

## Living The High Life

A hardy, obsessive subculture of hikers bags our counties' highest points

By Brendan Leonard

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There were many things I thought I might say when I finally pushed my passion for high-pointing to the top of Humphreys Peak, the tallest mountain in Arizona. "Right now, I am the tallest man in Arizona," was one memorable line. "Well, it's all downhill from here," was another.

But on the October afternoon my friend Brian and I actually made it to the 12,633-foot summit, I said instead, "Okay, snap a quick photo. I've got to go back down before I throw up."

But that's what happens when you enter the society of high-pointers, who spend money, energy and much of their free time collecting peaks—like the highest point in every one of Arizona's 15 counties.

I set out determined to bag the highest point of all, the volcanic mountain that dominates Coconino County. The previous day, we had heard that Humphreys had gotten some snow, but we expected only a light dusting. The kids sledding at the base of the Snowbowl ski area should have served as a warning that two guys in summer hiking gear weren't very well prepared.

The snow on the lower parts of the trail was already melting in the midmorning sun, so with every step I took uphill through the wet snow, I slid a half-step backward. I slogged through the slush behind Brian, struggling to keep up, while also struggling to act like I wasn't struggling. As we gained altitude, the snow became crunchier under our boots and my head began to throb with altitude sickness. Every tree was flocked with ice and snow.

At the saddle between Humphreys and Agassiz Peak, a vicious wind whipped over the north-south ridge that constituted our path to the summit. Two-foot icicles shot sideways off a wooden trail sign at a 90-degree angle. My socks were soaked with melted snow, as were the bottom 8 inches of my pant legs. My head pounded. We pressed on. We took on the last three-quarters of a mile to the summit, a trail of footprints in the frozen snow cut just below the ridge. Brian plodded up the ridge, getting farther ahead with every step. I had to count my steps and stop every 10 paces to draw in three breaths. My pant legs froze to my boots. The throb in my head felt powerful enough to implode my skull and the wind burned my face. Just six hours earlier, I had been breathing comfortably in Phoenix, elevation 1,117 feet, temperature 72 degrees.

After what seemed like an hour of stumbling up the ridge, I finally ran out of mountain. There was no more up, just Brian squatting in a snow-filled rock shelter.

The wind ripped at our clothes, and the sun provided blinding light but no heat. I had made it to the top, and it was terrible.

Humphreys Peak is the highest place to stand in Arizona, and also the worst.

I stood now on the trail of people like the software engineer with 3,142 mountains and molehills on his list, or the 69-year-old Flagstaff math professor who has notched 1,400 peaks—and still counting. The 15 county high points of Arizona vary widely in terrain, foliage and scenery, taking even hard core high-pointers a year or two to conquer and enabling one to say things like, “I have stood atop La Paz County” at a cocktail party. Finding and climbing them all will take anyone from one end of Arizona’s geographic spectrum to the other.

Of the 15 county high points, four are actual mountain summits that require a good day’s hike. Mount Baldy, Humphreys Peak, Chiricahua Peak and Mount Wrightson sport great trails to their summits, although the trails up Mount Wrightson are closed due to the Florida Fire in the Santa Rita Mountains last year.

With a sturdy vehicle, it’s possible to drive almost to the top of Mount Lemmon in Pima County, Mount Union in Yavapai County and the unnamed 9,441-foot high point of Greenlee County, a short walk off U.S. Route 191. You’ll need a four-wheel-drive vehicle for Harquahala Mountain in La Paz County. Technically, the high point in Graham County is Mount Graham at 10,720 feet, but the summit of Mount Graham is closed to the public because it serves as a refuge for the endangered red squirrel. The next highest point in Graham County is Hawk Peak at 10,627 feet.

Another four hikes leave the trail and require some orienteering or off-trail knowledge. Browns Peak, the southernmost of the famed Four Peaks, will take a short off-trail scramble up a talus chute to reach the top. Opinions differ on the best route up Navajo County’s Black Mesa to reach the unnamed high point at 8,168 feet, but all agree that any approach and hike will be complicated by lots of dirt-road driving, locked gates and cliffs. Mohave County’s Hualapai Peak requires some careful scrambling to reach the summit. Signal Peak, the Yuma County high point, is a “Choose Your Own Adventure” route, inside the trail-less and nearly roadless Kofa National Wildlife Refuge.

