

PEAK PLEASURES

A desire to keep lists and explore high elevations drives peakbaggers to reach one summit after another.

BY TED BREWER



ALMOST THERE An intrepid climber reaches the summit of 9,983-foot El Capitán, the second-tallest peak in the Bitterroot Mountains and a goal of many peakbaggers.

PHOTO BY NELSON KENTER

Cedron Jones takes a few nimble steps up a jagged rock outcropping and thrusts himself to the summit of Sheep Mountain, a semi-forested peak 10 miles south of Helena topped by granite domes, spires, and towers. Euphoria shows in his face as he takes in the panoramic view. It's a rich payoff for hiking up a mountain that's only about 6,000 feet in elevation and requires just 45 minutes for him to ascend—a walk in the park for this veteran climber. The view encompasses a huge swath of the surrounding Boulder Batholith, nearby Skihi Peak, the Helena Valley, and the Big Belt Mountains.

His sure and steady clip up Sheep Mountain's rigorous incline makes it apparent Jones has topped his fair share of peaks. The 72-year-old Helena resident has hiked to the top of, or "bagged," more than 2,000. As the author of *Peakbagging Montana: A Guide to Montana's Major Peaks*, Jones is one of the leading promoters of peakbagging in Montana.

Ted Brewer is a writer in Helena.

"I love it," he says. "You get up high and see the lay of the country. But there's no doubt it is compulsive behavior."

Compulsive, because peakbagging is about more than just summiting mountains; it entails compiling, adding to, and checking off peaks on a list. Typical lists are those of the highest peaks in a state or county, the highest peaks in a certain mountain range, or all the peaks higher than a certain elevation—such as the "14ers" in Colorado or the "4,000-footers" in the Appalachians. Once peakbaggers check off all the peaks on one list, which may take years or even decades, they start another.

Though not as technical, risky, or physically demanding as mountaineering—which often requires ice axes, crampons, and ropes—peakbagging is no leisurely stroll. These high-altitude hikes require strong legs and often the use of hands on steeper sections. The ability to read topo maps and terrain is essential because trails are often faintly marked or nonexistent.

Peakbagging also turns hikes into what Jones calls a "quest" to reach the summit of as many peaks as possible. Often, the peaks are

obscure and come to a hiker's attention only because of a book like Jones's or a website such as peakbagging.com. "I'm climbing peaks now in Montana and other western states that most people have never heard of, some that don't even have names," Jones says.

