

## Lizard Head Peak (13,113 feet)

by Dave Cooper

It was already midday when Albert Ellingwood and Barton Hoag started up the route. They had spent the morning searching for a reasonable way to climb the mass of unstable rock known as the Lizard Head, before settling on a chimney near the southeast corner.

Earlier that morning Ellingwood had attempted to ascend two other lines but had retreated from both. This remaining route was probably their last chance to find a way to climb the Lizard Head.

The date was August 28, 1920, and Ellingwood and Hoag were attempting to become the first to stand on the summit of this spectacular rock feature, guarded on all sides by vertical walls of crumbling volcanic rock. Ellingwood had been assured by all of the authorities that the peak was

**Getting to the Trailhead:** Take State Highway 145 towards Telluride. 2.7 miles before reaching the town of Telluride, Highway 145 turns south towards Lizard Head Pass, 12.4 miles from this junction. Continue south over Lizard Head Pass for 1.9 miles to the trailhead for the Cross Mountain Trail.

### Hiking and Climbing Statistics:

2860 feet of elevation gain in 3.8 miles one way on the approach. Lizard Head rises approximately 350 feet above its surroundings.

**Difficulty:** A trail approach to a technical alpine rock climb on questionable rock at high altitude. You should be very comfortable leading at a 5.8 to 5.9 level. This ain't your local crag climb!

**Technical Gear:** A standard rock rack up to a #4 Camalot should be sufficient for protection. Two 60 meter ropes, preferably both being single ropes, which don't snag as easily and are less prone to being cut on sharp edges. Don't forget your helmet.

You'll be happier if you leave your packs at the base of the climb, carrying water and rain gear on your harness and food in your pockets. A pack can get in the way. Try to hang the packs out of the way of marmots or you may be in for a nasty surprise when you get back down.



"unclimbable and inaccessible", but to the premier climber of the era these words were, as Ellingwood said, "like a red rag to the enthusiastic alpinist" (Outing Magazine, November 1921).

They had left the Lizard Head Station of the Rio Grand Southern three days earlier with 80 pound packs and hiked to a camp in Bilk Basin, where they spent the next two days waiting for good weather. Finally on the 28th. they had their chance.

It is hard to think of these two, equipped not with modern rock climbing gear but with nailed boots, 100 feet of hemp rope and three soft iron pitons, setting out to climb a route which even today challenges most climbers. Their courage and sense of adventure was enormous.

### *Lizard Head Peak with the route shown in red*

It was well after dark when the two finally reached the base of the climb after an eventful but successful climb, one which was certainly the most difficult yet completed in Colorado - so far ahead of its time, in fact, that many doubted whether the two had really done the climb. It was only nine years later, when the Lizard Head received

its second ascent by Harold Wilm and Dobson West on June 9th, 1929, that the first ascent by Ellingwood and Hoag was confirmed. Wilm and West used Ellingwood's three pitons (in addition to their own) and retrieved the rope that the first-ascentionists had been forced to leave when it became stuck on their descent.

As I mentioned earlier, even today, with the advantage of sticky-rubber shoes, modern rock protection and strong dynamic ropes, this climb is a serious undertaking. Considered to be the most difficult peak of any in Colorado over 13,000 feet, an ascent of Lizard Head should not be taken lightly. Although the rock may be more stable than it was on the first ascent (the route having been "cleaned" somewhat by the passage of other climbers), the constant weathering of this friable rock makes rockfall a constant hazard, and opportunities for the leader to protect the route may be widely separated. If another party is ahead of you, wait for another day. And always wear a helmet.

#### **Caution:**

Be aware of the potential for rockfall and always wear your helmet. You may want to heed the advice given by Ormes in his "Guide to the Colorado Mountains" - "when you reach the base, take picture and go home."

Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route. We write about it, you take all the risks.

## **Approach**



From the parking area head northwest across the open area, following wooden posts until the trail becomes unambiguous as it heads into the trees.