Two of the counties are what seasoned county high-pointers know as “liners”: A high point that sits on a county line, but not a summit. A liner is usually a point on a ridgeline that rises on its way out of a county, such as on the side of Rice Peak. The highest point in Pinal County falls on the north side of Rice Peak, the summit of which actually resides in Pima County. The high point of Gila County is also a “liner”—actually two points that are so close in elevation, you have to visit both of them to be sure you’ve bagged the high point—Myrtle Point on the Mogollon Rim on the Gila-Coconino County line, just off Rim Road, or Promontory Butte, a few miles east on Rim Road and a short hike.

So why would anyone bother finding a place like the Pima/Pinal County line, on the side of a mountain?

As Andy Martin, a software engineer and mountain climber from Tucson who has so far collected the high points of 49 of the 50 states, leaving only Alaska's 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America. When he ran nearly out of states, he decided to compile a list of the high points of all the interesting counties in the United States.

"I was looking for another list to go chasing," Martin said.

He decided to find the county high points of the 12 Western states and 13 Northeastern states. A few states such as California, Utah and Washington already had county high point lists, but for many states Martin had use of USGS topographic maps from the University of Arizona library, checking out as many as 50 at a time. After completing the list of 742 county high points in 25 states in 1994, he published the first 32-page version of his book. He was ready to quit then, but fellow fanatics helped him tackle the punishment of poring over maps for hours at a time to produce *County High Points*, which now lists all 3,142 county high points in the United States.

That book was just what Arizonan Bob Packard needed. The former Northern Arizona University math professor operates from his home base in Flagstaff and has so far bagged nearly 1,400 county high points. Packard calls Martin's book "the Bible," and has been faithful to it since 1988.

Packard's son, Erik, had suggested he summit the high point of every county in Arizona. Packard discovered that he'd already unknowingly done most of them while climbing Arizona's mountains, so he took Erik's advice and decided to finish the rest of the list.

Using a state map, Packard headed up each high point. But after he thought he'd finished, a friend pointed out that he'd misjudged the high point of Pinal County, so he returned to the Santa Catalina Mountains north of Tucson to correct his error. He walked along the Oracle Ridge towards the Pinal-Pima county line and stopped where he figured the high point to be.

"I looked down, and by golly, right there was a little cairn," Packard said. "In the cairn was an aspirin bottle, and in the aspirin bottle was a long, thin piece of paper. And the long, thin piece of paper said, 'This is the high point of Pinal County.'"

The 69-year-old Packard has gone on to summit 1,375 county high points across the country. He's been to the summit of every county in 21 states, including the 11 westernmost states.

He's the most accomplished county high-pointer in the world, or at least the world that knows about county high-pointing. The County High Pointers Association Web

site, [www.cohp.org](http://www.cohp.org), boasts only 82 nationwide "Century Club" members who have summited 100 or more counties.

Still, Andy Martin acknowledges that county high-pointing isn't exactly for everyone. "It's a fringe activity," Martin said, "especially to the 99 percent of the population that likes to golf on the weekends."

A few months after my climb of Humphreys Peak, I headed west out of Phoenix to Harquahala Mountain, Humphreys' low-desert, warm, snowless opposite. I couldn't convince anyone to go with me; even my co-workers at a Phoenix outdoor equipment store had never heard of the mountain.

Harquahala is the highest peak in La Paz County, rising just south of U.S. Route 60, a few miles east of the tiny town of Wenden, where a sign outside the Brooks Outback promises "Hot Beer, Lousy Food, Bad Service."

The mountain grows nothing but desert shrubs and saguaro cacti. The summit is only 5,681 feet high, and one can climb 3,300 feet up the north side of the mountain on the trail or drive the four-wheel-drive road on the south side.

The road and the trail meet at the Harquahala Mountain Observatory, where scientists lived and researched the sun's effect on the Earth's climate from 1920 to 1925. Now, it's where the people who hike up and the people who drive up stare at each other, astonished someone would drive when they could hike, or alternately, waste all that energy walking somewhere they could drive.

The first person to identify and climb all the county high points of Arizona, Bob Walko, stood atop Harquahala Mountain when it was the high point of Yuma County. When La Paz County split from Yuma County in 1983, it took the highest point, Harquahala Mountain, with it. After the split, Yuma County's new high point became Signal Peak. Walko never returned to Yuma County to hike it, but he gets credit as the first person to "complete" the high points of Arizona.

Surveying the checkerboard of farm fields in the valley below from the summit, I understood why Walko never felt drawn to this nondescript desert mountain. I would have skipped it myself if someone hadn't drawn new county lines in 1983.

But on my hike down, the warm breeze whistling through a forest of saguaros in the canyon reminded me that Harquahala wouldn't freezer-burn my face a la Humphreys Peak. If I want that treatment again, I can head down to Cochise County in February and try to get up to the top of Chiricahua Peak.

After that, there are only 12 more to be had.