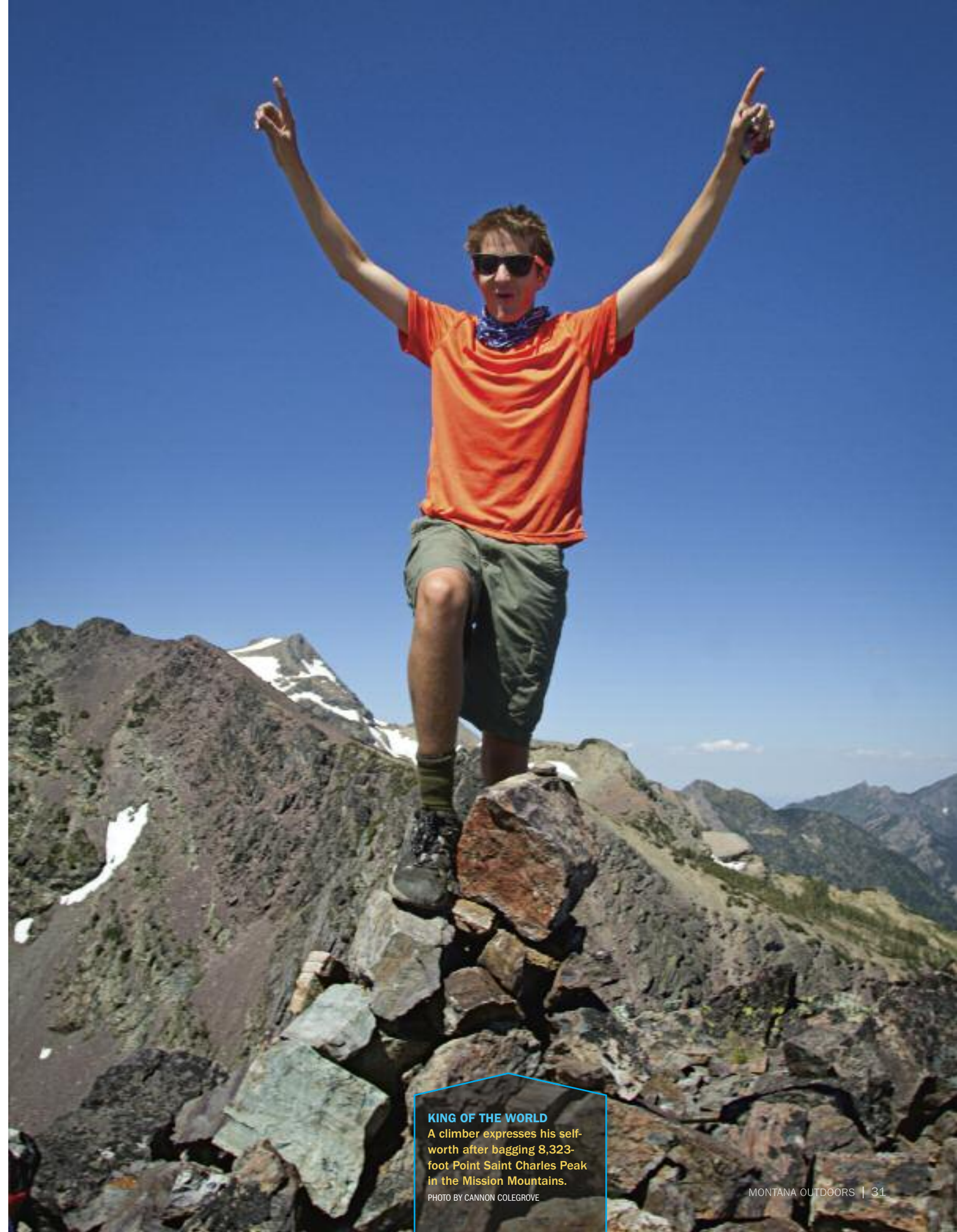
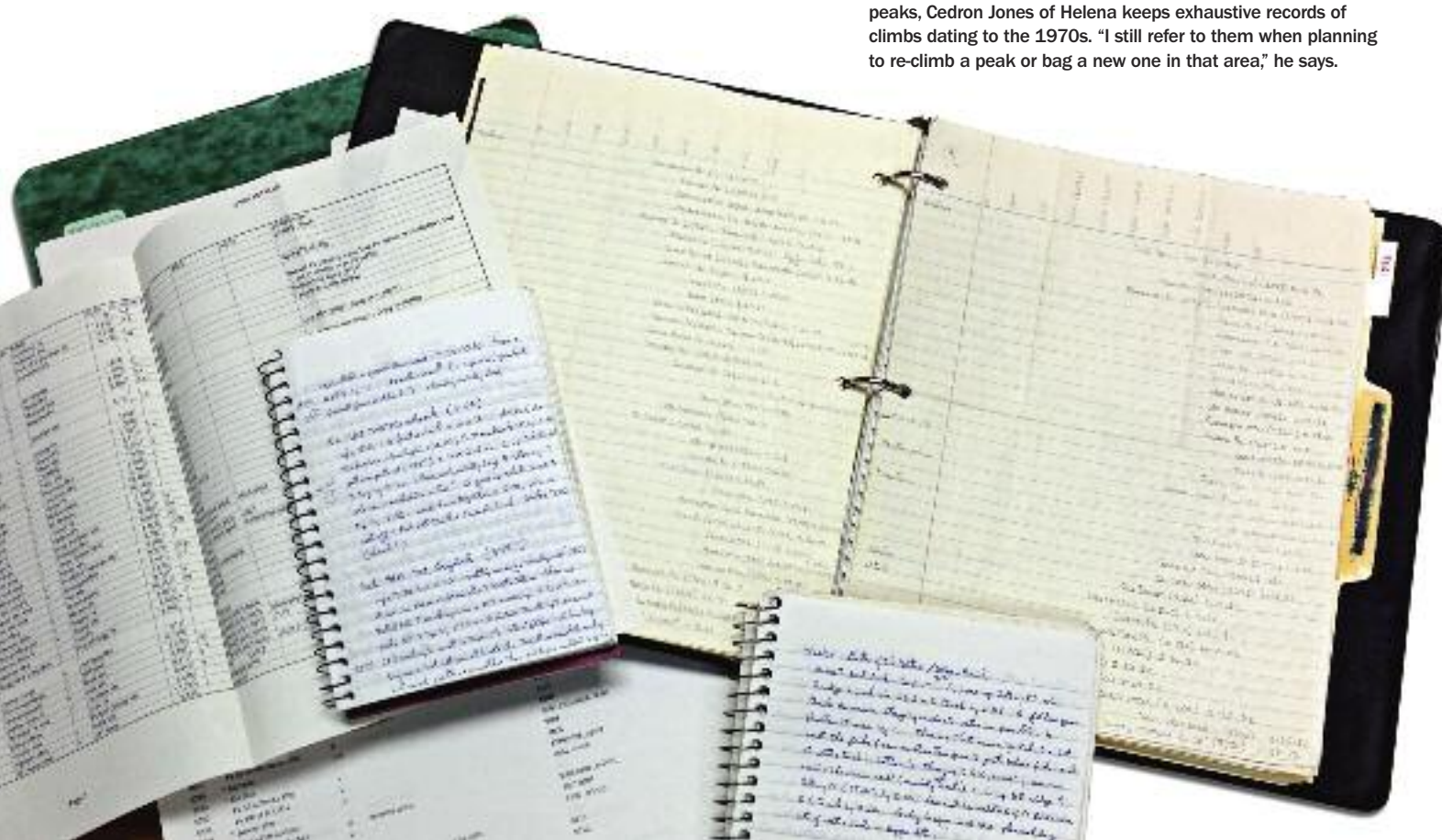
A question of prominence

