

Grays and Torreys: Gale-force Wind Ups the Challenge

Grays Peak and Torreys Peak are a pair of mountains that are among the most popular for the occasional Colorado fourteener climber and for visitors from out of state. While the total climb is 3750 feet up a rocky ascent to summit, it can be done without rock climbing, only requiring fitness and some balance while bouldering all the way up. High above Georgetown you can see these two mountains briefly while driving on I-70 between Vail and Denver.



Grays Peak is to the left with the saddle in the middle and Torreys on the right.

The local Arapaho tribe originally called Grays and Torreys Peaks the “Ant Hills.” The two peaks were given their current names in 1872 during a ceremony on the summit of Grays Peak in honor of two of America’s most famous botanists in that century, Asa Gray and John Torrey. The two botanists first achieved fame in 1838 for their book, *Flora of North America* which is long since out of print but can still be found.

My climbing mates were two more personalities right out of the book. Shan Stuart is an Aspen local who is a long-time hiker and who makes his living caring for dogs as well as homeowners. Laura Welch found her passion climbing many of the high mountains with me and Emme. She is strong, enthusiastic about almost everything (especially mountains), and she is a great conversationalist. Shan, Laura, Emme and I drove from Aspen towards Denver and chose Georgetown to overnight before the climb early the following morning.

Georgetown

Georgetown is a pretty, well-preserved, authentic Colorado town that has become a bedroom community for those working in the Denver area. The town was an historic center of the mining industry in Colorado during the late 19th century, earning the nickname the “Silver Queen of Colorado.” It is a National Historic Landmark District, and, with 240 protected buildings, it is practically a walk-in museum. There are people who believe that spirits and ghosts are attracted to the area because Georgetown’s buildings and the mountains surrounding it haven’t changed much since the town was founded in the mid-1800s; a lot of people have “crossed over” but are still lingering in town. That is not the sort of thing I worry about, but as we walked around town before dinner, I figured if there were any ghosts roaming loose, Emme would sense them first and warn us. We had no encounters.

We were up early the next morning for the 3750-foot vertical gain and 8 ½ mile round-trip

hike to get the two peaks. It is a short drive from Georgetown to the trailhead. The weather forecast was perfect, but the forecasts never take into account what might be going on at a 14,000 foot summit. Fourteeners often deliver the unexpected.

The Climb

The early part of the route was well marked, and we were all in good spirits. Emme was leading the way as always. At around 12,500 feet I noticed my inhales were not as satisfying, but I knew that was typical for me. My mates were OK with hiking my slower speed, and we stayed together until about 13,000 feet. There the approach steepened and got rockier, which presented no problem for Emme as she always found ways around big boulders, jumped up when she needed to, and always refused to be lifted.

But I was moving even slower than normal. It was plenty rocky underfoot and while I hadn't noticed any sharp muscle pulls, I began experiencing some pain in the groin area. I assumed it was a muscle pull. I didn't feel it was bad enough to turn around, since I could still ascend by being careful of my body positioning. I didn't want to hold Shan and Laura back from the opportunity to summit both peaks, so I told them to go on up to the first summit, Grays Peak, at their faster speed. The trail was well-defined, and I had no concerns about either them or me getting lost. I figured that if the pain continued, I would summit Grays at a slow speed, and they could continue up and down Torreys. We agreed we would meet at the saddle between the two where I would be happily waiting, and we would descend from there together. I would get the one summit and they would get two. What I didn't know then was that the pain was from the early onset of a double hernia, which would eventually require surgical repair!

Since we had Emme along, the plan was for me to keep her with me. The flaw in that plan was Emme's self-learned "job" to keep me connected to others on any climb. I was always slower than the younger climbing mates I selected, and Emme had learned to be a faithful connector of those ahead and me. She would do this by running up until she saw the faster climbers and then far enough back to where I could spot her as a beacon of where to go next.



*Emme coming down far enough so I could spot her.
How did she get up that?*

In this case, Shan and Laura got further and further ahead, summiting Grays and then heading down a different set of rocks towards the saddle to ascend Torreys. It became increasingly difficult for Emme to connect us, but she kept trying by hiking up to them and down to me in a lengthening course.

That is where a nervous adventure started.

The distances Emme had to cover kept her out of sight of them and of me for longer periods. When I managed to summit Grays at 14,270 feet, she was nowhere in sight. I met a few people who were relaxing and eating at summit and they said they had seen her but that she had gone down towards the saddle. It was obvious to me that she was looking to spot Shan and Laura.

I figured Emme was with them, so I started down to the saddle, unconcerned. That descent to the Grays/Torreys saddle is the most rugged part of the climb and with the least obvious actual trail. It is steep, rocky and, as with many terrains on fourteeners, two people could be 100 feet apart and not know each was so near to the other. It was likely I was descending while Emme was ascending back to the Grays summit to find me. We must have unknowingly passed each other as I headed down toward the saddle where I expected to meet Shan, Laura & Emme coming down from Torrey's.