In 0.5 miles there is a trail junction (Waypoint "TRAIL JUNCTION"). Turn right on the Cross Mountain Trail. (This junction can easily be missed if you're getting a pre-dawn start. If you reach a sign for the Groundhog Stock Trail you've gone too far).

*Lizard Head dominates the view on the approach*

Follow the excellent trail as it continues to gain elevation on its way to the saddle between Cross Mountain and Lizard Head, 3.5 miles from the trailhead. Here, at 12,100 feet, leave the trail and head to the right up the broad west

For more on Colorado's colorful climbing history, check out the outstanding book "Roof of the Rockies - A history of Colorado Mountaineering", by William M. Bueler (CMC Press).

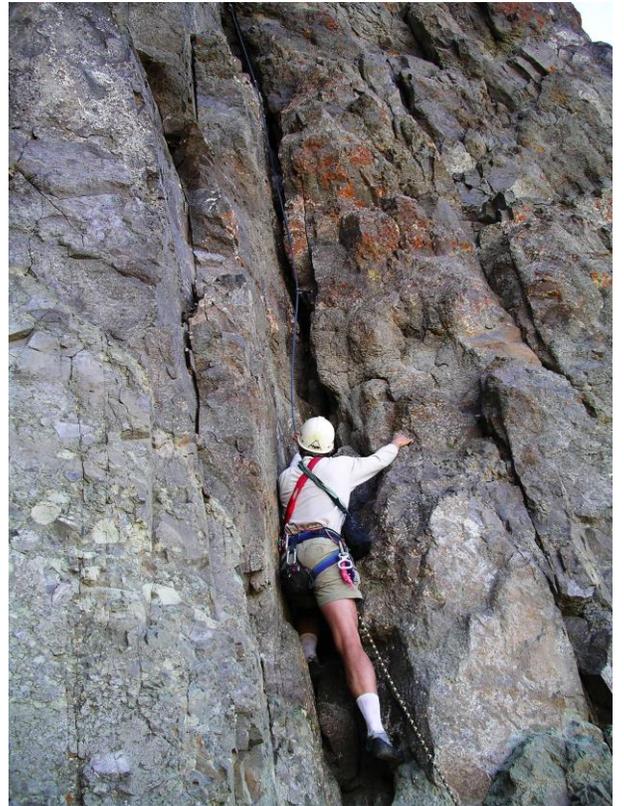
shoulder of Lizard Head. A faint climbers trail can be followed up the talus to the base of the tower. Turn right and scramble along the base of the Lizard Head until you have almost reached the southeast corner. Just before the corner, look for the distinctive crack of the first pitch.

### **Climb Description**

Climb the obvious crack/chimney system for 150 feet to the notch at its top. For the first fifty feet the face to the right of the crack can be climbed, but I have found this to be looser (and offering only marginal protection), while the crack itself is quite clean.

An intermediate belay stance can be used half way up the first pitch. This small ledge has pitons for an anchor (on my first attempt at this route several years ago there were two pitons here. On the last occasion, we could only find one surviving piton). While this intermediate belay stance is usable, it is probably better for the belayer if you combine the two pitches into one.

