

## A Scarecrow on a Pyramid

*Rhona Fraser*

If I win THE big Premium Bond I know where and what I am doing - the 'Fourteeners', the term given to the 54 mountains over 14,000ft in Colorado, USA. Most are long but not technically difficult peaks. Only a few are narrow and testing. A challenging but possible goal.

So far I have done four summits in trips in 1992 and 2001. My first fourteener was Quandary Peak (14,265ft) - a rather boring walk, mostly traversing a large boulder field. However it gave an amusing incident involving a large school party, when I overheard a boy excitedly tell his friends he had been sick and therefore was going to get off school for several days. I did not have the heart to tell him that this was altitude sickness and would improve as he descended! We also climbed the highest, Mt Elbert (14,433ft), another easy straightforward walk, though done in unusually wintery August weather.

In 2001 David Joule and I returned to America to tackle some big peaks in the Aspen area. Our highest summit was to be La Plata Peak (14,336ft) from South Fork Lake Creek Road, an easy ascent of 3,600 feet. The sign at the start of the walk, though, was rather disconcerting:

*Beware of Bears*

*Do not drink the water because of giardiasis*

*Do not treat the water as it is laden with minerals and toxic*

*Do not enter private land as you may be shot*

Makes the risks of the stalking season in Scotland seem insignificant!!!

The climax of the holiday was planned to be the ascent of one of the more difficult peaks in Colorado. We had considered North Maroon Peak, and its lesser companion, South Maroon (the names are due to the spectacular colour at sunrise), but the local Aspen guide persuaded us that due to loose terrain, it was safer to ascend these in early summer when snow secured the rock. Pyramid Peak (14,018ft), the third of the Maroon Bells on the opposite side of Crater Lake, was suggested as a good alternative. All these peaks are known for fatalities, mostly due to rock fall.

The first problem was finding the turn-off from the Maroon Bells trailhead to the start of the climb. The guide had told us this would be difficult to find in the pre-dawn darkness, yet he encouraged us to set off early to avoid the risk of afternoon thunderstorms. We compromised by setting off just as the sun was rising and managed both to find the path and get a wonderful glimpse of the crimson summits. The first section involved very steep climbing up to the tree-line, on a muddy path using branches as handholds. A steep scree section followed, which led into a boulder-filled corrie beneath the pyramid-



*Sunrise on the Maroon Bells*

shaped mountain. It was in the corrie that I discovered a 'slight' problem. I HAD NO WATERPROOF JACKET!!!! I blame David. He is a bachelor and, even worse, an engineer. He is very tidy. He carefully folds clothes into drawers and even into rucksacks and never has a strand of hair out of place, even after hours of walking (though I do have more of the latter item to control!) He never gets dirty, however muddy the terrain. I, on the other hand, cannot see the point of neatly packing, as things will inevitably get creased. I do not have the patience or time to be tidy, and have learnt to accept, in fact to take pride in, looking as if I been dragged through a hedge backwards within minutes of starting a walk. At Aspen I had a bout of guilt as I saw David lovingly unpack his clothes, as mine lay apparently haphazardly on the floor. So I had unzipped my waterproof jacket, put it on a hanger and placed it in the wardrobe ... WHERE IT WAS STILL. Damn ... double damn. It was windy and cold, and

while it is one thing not to do a big mountain because of altitude sickness, it is just NOT acceptable to descend having forgotten your waterproof. But what would I say to the mountain rescue team? Somehow I had to design a windproof shelter using my waterproof trousers. Solution: wrap the legs of the trousers round my arms, the 'bottom' providing a windbreak for the chest, the rucksack for my back. I felt and looked like a mobile blue scarecrow.

Our route then took us from the corrie left to the north-east ridge, where the interesting scrambling began. The first section was easy angled but very shattered, reminiscent of Stac Pollaidh. Then the slope increased, and the ascent consisted of negotiating several narrow ledges and jumping across a three-foot gap. The crux was obvious - a white steep wall with a considerable drop, which was lovely to climb because of good foot- and hand-holds. Above this, route finding was difficult. We had been told that any very hard moves would indicate that we were probably off route. This was reassuring but route-finding took time, for though there were cairns these were often lost in the confusion of ledges and gullies.

We reached the surprisingly wide summit at 2pm, rather later than we had hoped. We did not dare stay long, as black clouds loomed beyond Maroon Peak. However, the descent seemed easier than we had expected as the cairns were more obvious from above, and we seemed to avoid the crux by staying high, but instead found ourselves at a notch. As we debated how to descend this, there was a flash of lightning. It's amazing how the thought of imminent death sharpens the mind and lessens the exposure. We half-climbed, half-jumped down the step and ran across the red gravelled ridge. Suddenly my head was crushed by a dreadful pain, the sky darkened, hailstones rained from above and worst of all, lines of static electricity raced along the wet ground. WE HAD TO GET OFF NOW!!!! We launched ourselves from the ridge, ignoring the loose terrain in our haste to escape. We sheltered for around 15 minutes huddled on a narrow ledge, the observant David noting we were beneath a rather fragile-looking rock pillar. Thunder and lightning rushed through above us. Hail mixed with the gloom. We were not safe, but there was no way I was going to walk down that exposed Stac Pollaidh ridge. The rest of the descent was unsurprisingly rushed. Irritating steep gravel slopes on ascent, were slithered down. Boulder fields dealt with, with unusual efficiency. It hailed slightly, but only started to rain when we got to the tree-line. Remember I had no waterproof, but it did not really matter - we were now down and safe, having done one of the more difficult hills in Colorado.

The next day we drove to Salt Lake City for the journey home. Pyramid Peak shone completely white at the end of its valley. We had just made it!