

Petit Grepon
in Rocky Mountain National Park
A Lesson in Day Climbs

My brother and I had been planning this trip nearly all summer. It was to be the biggest challenge of our climbing careers yet. It was, as far as we were concerned, a “big wall” and if Lynn Hill could do “The Nose” free in a day, certainly we could do “Petit Grepon” in a day. Well, depending on your definition of what a *day* is, we did in fact finish the Petit in a day.

Around 3:03am Sunday morning, the 25th of August 1996, we awoke to the sound of a strange vehicle backing up to the tent. Beep ... Beep ... Beep ... Beep ... the nerve of someone backing up a utility vehicle at that time of the morning in the middle of Glacier Basin camp grounds. After yelling obscenities at the rude driver, to no avail, we realized that it was not a vehicle backing up in the dark but our travel alarm’s annoying way of waking us up. We had packed everything the night before, down to what we would put on in the way of clothing, so that the morning journey to the trail head would be as short as possible. Within 45 minutes we were parked at the Glacier Gorge trail head with packs on our back and ready to go. A quick gear and sanity check and we are on our way.

It was cold when we got up and we dressed the part. Two layers of pants and shirts, a fleece, and hats and gloves, yet we were producing sweat before the first ¼ mile up the trail. First to come off were the hats, then the gloves, then the fleece, then the outer layer shirt, and finally the sweat pants were pulled up to the knees. Our bodies were working overtime on the hike, we think mostly due to the altitude which was 8,900’ at the trail head. We had packed only the bare essentials for a single day climb, plus enough water for the hike in and out. Still, the packs were heavy with all the gear, extra clothes and food.

The walk seemed quiet and peaceful until we happened on a herd of Elk. Phil and I failed “Walking Quietly Through the Woods, 101” in college, so the newly disturbed pack of angry beasts charged directly at us, at least that is what it sounded like. I couldn’t see what was going on since I had grabbed my brother and put him in the front of the commotion as a peace offering to the forest gods. Our enormous combined presence scared them off their attack path and they soon vanished into the woods. I think the Elk must have spread the word around the forest about the two hiking manly men because we didn’t have any trouble with mountain critters after that.

Living on the East end of Kansas doesn’t provide the most perfect of conditions for altitude training. I think an altimeter reading from my house in Leawood shows about 500’ above sea level, and we quickly found our selves hiking above 10,000’. Even running weekly on the tread mill, which is easily 2 more feet above ground level, didn’t prepare me for this hike from hell. We felt out of shape, out of breath, and out of our minds the entire way up to Sky Pond.

Why do they call it Sky Pond? I reckon it’s because, if you were to get rid of the mountains, rocks, and earth holding the pond up, it would literally be “in the sky”. The altitude for Sky Pond is about 10,800’, and at this point we found ourselves just above the tree line. The time, well behind schedule, is now 9:00am. We had been hiking, with more than our share of rest breaks, for around 4 ½ hours.

After walking around the edges of Sky Pond we found the perfect place to “rack up”. An overhanging rock shelter would hold the gear not absolutely essential for the climb itself until we could return later in the day to retrieve it. What an optimistic point of view ... later that day?

I was feeling ready to go, like a kid waiting in line for a day pass at Worlds of Fun. All the preparation had paid off. The flight was on time, the rental car was big enough for all our gear, the camping site was great, we had actually woke up on time and made the killer hike to the base of Petit! All systems are go for take off. Phil? Phil, are you OK? Phil, why are you hunched over that bush?

The altitude had taken it’s toll on my brother’s gut, and he hadn’t been feeling all that great. To ease the uneasiness he tried some liquid Power Gel. That was just the excuse his stomach needed to send him over the edge, so to speak. I think Phil picked the wrong bush to “unload” on since a strange furry creature scrambled out of the bushes and began a close examination of the situation. We couldn’t figure out what he was, and I’m sure he couldn’t figure out what we were either. Looking very similar to a beaver in many respects, he was also strangely different than anything we’d ever seen. Making several advances towards us and our gear, it was obvious that he wasn’t scared of us. Maybe he wanted the left over Power Gel? Later we were told by the Ranger at park headquarters he was most likely a Marmot, and that Marmots rarely eat adult humans as we had originally thought.

