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Chef Matt Vawter uses Fruition Farms ricotta, foraged miners lettuce and a snap pea caper vinaigrette in Fruition's Spring Asparagus Salad.

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# Highest Ground

Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks offer goal-oriented exhilaration.

BY TED ALAN STEDMAN



Mt. Massive, the third highest peak in the lower 48 states, towers over San Isabel National Forest and rewards successful summiters with picturesque views.

Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks hold an almost mythical fascination and admiration. Climbing these 54 peaks, also known as "fourteeners," represents the state's quintessential outdoor experience, an elevation celebration no other lower-48 state can claim; sorry California, you're number two with 13. "We call them the 'Approachable Everests,'" says Lloyd Athearn of the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative. "The joy of climbing a big Colorado peak can be a major life achievement for some people."

No fourteener is "easy," but some are easier than others. Long days are the norm, and some summit bids are best done with a lower basecamp allowing closer proximity. Roughly 17 peaks are ranked as difficult and carry Class 3 and above technical ascent rankings. Where to start? Having climbed roughly half, including some of the more difficult peaks, here's my recommendation for your Colorado climbing quest.

## HIGHEST PEAKS ON THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE AMONG THE EASIEST

For climbers looking at their first summits, the conjoined Grays (14,270 feet) and Torreys (14,267 feet) peaks rise to the top of list on several levels. Being close to Denver, just south of I-70, they're popular; a comforting aspect for first-timers who aren't averse to a shared experience. The peaks mark the highest points on the U.S. Continental Divide, and with their connecting saddle, it's a wonderful two-for-one climb. Ascended together from Stevens Gulch Trailhead, the Class 1 trail to



### THE RATING SYSTEM

Hiking fourteeners is an inherently risky activity. Some of the gear requirements include proper footwear and 10 essentials as listed by REI at [rei.com/learn/expert-advice/ten-essentials](http://rei.com/learn/expert-advice/ten-essentials). The class designations describe difficulties and help hikers select peaks that challenge but do not overwhelm their fitness levels. *DLM* recommends consulting your doctor prior to a hike if you have any health issues.

Mt. Wilson, among the more technical 14,000-foot peaks in the San Juan Mountains, displays a vivid alpenglow during summer monsoons.



Grays is basic hiking at altitude. After gaining its summit, there's a brief descent north to the .8-mile saddle and a Class 2 hike on boulder debris to Torreys' summit. Round trip/elevation: 9 miles/3,600 feet.

### RARE PROSPECT OF SUMMITTING FOUR FRIENDLY FOURTEENERS

This Class 1 and 2 four-pack in the Tenmile-Mosquito Range south of Breckenridge is another example of geologic serendipity, allowing entry-level climbers to confidently summit Mt. Lincoln (14,286 feet), Mt. Cameron (14,238 feet), Mt. Bross (14,172 feet) and Mt. Democrat (14,148 feet) in a single trip. The easiest, most common way to climb all the peaks begins at Kite Lake Trailhead and ascends the rocky switchbacks on Democrat's East Ridge Route, followed by a decent

east to the broad saddle between Democrat and Cameron. After gaining these summits, descend southeast to the saddle between Cameron and Bross for a relatively leisurely stroll up the gentle incline to Bross's summit. Round trip/elevation: 7 miles/3,600 feet

### STORIED, SHY PEAK AN INTRO TO MORE DIFFICULT CLIMBS

Welcome to what many consider Colorado's most spectacular fourteener. A long, deep couloir on the east face and a perpendicular ledge toward the top hold snow well beyond winter and appear as the peak's namesake cross. The irony is that Mt. of the Holy Cross (14,005 feet) is somewhat hidden from view by surrounding mountains, adding allure. The Class 2 nature of this day-long climb requires rigorous boulder

hopping and negotiating steep, uneven terrain, but little in the way of exposure (i.e., vertical terrain where you can fall). The easiest route from the Halfmoon Trailhead starts out as a 1.7-mile forested hike to the switchbacks on the west ridge, and then a long ascent over huge talus blocks comprising the north ridge to the final summit block. Round trip/elevation: 12 miles/5,625 feet.

### FRONT RANGE MONARCH AN INDUCTION TO THE VERTICAL WORLD

Longs Peak (14,255 feet) dominates the northern Front Range with sheer mass and an immense vertical east face. Thousands attempt to gain the summit each year. Despite its popularity, it is not a peak to be taken lightly. The standard Class

#### CLASS 1

Trail hiking similar to walking on a maintained trail

#### CLASS 2

Off-trail hiking on steeper terrain, often on an unmaintained route versus a trail

