



HIGH POINT

An attempt to reach Montana's rooftop leaves a mother marveling at her son's nerves of granite

BY MEGAN AULT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON SCHUERR

I CONTEMPLATED why people push their limits while trudging up the 27 switchbacks toward Granite Peak, Montana's highest mountain at 12,799 feet. I have reached my edge a few times before—finishing my first marathon or the Bridger Ridge run, birthing babies without pain medication, Nordic ski racing in sub-zero conditions—to name a few. For myself, I've done these things for the exuberance of discovering that I can accomplish more than I thought I could. But when one pokes at boundaries there is always another possibility as well: that we end up disappointing ourselves.

At 12,799 feet, Granite Peak is Montana's highest mountain.

Granite Peak is certainly nowhere near the most technical mountain climb in the U.S., but it has been called one of the most difficult "high points" in all 50 states, outside of Alaska's Denali. Besides a Class 4 scramble, pulling oneself up over boulders to a snow bridge where an ice axe is sometimes necessary, the final push to Montana's rooftop is airily exposed and requires ropes (although some have summited without them) and rock-climbing skills.

For some reason, despite the fact that I've spooked on scaffolding and had to be talked down a ladder before, reaching the top of Granite Peak seemed like a reasonable goal last May, when I first hatched the plan. It was all part of an idea that I should do something big, a memorable rite-of-passage of sorts, with my 12 and a half year old son Dylan before he officially became a teenager. My boyfriend Shawn Regnerus and his brother-in-law Aaron Schuerr, both experienced climbers, eagerly agreed to help us reach the summit as they had always wanted to climb Granite as well.

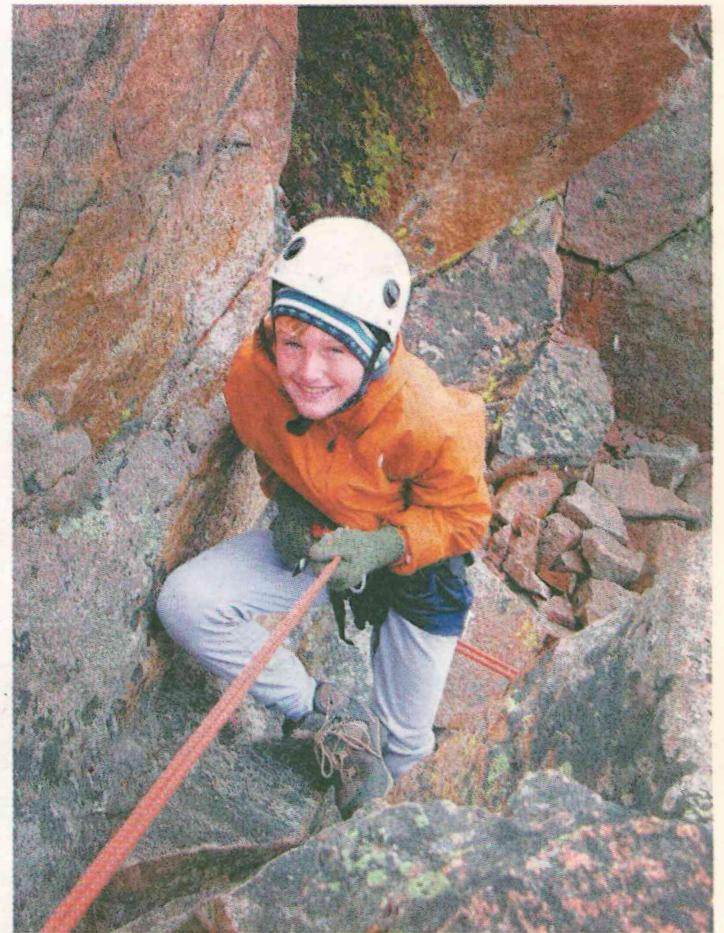
Although Dylan and I were practiced hikers, we hadn't rock climbed before and knew we needed to get somewhat comfortable doing this before tackling Granite. Shawn took us up to Hyalite Canyon's Practice Rock to try the easiest climbing line on what looked like a nasty rock behemoth that was better circumnavigated than scaled.