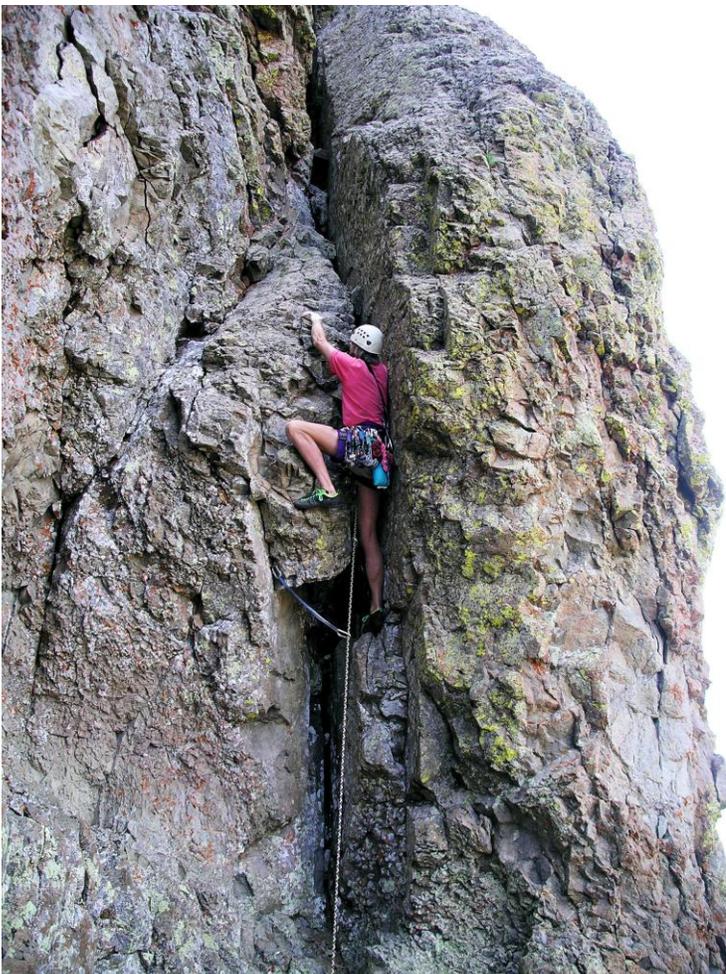
*Climber on the first pitch*



From this intermediate belay ledge most people move out to the left face and climb delicately up then right to the final, awkward bulge just below the notch. We gave this section of the route a solid 5.8 rating.

*Cooper just above the crux overhang on the final pitch - Dan Bereck photo.*

Fixed anchors at the notch can be used for belaying and rappelling. From here head left up a ramp to the base of the final pitch. This ramp, while only 4th class, is covered with loose gravel and demands great care while ascending and descending. Some parties will fix a line on this section, approximately 200 feet long.



The third pitch, considered the crux pitch by many, starts in a small alcove and is distinguished by a small overhang twenty feet up. A wide crack on the right side of the overhang offers protection and continues the whole length of the pitch, widening considerably into a slot above the overhang. I've seen this pitch rated at anything from 5.7 to 5.9, though we thought it to be a stiff 5.8.

The first ascent party employed a technique known as the *courte-echelle* to overcome this obstacle, in which the leader stands on the shoulders of his or her partner to gain a higher handhold (I confess that none of my climbing partners have offered to do this for me!). On the second ascent, Harold Wilm took a fall when trying to climb over the roof and it was left to his partner West to finish the pitch. Even the legendary mountaineer Dwight Lavender, when completing the fourth ascent in 1931, employed the same *courte-echelle* at this spot.

A fixed piton immediately below the overhang can be clipped, then the crack can be protected with one or more #4 Camalots. A couple of strenuous moves are needed to get over the overhang before the terrain eases up. Continue either up the widening slot or head left a few feet and climb the face with reasonable protection.

*Climbers on the summit*

The top of this pitch ends at a fixed anchor above the slot, which also offers a good spot for the first rappel. From the top of this pitch, scramble up to the summit ridge, turn left and cross a narrow ridge to gain the summit. This



section is not difficult but the loose nature of the stacked dinner plates of rock demand care.

The descent requires at least as much caution as the ascent. Downclimb to the top of the third pitch and rappel 100 feet down the slot to the ramp system. Carefully downclimb the second pitch back to the notch at the top of the first pitch and rappel to the ground.

*Rappelling the upper pitch and getting clear of rockfall!*

Be extremely careful when pulling the ropes, both to avoid getting your ropes stuck and because of the inevitable rockfall.



TOPO! map printed on 07/17/06 from "Untitled1.tpo"