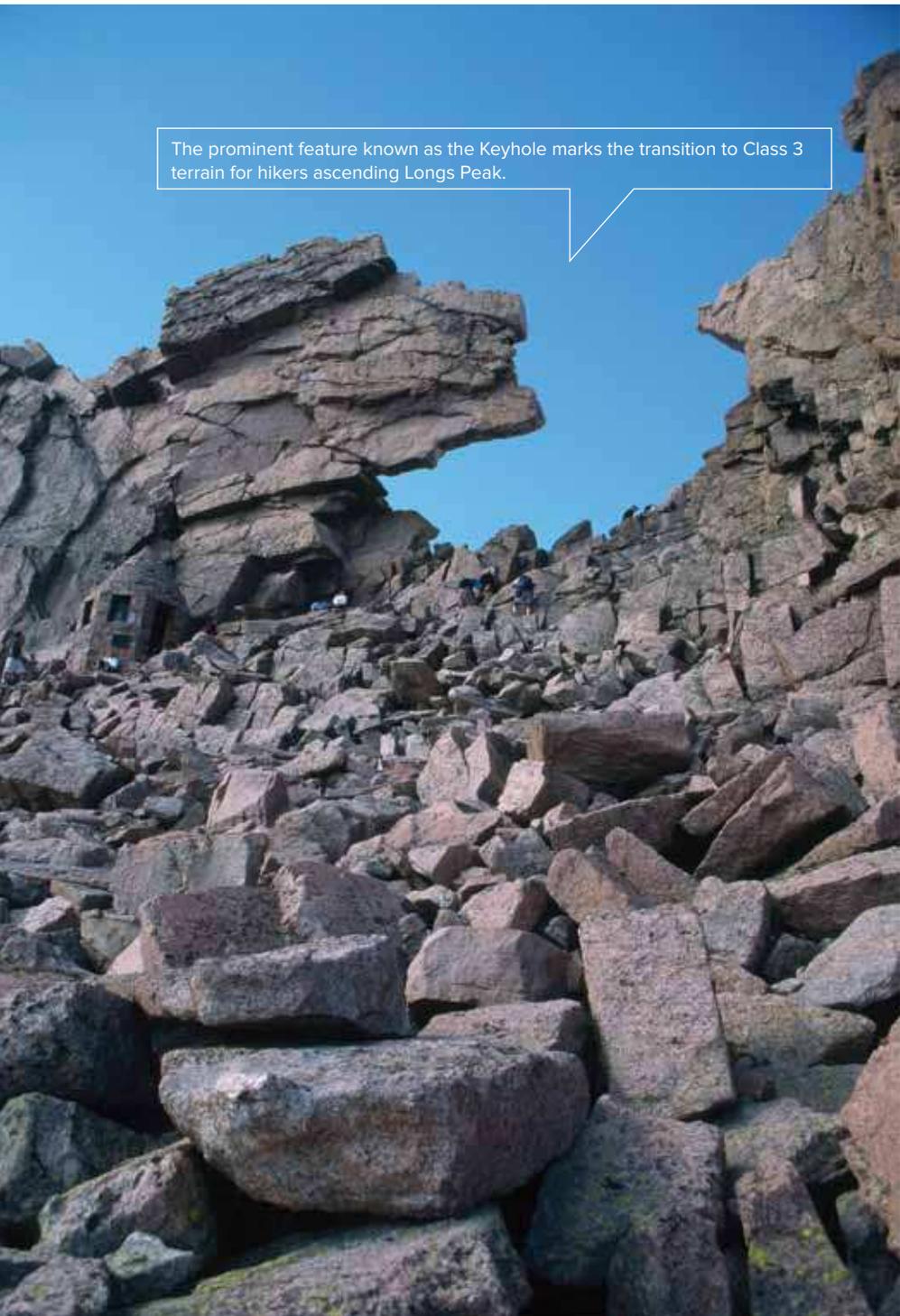
#### CLASS 3

Often called scrambling, using upper body and handholds for upward movement

#### CLASS 4-5

Technical climbing, often with exposure to falling and potential of rock falls; Climbing equipment often required

• For more info before you climb, visit [14ers.com](http://14ers.com), which is a community-based site chronicling all aspects of climbing Colorado fourteeners.



The prominent feature known as the Keyhole marks the transition to Class 3 terrain for hikers ascending Longs Peak.

3 Keyhole II route is usually started in the pre-dawn hours—full moon nights border on festive—so climbers can safely descend before the onset of afternoon thunderstorms that can turn portions of the steep route into a deadly bobsled run. From the Longs Peak Trailhead west of CO-7, a six-mile hike leads to the jumbled Boulder Field at 12,760 feet, and then to the famed Keyhole consisting of a huge overhanging rock slab. Crossing through the Keyhole, enter into a vertical world of Class 3 terrain demanding handholds for upward elevation gain. You'll traverse an exposed western face of slabs to the 13,300-foot Trough, a long couloir leading to the wildly exposed Narrows ledge. This airy catwalk deposits climbers to the steep final section named Homestretch, where handholds and jams in vertical cracks lead to Longs' broad, hard-won summit. Round trip/elevation: 15 miles/5,000 feet. 



The Colorado Fourteeners Initiative crew works to improve the approach trail on Mt. Massive, west of Leadville.

## A Higher Calling: Colorado Fourteeners Initiative

Anyone scaling the state's 54 highest peaks has the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative (CFI) to thank. The Golden-based nonprofit's goal is to ensure that all fourteeners have a sustainably designed, durably constructed approach route to the summit that minimizes the effects of foot traffic in sensitive mountain environments. "We're not building routes all the way to the summit," says Lloyd Athearn, CFI executive director. "Our objective is to have a good trail through the alpine tundra where the ecosystem is less resilient. Plants adapt to extreme environments, but they can't withstand people stepping on them."

Moving 600-pound boulders with winches, constructing drainage cuts and carrying heavy tools in the thin air are basic job requirements. 10 percent of the work is packing in and out two to three tons of gear, food, bear fences, tools, water and human waste, Athearn explains. It's a monumental task considering the 12-week window when trail crews can operate. Up to a dozen crew leaders fan out to various fourteeners, and bigger projects contract youth corp workers. Last year, CFI had 53 trail maintenance projects on 19 peaks, totaling 1,330 individual days of volunteer labor.

Athearn says fourteener popularity increases yearly. "We don't have exact numbers, but we count more people each season." One gauge for popularity is individual donations coming from 44 states and several foreign countries. "Climbers donate money after experiencing the awe of summiting Colorado's highest peaks," says Athearn. "Working at 14,000 feet has a way of instilling pride."

[14ers.org](http://14ers.org)