

What you need to know to climb your first fourteener

By John Meyer

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Mount Bierstadt is 1.4 miles west and a little south of Mount Evans. From Guanella Pass, which is south of Georgetown, it is about a 3-mile hike, with a climb of 2,391 feet.

Hyoung Chang,

Denver Post file



Visitors to Denver Botanic Gardens hike past some shrubby potentilla — a member of the rose family — during a guided tour on the M. Walter Pesman Trail in the Mount Goliath Natural Area on a cold, foggy day. Volunteer naturalists were helping to identify the alpine flowers. Lyn Alweis, Denver Post file

Climbing fourteeners is a quintessential Colorado adventure. Boasting more than 50 mountains with summits peaking above 14,000 feet, no other state in the Lower 48 comes close. California ranks second, with a measly 12.

The rewards of hiking above timberline with majestic views that take in distant peaks and valleys dozens or hundreds of miles away are profound, but what if you've never done one before? How do you start? Which peaks are best for the first-timer? What do you need to know to be safe?

We're here to help.

First, while it's common to use the term "climbing" when talking about fourteeners, the vast majority of them are really high-altitude hikes that are climbed without technical gear such as ropes and harnesses.



Hikers walk along the M. Walter Pesman Trail on Mount Goliath. *Lyn Alweis, Denver Post file*

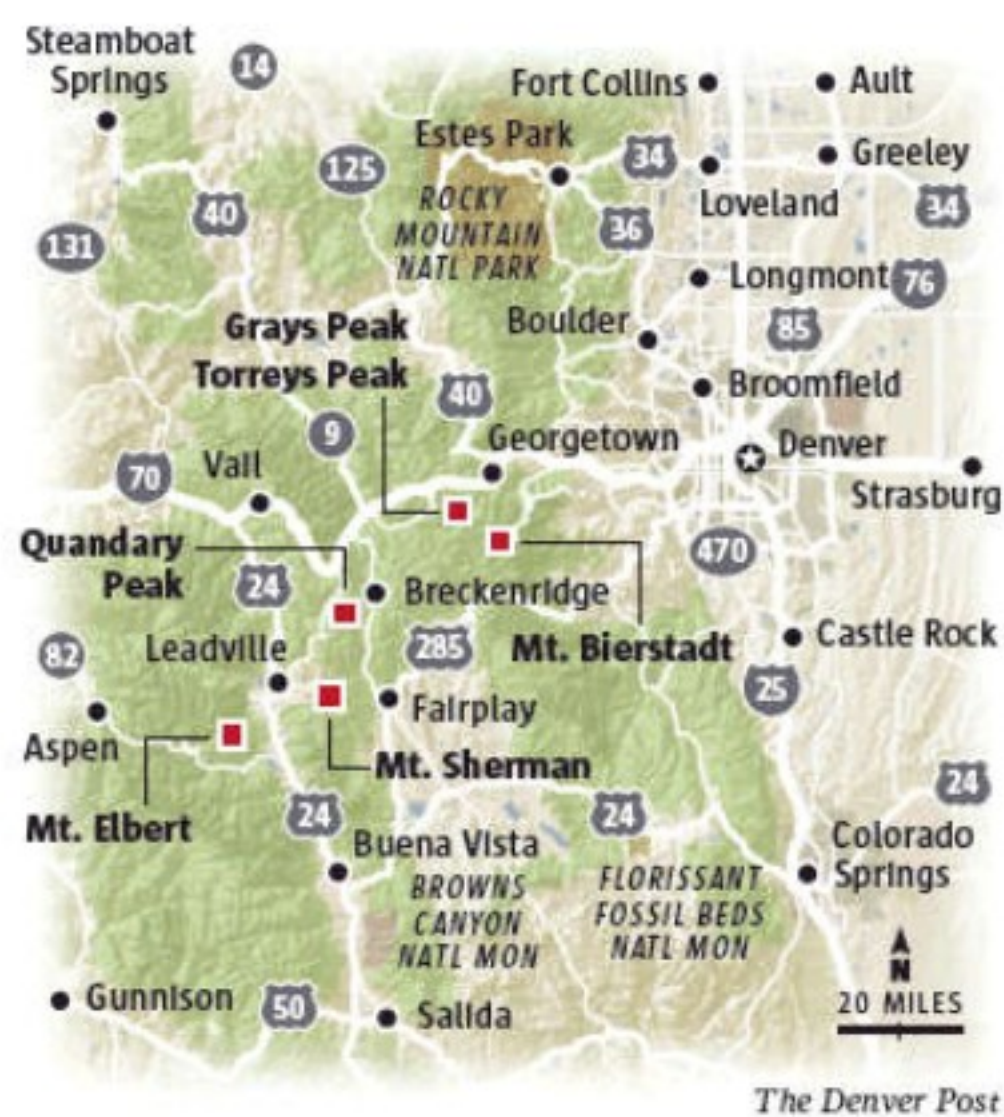
They still can be dangerous, though. Some have hundreds of feet of “exposure,” meaning if you take a fall, it could be a long one. Trails are rocky, and rocks sometimes wobble underfoot, so you could sprain an ankle or break a leg. Ice and snow, even in summer, can complicate your climb. Altitude sickness can strike even the fittest climber. And always, you need to be on the lookout for weather that could bring thunderstorms. One of the tried-and-true rules for fourteeners hiking is that it’s best to be off the summit and on the descent by noon to avoid lightning.