Our pitiful cries for help were getting on the Marmots nerves and so finally, after getting real bored with holding us hostage, the Marmot set us free. We took the opportunity and made our break for the base of Petit. To obtain the first belay point, a 500' vertical climb/scramble up and across loose boulders provided even more heart pounding and heavy breathing. Every 20 to 50 feet required a 5 minute rest break and so our climb on the rock face itself didn't get under way until almost 10:30am.

Having finished the 500' approach, we took a much needed 30 minute rest and preparation break at the base of the climb. We were finding that every single move we made at this altitude required twice as much effort as we were used to in Kansas. I was starting to feel a little nervous about the 8 pitches ahead, and real uncomfortable about the options for descent.

As Phil takes the first moves off belay for his lead of the first pitch, my stomach starts building a legal case against me. As the day would wear on, I would become less and less able to contribute to the day's adventure. Phil had managed to dump most of his sickness earlier, and I wish I could have done the same. Phil and I had agreed on which pitches would be lead by each of us, and my 3 were to be the last pitches, eventually gaining the summit. Already I am wondering if my body will hold up for the leads.

The first pitch is pretty straightforward stuff, following into a second pitch that achieves a major ledge. Above the ledge some wide chimney moves, with little protection, leave you on a chock stone belay. A fairly unmemorable fourth pitch sets us up for the only 5.8 section of the day. The fifth pitch comes back out on the face, presents the crux section as a thin cracked steep dihedral, and eventually winds around to the east side of the pinnacle. The day has gone by fairly rapidly to this point, so the east side of the mountain is in the shade and at this altitude, this late in the year, shade can be a very cold thing. I have been dragging myself up the climb all day, begging for an oxygen mask at every belay, which Phil found very good for our team morale. Having hauled the clothing, food, and water pack all day long, and feeling really sick, I ask Phil to relieve me of the upcoming lead duties. He kindly obliged and quickly begins the 6th pitch ascent which lands him on the famous "Pizza Pan" belay. They weren't kidding either, this belay stance is barely big enough to hold a mushroom and onion pizza, and make sure it's a thin crust pie! The wind has really picked up now, and with a cloud cover having moved in Phil finds himself in a really nasty spot. It is down right freezing! Shaking uncontrollably he encourages me to break down my belay and get through the pitch ASAP. I'm wondering, why am I so popular all of the sudden? Oh yeah, I've got all the warm clothes in my pack. Belaying in a tee-shirt in the howling wind, I think he was actually a couple shades of blue before I reached him on the pizza pan stance. After tying me in to the belay station we quickly suit ourselves up with all the extra warm clothes found in my pack. A complicated hand over of gear entails due to the extremely small working belay area, after which Phil takes off on lead looking for a small ledge with a boulder as the next belay point. While belaying from the coldest spot on the mountain a storm system is brewing above the peaks behind us. It's close to dark, I'm cold, I'm shaking out of control, it's starting to rain, and the clouds are looking very serious. Phil has made enough progress on the 7th pitch that he can't possibly hear my pathetic rendition of "Go Tell it on the Mountain", which I sing louder and louder in an attempt to get God's attention, at which point he would have to come down and save our butts (maybe he would save us just so I would stop singing?) After penning a couple of formal deals with the almighty I hear Phil finally yell "Safe, and Off Belay". I turn in a world record time breaking down my belay and then follow up this second to the last pitch. By the time I meet Phil on the tiniest of belay ledges the sky has cleared back up to reveal a bright shining moon! The sun is still casting light over the mountains, and now the moon is joining in. Of course we both recognize that the dual heavenly bodies of light won't last long, and within an hour or so the sun will surely be gone. The last pitch wanders left and right and experiences the thin blade section of the pinnacle. A most impressive finish lands us on the smallest summit we have ever seen. A mere 8' x 30' at the top, Phil and I reckon Petit Grepon is French for "Little Summit" (we never took no French lessons in school, but we smart folk anyhow).

A note to the aspiring Petit climber: I doubt it's possible to over plan for this climb. Lots of water, extra clothes, rain gear, flashlights, etc. are very necessary items to take with you on this climb. Sure, it's fun to bitch about the extra weight and bulk while your climbing, but when the need arises and you find the gear in your pack: you will believe.