In the 1980s, while managing species data for the Montana Natural Heritage Program, Jones pored over just about every topographic map of the state and came up with a list of the 100 highest peaks in Montana. He wanted to hike every one. It took about 20 years, but he bagged them all. He next tackled a list of all 10,000-footers in Montana. He recently reached the last of those 340 summits and is ready for another challenge.

Compiling a list of peaks to bag can be nearly as challenging as the climbing itself. Though there's little question of what the highest peak in any given state, range, or area is, determining which peaks are the second highest, third highest, and so on is highly subjective.

Consider a mountain range and all the

DETAILED ACCOUNTS In addition to maintaining lists of peaks, Cedron Jones of Helena keeps exhaustive records of climbs dating to the 1970s. "I still refer to them when planning to re-climb a peak or bag a new one in that area," he says.



KING OF THE WORLD

A climber expresses his self-worth after bagging 8,323-foot Point Saint Charles Peak in the Mission Mountains.

PHOTO BY CANNON COLEGROVE

high points along its outline. Some points may be inconsequential protrusions, or “subsummits,” on the sides of true peaks. Others may contain just enough “prominence” to qualify as another individual peak and merit listing, even if that high point has no name (and often it doesn’t). Prominence is a term that represents the elevation of a summit relative to the surrounding terrain. The prominence of a peak is the height of its summit above the lowest contour line encircling it but no adjacent higher peak. Jones uses 400 feet of prominence as his standard of determining what does and doesn’t constitute an individual peak. Some climbers use 300 feet, while others require as much as 1,000 feet before they consider a protrusion a true peak.

A certain amount of prominence is also used by cartographers to determine if a peak is an independent mountain or just a sub-summit (what Jones calls a “blip”).

Like many avid peakbaggers, Jones has created lists of peaks that may not be high in elevation but are still worth bagging because of their prominence. Montana is packed with world-class mountain prominence, even though the state’s tallest peaks are lower than those in higher-elevation states like Colorado or California.

For instance, McDonald Peak, the high point of the Mission Range, has a modest elevation of 9,820 feet. But its whopping 5,640 feet of prominence has attracted many peakbaggers to its summit.

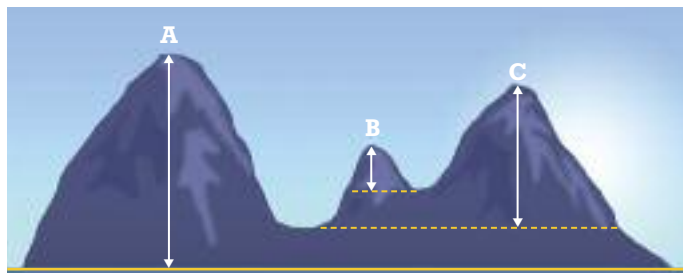
When Jones realized he could create his list of peaks based on prominence rather than conventional elevation, “it opened up a whole new world for me,” he says. “All of a sudden, peaks I’d never even noticed, never knew existed because they were so low—4,000 feet or whatever—were suddenly in my consciousness. So I started going out and bagging those.”