At the Saddle, the Wind

When I got down to the saddle, I didn't see Emme. Instead, I saw Shan running down from Torreys in extremely high wind with his cell phone to his ear. The winds were gusting strong enough to knock people down. Laura got knocked down on the rocks, and then I saw Shan get knocked down and nearly taken off the cliff side of the saddle by winds that were certainly gusting over 50 MPH.

Gale-force winds at high elevations are not unusual and we were nearly 3 miles above sea level. Studies were done at Longs Peak, another fourteener in the Rockies, where wind speeds were measured over 100 MPH for 13 of the 74 days measured. At 60 – 70 MPH you will be knocked over.

The call Shan answered was from Pamela. She had gotten a call at home from the climbers I had met on the summit of Grays. They told her they were still at the Grays summit and that Emme came back up, obviously looking for me. They were holding her by the collar and saw the tag with our phone number. They knew I was looking for her and that I had started down to the saddle.

Pamela tried my mobile, but I had shut it off to save battery. She called Shan's mobile and he answered. It was a frustrating call for both of them because the wind made it almost impossible to hear anything. Shan got knocked down on the rocks, but he finally heard the mobile number of the people at summit with Emme. He shouted he had to get off the phone because he was getting blown off the cliff side of the mountain by the gale-force winds and he needed both hands to hold on. Right at that point he got knocked down again. Pamela heard his trailing voice, the wind and then the phone knocking against rocks. She was convinced that all hell had broken loose on top of those mountains, which in a sense, it had.

Emme Was Still at the Grays Summit

I got to Shan and learned the situation. I looked back up the rocky slope I had just descended from Grays, and I knew I was going to have to re-climb it to get to Emme. I thought that getting back up that steep and rocky ascent was going to inflict some groin pain, but that was

of secondary importance to me. The pain seemed to subside somewhat, probably because of an adrenaline rush from the worry about being separated from Emme.

Selflessly, Shan declared he would go up to get her, figuring he could ascend more quickly than I. He started up.

Meanwhile the winds on that exposed saddle were creating a wind chill that took the effective temperature down to below freezing. Laura was getting very cold. We decided she should head down off the exposed saddle. I stayed. I was not leaving without Emme.

My eyes kept scanning the routes I thought Shan would use on the descent, hoping to see he had Emme with him. Finally, I did see Shan coming down that rocky slope. He was wobbling down the rocks looking like a drunken sailor. At first, I assumed the strong winds were buffeting him, but then I saw he was holding onto something black that was attached to Emme like a leash. He was pulling and she was resisting; she clearly didn't want to leave the summit.

Shan in a Stroke of Creativity

Emme would not leave the summit until she could find me. She would not budge. Shan had no leash and it was too treacherous to attempt to carry her down the rocky slope, so he improvised. He reached in his pack for his black rain pants, tying the end of one leg to her collar and holding the other pants leg like a makeshift leash. He had to drag her, carefully, all the way down rock rated Class 2 Difficult with Emme growling and resisting all the way.

My relief in seeing them was an energy boost. I was shouting until I was hoarse, but the wind was downhill, and I was trying to shout uphill. About halfway down, Emme spotted me and then Shan had a new problem: she shot ahead of him and began pulling him down the rocks. Shan looked like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, jerking around on unstable rock, unwilling to let go of his makeshift leash.



I shouted up to Shan to stop for a second for the shot. You can see behind him how far up he had to go to get her.

Shan finally gave up and untied her. She danced down the remaining rocks, barking at me. She was scolding me for not being where she expected me to be earlier—I know that to be a fact.

She got to me and almost knocked me over, leaping as high as my chest. We had quite a reunion. Shan told me he had found Emme at the top of Grays, still with the couple who were holding her. Most climbers are great people and will help in a pinch, and this was one of those times.

We made our way down with no further mishaps. After 3750 vertical feet up, 3750 feet down, 8.5 miles roundtrip, we got back to the car at 2:30 pm, eight hours after we started. There was no wind at trailhead and the sun was shining. We found Laura basking in the warmth like a sun goddess tanning at a beach. Shan logged a bigger day than the rest of us, since he re-summited Grays, a total of 4600 feet vertical and three peaks. What a guy!

After that, we never had another moment of separation on any mountain—both Emme and I made sure of that! In the car ride back to Aspen, the groin pain subsided, and I didn't give it much more thought. I wrongly assumed that it was a pull and would heal all on its own. That turned out not to be true, but that is another story...

Read about that story and more about my adventures with Emme in my book *The Dog Who Took Me Up a Mountain*, releasing on October 8, 2019 and [available for preorder now](#).