Dylan went first, climbing to the top with what seemed like minimal psychic expenditure. When my turn came I caressed the rock as though calming a big, unpredictable dog, then began to work my way up. Fifteen feet from the bottom, I paused on a ledge to have a lengthy, repeat conversation with Shawn about how the equipment would prevent me from dying if I fell. A few feet higher I dared

look down at his sweet, encouraging face holding my lifeline. "I hate rock climbing," I announced, and demanded he let me down immediately. Then I went back up and froze in the same spot. Then I went back down and tried very hard not to cry in front of Dylan, wide-eyed at seeing his 37-year-old mother in this state. I looked at Shawn and he looked at the ground. I hated seeing them like that, pained for me. I took a deep breath, then quickly skittered to the top, raised my fist and cussed like a sailor—with apologies to my son's tender ears.

The second time on Practice Rock was much the same, and I realized that what began as Dylan's coming-of-age challenge had ironically become my albatross.

Still, we planned our Granite adventure for the last weekend in August, knowing that the Beartooth Mountains are famous for heinous weather, hoping for sun. We got the most complete climbing guide on Granite Peak available, published by First Ascent Press out of Bozeman. I studied



Twelve-year-old Dylan Ault rappels down after reaching the summit of Granite Peak.



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Mountain goats are common camp visitors on Froze-to-Death Plateau in the Beartooths.

HIGH POINT

it closely, and identified several statements of concern that re-visited me at odd hours throughout the days preceding our trip. Statements like: The summit success rate for Granite is relatively low. The common reasons for failure are bad weather, inadequate physical conditioning and a lack of mental fortitude. Or the final directions for the easiest route to the summit: Another steep move in the chimney leads to a large broken ledge that is followed back left to a series of squat corners. Climb a steep crack and step left. Scramble up a corner to a ledge and traverse left into the upper third of the Keyhole Chimney.

The big day was pleasant as we drove on the West Rosebud Road outside the little town of Absarokee to the Mystic Lake Trailhead that would take us up toward Granite Peak. When we pulled into the parking lot I looked at the towering, fairytale-like peaks before us and tried not to feel small. It began to sprinkle as we set out, but didn't pour until switchback number 16 or so. Dylan kept count of the switchbacks, know-

ing that once we'd counted them down we'd have 5,000 feet of elevation gain behind us. We decided to huddle together on the mountainside under the tent fly before we got completely soaked and spent nearly an hour there before we got another breath of fresh air.

Although the rain stopped, the weather changed to cold fog as we made our way up to Froze-to-Death Plateau and began what seemed like an endless journey across mossy, high-alpine tundra and scree fields. Sometimes the scree turned to boulders, like a rock playground for giants, and I fought to keep up with Dylan, Shawn and Aaron.

We kept stopping to add layers as the day crept toward evening, until both Dylan and I had on everything we'd packed. For me this included a turtleneck and fleece layer, a down coat with a rain jacket over top of it, a hat, gloves, long johns and hiking pants, wool socks and boots. And we were still cold. "This is harder than I thought it would be," Dylan admitted to me at one point. I knew his confession was more about camaraderie in noting my fatigue than true complain-

ing, and we continued together in silence for another hour until setting up camp inside a vertigo-inducing cloud.

I am certain a cup of steamy, Lipton parmesan noodles will never taste as good as they did that evening, as we discussed the weather the next day, and whether it would clear enough to allow us to summit. In moments when the fog wafted through and allowed a brief peek at the surroundings, I was humbled by the immensity of the plateau and the surrounding peaks, rising out of the clouds like angry grandfathers. They certainly dwarfed the Bridgers or Spanish Peak mountains I was used to backpacking in. I sensed the same awe in Dylan, and in a private moment asked him if he was still sure he wanted to try to get to the top. "I'm sure," he said.

The next morning I poked my head out of the tent, greeted by fog now so dense we couldn't see from one tent to another. I stumbled over rocks and said good morning to Aaron. "This place reminds me of the Himalayan mountaintops where Tibetans drag their dead relatives and chop them up for vultures to eat," I said.

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When Shawn finally stumbled down the rocks toward the tent I hollered, "Did you make it?"

"We did!" he yelled back with a grin.

When Dylan and Aaron crested the hill I hooted and hollered. Dylan ran down and jumped into my arms as I congratulated him. He said the climb had tested him, but that he was very glad he did it. Turns out there is one other possibility when you meet your edge with your child in tow: You might discover that they can do more than you can. And that's reason to celebrate. ●

>>Megan Ault lives in Bozeman and is the managing editor of *Balance* and *Montana Quarterly* magazines.



Author Megan Ault, center, congratulates her son after reaching the top of Granite Peak with Shawn Regnerus, left, and Aaron Schuerr (not pictured).

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