Over the next ridge

Others share Jones’s obsession to conquer high places. Jim Williams, FWP’s regional wildlife manager in Kalispell, reached the



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Understanding “prominence”

In the diagram above, showing peaks on an island, prominence is represented by the vertical lines. That distance, in feet, is measured from a peak’s summit to the lowest contour line encircling it but not a nearby higher peak. Let’s say the prominence of A is 1,000 feet, B is 200 feet, and C is 700 feet. Under his criteria, Cedron Jones would consider A and C as individual peaks but not B, which he’d classify as a “blip” (subsummit) of C. The notion of prominence is not easy to grasp. For a detailed explanation, visit peaklist.org.

MONTANA OUTDOORS

top of his first peak in 1976. He has been keeping a list of bagged peaks ever since. That tally now includes more than 100, almost all in Montana. “I’ve always had a curiosity to see what’s around the next cor-

ner or over the next ridge,” he says.

Often, Williams is looking for animals. The biologist says he has spent countless hours on summits tallying mountain goats and bighorn sheep as part of FWP wildlife population surveys. He notes that alpine peaks are also excellent places to encounter pikas, hoary marmots, ptarmigan, and, if he’s lucky, wolverines.

For Williams, peakbagging is a family affair. He and his wife, Melora, have been taking their two (now) teenagers to mountaintops since the kids were barely able to walk. Many hikes require scrambling across scree fields and boulders to find missing alpine trails. “The more remote, the better,” Williams says. While other parents show off pictures of their children at Disney World, Williams loves sharing photos of his family sitting atop Mount Oberlin, Mount Reynolds, and other peaks in Glacier National Park.

A member of the Glacier Mountaineering Society, Williams says that when he retires he wants to hike to the top of the park’s other five 10,000-footers (adding to 10,014-foot-high Mount Siyeh, which he has already bagged). He also wants to summit the highest peaks in every range of western Montana—all of which he’ll duly add to his

list, of course. “It’s like the life lists that birders keep,” he says. “Peak lists help people remember their days afield. They trigger memories of hard-earned climbs in special places.”

Sitting atop Sheep Mountain, staring across the shaggy hills of the Boulder Batholith toward a hazy Helena Valley, Jones recalls a time when he could remember every peak he bagged and the route he took to the top. He admits that some hikes are now starting to blur together, despite his detailed records. Even so, the septuagenarian continues to create new lists of peaks to climb. For him and his fellow peakbaggers, there’s always one

more summit around the corner. “Some people have to have their garden just so. Some people have to keep the house clean,” Jones says. “I have to go for a hike, and it’s sure nice if there’s a peak in it.” 🐾



PEAK PERFORMANCE In addition to getting fit and seeing alpine wildlife, peakbaggers also take in some of the best views Montana has to offer. Many say the scenery alone is worth the often-grueling effort of reaching a high rocky summit. Clockwise from top left: taking notes after bagging Bald Peak (10,180 feet) in the Gallatin Range; a National Geodetic Survey benchmarker atop Saint Mary Peak (9,351 feet) in the Bitterroot Mountains; photographer John Lambing cautiously peering over the lip of the Mount Siyeh headwall, 4,000 feet above Cracker Lake in Glacier National Park; a peakbagger atop a petrified tree stump near the summit of Ramshorn Peak (10,296 feet) in the Gallatin Mountains overlooking Paradise Valley; a hoary marmot sunning itself; celebrating the summit of Pollack Mountain (8,325 feet) in Glacier National Park; curious mountain goats in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness near Granite Peak (12,799 feet), Montana’s highest natural point; and a white-tailed ptarmigan in penstemon wildflowers at Piegán Pass, Glacier National Park.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARK SHAPLEY; ANITA STRAWN DE OJEDA; DEE LUNNELL BLANK; JOHN LAMBING; MACNEIL LYONS; DAVID ANDERSON; CATHERINE L. WALTERS; JEFF HANDLIN; DEE LUNNELL BLANK