Sick, tired, cold, delusional, smelly, and grouchy are ways to describe our dynamic duo-ness. I was sick, tired, and cold, while Phil was smelly and grouchy ... or was it the other way around ... or were we both simply delusional? The mind plays tricks on you when you push your limits like we had. Either way it was now about 8:15pm and we began looking for a way down. I'm not even sure if I bothered to take in the view, since getting down was now the all important goal. The guide book offers two choices: either a series of 9 double rope rappels, or a single double rope rappel followed by a scramble off the back side of the ridge.

In order to prolong the need to make an actual decision, we make our way down the first rappel to examine our options closer. I continue asking for divine intervention and ramble on about wanting my mommy over and over again. Phil, being

the understanding brother that he is, reckons that as long as I continue following him off the mountain that my lunatic ravings aren't going to hurt anyone, although I wish he would have smacked me up side the head once or twice to bring me back to reality.

Once off the first rappel an argument entails, of very little energy, as to the best way home. Phil elects the back side walk off, and I think the direct series of rappels is more convenient. After all, our gear is on the front side of the mountain and a walk off the back means re-hiking the last mile of the morning's trip to retrieve it. Phil calls me a whiner, decisively winning the dispute, and so we begin our climb off the back.

We rope up for a 50' chimney climb, the top of which overlooks a 3rd class scramble to the "Gash". From this *gash* in the mountain ridge we could see the valley below ... our way home! Phil yells back to me "Just a couple hundred yards of boulder scrambling and we will meet up with Andrew's Trail". A huge feeling of relief comes over me as I realize we might get down before the sun has completely set. The journey is nearly finished, or so I thought.

An hour and a half later the valley is still out of reach? Remember the bit about the mind playing tricks on you? The 200 yard estimate was only off by about 1,500 vertical feet of ankle breaking boulder scrambling agony!!!! About a quarter of the way down we lost the sun and had to dig out the petzels (goofy little flashlights rubber-banded to the foreheads of outdoor type people with a really bad habit of messing up your hair). My whining and complaining have turned into 4 letter words describing my affection for Phil. A couple hours into our walk off, nearly finished with the scrambling descent, we find our selves pondering the age old question "Do we walk across this glacier in our Tevas with or without socks?" The With Socks option is also known as "Winter Tevas", but because technically it's still late summer we have created a dilemma for ourselves.

Being college graduates we took no time in deciding that glaciers are basically wet and cold, snow and ice. The obvious choice was to remove our socks and go across Andrew's Glacier in stylish summer Tevas. Reaching the very bottom of the valley and the end of the glacier we expected to run right into a big neon sign pointing the way home. In the end I guess a long enough extension cord couldn't be found to light the sign and as a result we found no indication of park managed trails anywhere. We were still lost.

With no obvious trails anywhere in sight I start making a case for an evening under the stars. Why not just lay down on these nice big rocks and sleep, picking the journey back up at sunrise? It's 11:00pm now and neither of us have eaten much all day due to being sick, we are terribly tired, our knees have run away from home because of abuse, and we have no idea where we are. Since Phil hadn't packed his night-night teddy bear he refuses to stop, insisting that as long as we keep walking in a general DOWN direction we will once again join civilization. Being the witty negotiator that I am I plan a "Sit In", forcing myself to the ground in brilliant protest. Phil on the other hand, being the more persistent of the family, grabs my pack and runs away with it. What was I to do? Not wanting to be outdone I pick up my body, which is way heavier than the pack he just took from me, and haul my lifeless carcass down the hill after him.

Crossing back and forth over Andrew's creek, make shift trail markers start popping up, but all too often the trail disappears again shortly after the markers. Still heading mostly in the down direction and an hour into the trail finding game, we happen upon the moonlit outline of the end of the mountain line! That is exactly what we were looking for since the game plan was to follow the back side of the mountain around to the front side, retrieve our gear, and then go home and sleep. An hour or so had been spent walking blindly through the woods, eventually landing us back on the original Glacier Gorge Trail. We experience our second sigh of relief knowing that we most likely will live through the night having found the trail back home.