And just for the record: The Colorado Mountain Club recognizes 54 fourteeners. Some lists include more, but those include peaks that the CMC considers parts of other fourteeners.

Before we list the best fourteeners for first-timers, we need to mention a peak that most first-timers probably should avoid. Some first-timers opt for **Longs Peak** in **Rocky Mountain National Park** because it’s such a prominent Front Range landmark, and it’s certainly tempting for that reason, but starting with Longs can be a bad idea. Longs is aptly named because it is a very long way from the trailhead to the summit and back — more than 14 miles — and there is 5,100 feet of elevation gain. That’s why the Colorado Mountain Club discourages first-timers from attempting it.

“It’s a tremendous amount of elevation gain,” said Roger J. Wendell, a certified CMC leader who has three decades of volunteer experience with the 107-year-old club. “That’s a huge day for anybody. The trail is long, there is exposure and people somewhat regularly die on Longs. You can die on any of them, of course, but Longs has that added risk. Plus, with so much elevation gain, if you’re coming from the flatlands, the altitude can really take its toll on you. We’d like to keep you at about 3,000 feet of gain if you’re a beginner.”

Perhaps the best fourteener for a first-timer is **Mount Bierstadt**, which rises above **Guanella Pass** near **Georgetown** and is connected by Sawtooth Ridge to Mount Evans, which is the most visible fourteener from **Denver**. Bierstadt tends to be crowded, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing if you’re inexperienced. It means if you get in trouble, there could be people nearby to help you.



"Bierstadt, to me, is ideal because when the weather is good, people can always see their car (down on Guanella Pass)," Wendell said. "You can't get lost. If you're nervous, the trail is clear. Bierstadt would probably be my No. 1 choice for anyone in the Boulder-Denver area."



A mountain goat traverses the east ridge of 14,264-foot Quandary Peak. *Patrick Traylor, Denver Post file*

Another fourteener that's a good place to start, especially for Front Range folks, is **Grays Peak**. The exit on Interstate 70 for climbing Grays is only 33 miles from **Genesee**. It's also connected by a saddle to a neighboring fourteener, **Torreys Peak**. If you're feeling fit, you can knock off two fourteeners in one day, and many people do.

Before heading to Grays, though, keep in mind that there is a steep drive of about 3 miles from the interstate to the trailhead that is very rocky, so don't try it if you're not sure your vehicle can handle a wildly bumpy ride. You can also park near the interstate and hike the road to the trailhead.

"What I like about Grays and Torreys, I'm keen on people staying on the trail, being able to see the trail and see where

they're going," Wendell said. "Grays and Torreys are ideal for that — it's almost impossible to get lost on those. Now, if you do Grays and Torreys together, that's a pretty tough hike, but the beauty of that is, you can go to the top of Grays and if you're feeling good, you can take that extra half hour, go over to Torreys and then come back — if you're feeling really fit."

Quandary Peak, which is near Breckenridge, is another good choice for Front Range day-trippers. The easiest climbing route ascends the east ridge, but that's a bit of a misnomer because it's actually a very wide ramp on a humpbacked peak.

"It's not technical," Wendell said. "It would be hard to get lost on Quandary, and for beginners, that is important to me."

Mount Sherman, between Fairplay and Leadville, is relatively easy. It may be the least inspiring of them all in terms of topography and beauty, but it can be a good choice for youngsters doing their first fourteener.

Then there's the fourteener with the highest point in the state: **Mount Elbert** at 14,440 feet. In the Lower 48 states, only California's Mount Whitney stands higher (14,505).

"It's relatively easy," said Wendell, "even though it's the highest."

So how do you find the mountain and the trail when you get there? There are excellent fourteener guidebooks, such as the CMC's "The Colorado 14ers, The Best Routes." The CMC also publishes a smaller fourteeners "pack guide," sized to toss in your backpack. Read up on your climb before you go and invest in a detailed topographical map.



American flags are tied to a pole on the summit of Quandary Peak.

Patrick Traylor,

Denver Post file

Finally, some words of wisdom.

"The peak is always going to be there," Wendell said. "If you have any doubts, you're not feeling well, there's a lightning concern, maybe an injury or you're developing a hot spot in your foot from the forming of a blister, turn around. Those peaks are always going to be there. You can come back another day. It's better to be safe."

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