

Best of the Rockies

CLIMBING

CENTRAL COLORADO

ROCKY THREE:
Hiking West
Maroon Pass, in
the Elk Mountains



NEED TO KNOW

Dodging Thor's Wrath

Afternoon thunderstorms are a dramatic fact of life in the Rockies, where lightning kills, on average, three or four people a year. You can generally avoid storms if you summit before lunch, but if you are caught in one while on a high ridge, move to the ridge's middle. (The exposed ends are more vulnerable to lightning strikes.) Better yet, descend. If a forest is nearby, head for the shortest trees and let the taller ones take the hit. In open terrain, avoid large boulders, shallow caves, and rock outcrops. Stash any metal at a distance, put at least 15 feet between you and each of your friends, and protect yourself as best as possible using the "lightning crouch"—squat, feet together, tuck your head, and cover your ears. —L.M.



BY LOLLY MERRELL

Scrambling to the Rooftop

HEAD TO THE SUNNY
SIDE OF THE ELKS FOR
SOLITUDE AND AWESOME,
NO-TECH ASCENTS

ON THE EASTERN SIDE of the Elks, well-marked (and well-used) trails start from the twinkle and sushi of Aspen and web into dark coniferous forests. But on the west side, the range is painted with airy aspen groves, wildflower meadows, and empty trails that access these stunning mountains from the back side. My portal to the Elks' best climbs is the mining hamlet of Marble, off State Route 133. From there, the 4WD Lead King Basin road winds five back-country miles to the trailhead for a two-mile hike to Geneva Lake, a popular place to camp. If you're seeking solitude, hike another few miles up-valley to sparkling

Siberia Lake, at the base of 14,092-foot Snowmass Mountain.

Before tackling Snowmass, my dog, Jake, and I warm up by strolling through wildflower-covered hummocks to the top of a 12,000-footer known locally as Little Gem Mountain; a grassy ridge riddled with marmot burrows sets you atop an unnamed adjacent peak, also 12,000 feet high.

Now Snowmass. My favorite trail is a faint one that climbs three miles up a steep talus field to the summit. While the route is clearly discernible from below, it's easy to go off track in the sea of gray rocks. But that's the fun of this hike—mistakes are simple to correct, thanks to the wide-open, above-timberline terrain. Up top, the rust-red triangles of the Maroon Bells rise to the east, and to the south, the corrugated

junction of the Elks and the Ruby Range heaves into view.

The following day, I usually ascend the pass that drops down to Avalanche Lake, where a trail meanders through aspen groves to hunter-green Capitol Lake. From there it's two rigorous miles up the 13,664-footer that locals call K2. Gutsy hikers (and sure-footed dogs) can inch along a knife-edge ridge to bag Capitol Peak. For an easier alternative summit, head north one and a half miles and top off 12,610-foot Mount Daly.

Recovery occurs over burgers at Redstone's Crystal Club Cafe, north of Marble. Spiritual reckoning comes farther up the road, at the Glenwood Springs pool. Here I invariably spot my Elk brethren in the steam—they're the sunburned soakers gazing at the beckoning peaks. ▲

Every summer for the past decade, editor and writer **Lolly Merrell** has scrambled up the Elk Mountains to bag summits, usually with her nimble dog, Jake, leading the way.

DOING THE ROCKIES RIGHT
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