From our newfound position on the trail we still have a 2+ mile round trip hike to get the extra pack back, which is waiting underneath the Petit. In my mind there are only two options at this point: (1) Fall down and sleep right where we are, then at sunrise go and get the pack, or (2) Hike back to the car, sleep the night off in our tent, and then re-hike the entire journey later tomorrow afternoon. Phil, always finding it necessary to contribute to the problem solving process, adds the third, and to me the most unthinkable, option. He will go get the pack now, while I take a bit of a rest and nap, and on his return we can then hike down out of the mountains and be done with the journey.

Sure, fine, whatever. You go hike around in the middle of the night, up and through waterfalls, across treacherous rocks and waterways, risking bear and mountain lion attacks, and try to find that itty bitty tiny bag in the middle of Rocky Mountain National Park. No problem, I'll wait here.

I found a big rock that looked and felt just as comfortable as a Sealey Posturpedic Mattress (remember that problem with the mind playing tricks on you?). Sleep was most welcome, and I dozed for what seemed to be just over an hour. Since Phil had turned the thermostat down before he left, I woke up freezing and shaking uncontrollably again. Then it hit me ... Phil still

wasn't back. Had he been attacked by the evil Marmot? Did an elk chase him into Sky Pond, which at this time of the night must have been -500 degrees Fahrenheit. Was he wrestling with a bear over possession of the last bit of Power Gel? My heart raced. My mind said go back to sleep and don't worry about it, but my heart continued to race none the less. I pulled myself together to prepare a heroic rescue of my missing, and probably dying, brother. Downing a granola bar and several gulps of water, I start up the trail after him around 12:30am.

Ever heard of a Pine Martin? Me either, but I had a close encounter with one that night (as you read on, remember the mind playing tricks factor). Walking up the trail, still mostly delusional, my petzel beam catches a pair of eyes in the bush. They don't run away, but return a ferocious and angry stare. The crazed animal jumps from the bushes and runs right at me. I respond, most intelligently, with Ahhhhhhhhh! This startles the attacking wild creature of the night, just long enough for me to realize that he wants my petzel, not my flesh. Recognizing the possibilities for night time hunting, and the advantage he would have over his competition, he plots a collision course to take the light emitting tool from me. I wonder, what is going to scare this guy away, how can I come out of this disagreement victorious? I will not give up my petzel to this dirt crawling fur ball of the forest, and in retaliation I assume the persona of a bear. Grrrrrr, Grrrrrr, Grrrrr (imagine my arms swinging wildly in the air). This has no impact on the Martin and he continues his aggressive advances?! Realizing that this creature looks like a cross between a ferret and a cat, I try my famous Dog impression. The Martin falls over holding his tummy, laughing hysterically at my feeble attempts to scare him off. Of course this was the reaction I expected out of my lesser educated opponent, so I make my break leaving the Martin in my dust.

Since I still had my petzel, it wasn't long before I realized that I had run in the direction from whence I came, and was actually retreating. Phil was on one side of the duped Martin, and I was on the other. Would I brave another encounter with the night dweller, or just go back and sleep on the trail. What to do, what to do? Decisions, decisions, decisions ...

It wasn't long before Phil returned and rudely woke me from my morning rest. And to top it off, he was empty handed. An hour and a half of searching and he never found the pack! I nearly died trying to rescue him, and he gives up the search at 1:00am. Too tired to argue about who was right (I was) and who was wrong (he was) about the daring, early morning gear rescue attempt, we pack up the gear we have and head down the trail back to the car. About a mile into the journey to the car my petzel blows up, literally. I reckon the venting Pine Martin used his telepathic powers to cause the failure. Since both Phil and I had been rejected during Radio Shack job interviews, we give up the futile effort to fix the non functioning headlamp and begin down the trail again ... one of us has a light on upstairs, but neither of us are home.

The car is reached by 3:00am, and we lay our broken bodies to rest in sleeping bags by 3:30am, August 26th 1996. A good night's sleep will be needed before we begin the long 4 ½ mile hike again in the morning to retrieve our still missing pack.

Story by Joe Ratterman, climb by Phil and Joe Ratterman