our speed and morale.

We traversed over the summit of Taylor and dropped into a feature that we'd dubbed the Sending Hole, an airy little perch tucked above the west face of the Sharkstooth. We scarfed all the food that Adam had brought us (including a still-warm burrito from Chipotle—what a mensch!) and prepared for a long night of climbing. This is also where Tommy's name for the traverse (CDUL, pronounced "cuddle") came into play—Adam had brought us a light sleeping bag liner, so Tommy and I squeezed our legs together and huddled for warmth. Sadly, we just got colder and colder and ultimately had to start climbing again.

We pioneered a new descent to the Petit Gepon and simulated the South Face (5.8) in our tennies, desperately trying to maintain warmth. We then rappelled down into the notch by the Saber and managed to find our way right onto the start of the Southwest Corner (5.10c, but pretty hard!). Tommy led the whole route in a single pitch, a heroic effort in the cold and dark, and we traversed over to the base of the Northeast Ridge of the Sharkstooth (5.6). After an easy romp up the ridge, we rappelled the west face via a new rap line that Tommy had previously pioneered and met Adam again.

The sun had come up as we summited the Sharkstooth, and we were now about 26 hours into our outing. Fatigue was definitely building and the whole rest of the traverse seemed to move in slow motion, even though it was now technically much easier climbing. It took us several hours to get to the base of the Culp-Bossier on Hallett Peak (nails hard 5.8+), with Tommy stopping to vomit a few times and even once asking if we could take a quick nap. It wasn't clear if it was a nutrition issue or just the strain of leading several difficult routes through the night at altitude, but Tommy hit a real personal low around midmorning.

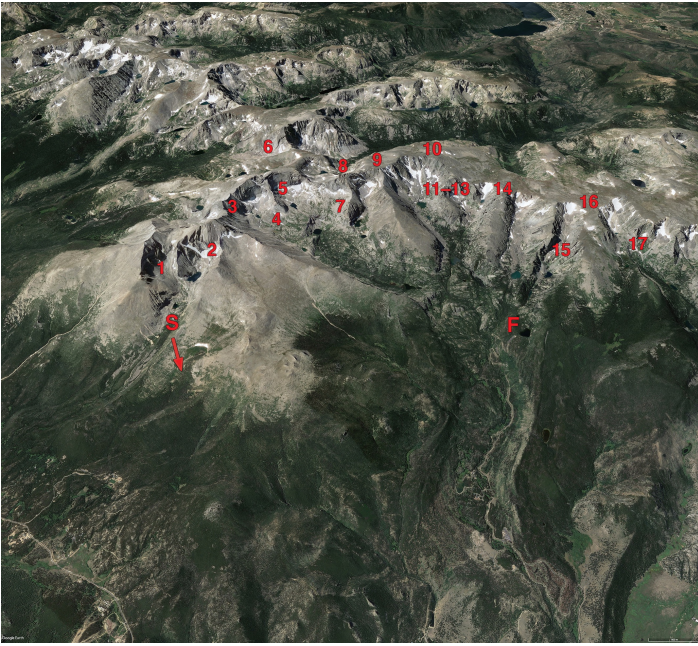
Near the base of the Culp-Bossier, Maury met us with fresh cookies, breathing new life into our weary bodies. We simulated the route in a pitch, with Maury hiking around to meet us on top, and then carried on over Flattop to Notchtop, where we down-soloed the Spiral Route (5.4) to reach the Direct Southwest Ridge (5.9), our final route. Both of our wives and some friends met us at the lake below Notchtop when we got down, so we spent some time eating and relaxing before trudging the final few hours down trails to the car.

The CDUL: It's an incredible outing in the Park and an efficient way to climb most of the classic rock routes without having to go back and forth to various parking lots. But it sure is tough.

All in all, the traverse took us about 36 hours and entailed, by our best estimate, about 20,000' of vertical and 35 miles of hiking over 17 peaks. The numbers belie the difficulty of the terrain and the overall strain, and GPS struggles with vertical travel, so all of our numbers varied wildly. Plus, our batteries died over the course of the 36-hour push, which served as a good reminder that some things are better left unquantified.



## Images



Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold's 35-mile traverse included 12 classic technical routes and 17 summits: (1) Mt. Meeker, (2) Longs Peak, (3) Pagoda Peak, (4) Spearhead, (5) Chiefshead, (6) Mt. Alice, (7) Arrowhead, (8) McHenry's Peak, (9) Powell Peak, (10) Taylor Peak, (11) Petit Grepon, (12) The Saber, (13) Sharkstooth, (14) Mt. Otis, (15) Hallett Peak, (16) Flattop Mountain, and (17) Notchtop Mountain. They finished at Bear Lake.



Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold on top of Sharkstooth in Rocky Mountain National Park during the CDUL Traverse.





Tommy Caldwell (left) and Alex Honnold at sunrise during the CDUL Traverse.



Alex Honnold (left) and Tommy Caldwell at a break in the CDUL Traverse, Rocky Mountain National Park.

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