



# Looking Up

June 5, 2014

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By: **Julie Dugdale**

One hundred peaks, one unwavering faith: Eric Holle's journey to higher ground.

***Update: July 1, 2014***

## The Climb Continues

*“Reaching the summit is optional. Getting down is mandatory.” —Ed Viesturs*

Anyone who's climbed a mountain knows what it's like to take that final, weary, elated step to the summit. Maybe it's that 14,000-foot behemoth beckoning on the horizon, or perhaps it's a personal feat closer to home. No matter what your mountain is, real or symbolic, there's something exhilarating about conquering it—something indescribably uplifting about realizing your own strength.

But rarely do we journey up our mountains without a shoulder to lean on, a voice to hear us, and a hand to pull us up when we stumble. Eric Holle's summit of Jagged Peak in southwest Colorado was the pinnacle of a decade-long dream to climb the Centennial Peaks—the 100 highest peaks in Colorado. It was his moment, and it was big. And right there beside him, sharing that moment and now one mountain closer to his own Centennial Peaks goal, was his friend and fellow mountaineer Ben Lysdahl.

Through brutal storms and bitter nights and treacherous trails, the pair embarked again and again on what they refer to as “sufferfests” in their quest to summit the Centennials. “Those were tough weather days, long ascents, gnarly terrain,” Holle says. “Ben’s the guy I want there by my side in that type of situation, because I know that he’s going to be just as strong as I am, and I’m going to be just as strong as he is, and we’re going to work together, get up there, have some fun, and get it done.”

They didn't hit every mountain together, nor was that the plan. It was a unique goal for each mountaineer, built around individual schedules and motivations, even as they trekked toward it on similar trajectories. So when they set out on Holle's last climb on the Centennial circuit, and when they eventually celebrated together atop Jagged Mountain, Lysdahl still faced at least seven summits.

Fast forward to June 2014. The end was in sight for Lysdahl. Just six mountains, a handful, really, left in the San Juans. Holle, on the precipice of a new adventure with a baby due in just weeks, was stoked to accompany his friend on the last leg of his journey. It was only fitting that he be there when Lysdahl join this elite group of adventurers in mountaineer history, just as Lysdahl had been there for him.

A sufferfest would do the trick—six peaks in four days. At the end, scheduled for June 8, would be Uncompahgre Peak, the sixth highest peak in the state, and the tallest in the San Juans at 14,309 feet. Not only would it complete Lysdahl's Centennial Peaks mission, but it would also be the last of the Colorado fourteeners (peaks over 14,000 feet in elevation) on his list—a double celebration.

It was meant to be a day for the books, but Mother Nature had plans of her own. As a decent weather forecast deteriorated in the 48 hours leading up to Uncompahgre, the team (Lysdahl, Holle, and Lysdahl's girlfriend) decided to attempt. They'd watch the weather. They'd be vigilant. They'd leave early, in the very wee hours of the morning. They'd make smart decisions.

They did all of those things, and that's how Lysdahl settled for the 99 highest peaks in Colorado that day. They were minutes from the top. It was nothing. They could have risked it. But summits are exposed; they render you vulnerable. So they hiked down in a whiteout of snow, never setting foot on the 100th summit.

It's a testament to the kind of mountaineers Lysdahl and Holle are—the kind who don't need glory to feel accomplished; the kind who respect what's greater than they are; the kind who revere the unpredictable sanctity of nature. It's something Holle thinks about often, now, with parenthood unfolding before him. Because that's his next mountain. And it'll be a heck of a climb.

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## Looking Up

The air had never been sweeter. The view never more sublime. At 13,824 feet above sea level, Eric Holle sat on a rock, drinking in the wind, laughing with the kind of joy that comes from the hardest fought accomplishment. The granite angles of Jagged Mountain cascaded to the earth beneath him as he inhaled the wild scent of Colorado's San Juan Mountains. He found the summit register—the running log of mountaineers who reach the summit and record their arrival—and signed his name. Beside it, he penned “100 / 100.”

It had been thundering for days. Holle and his climbing partner, Ben Lysdahl, had fallen asleep in their tent the night before while the sky unleashed a steady snowfall. Snow was not in the plans; it was, after all, August 11. But then, that was the unpredictability of the Rockies. The pair had already summited two peaks during their backpacking trip into the remote Weminuche Wilderness Area, which they'd accessed via the Durango Narrow Gauge Railroad. The peaks had been numbers 98 and 99 on Holle's quest to summit Colorado's Centennial Peaks: the 100 highest mountains in the state.

With just one summit left on Holle's list, they'd pushed on that morning. The snow had stopped, but surfaces were slick and clouds loomed. They took it slow, roped up the rock face meticulously, and traversed around a ledge with a 2,000-foot drop. It was, perhaps, the most technical summit of them all. "It was scary being up there," Holle says. "Questioning yourself as a mountaineer is a tough thing to do. That mountain didn't give up—but neither did we."



*Eric Holle at Teakettle Mountain in the Sneffels Range in southwest Colorado.*

That day, Holle joined the ranks of a relatively elite group of mountaineers who've conquered the Centennial Peaks—that's 53 fourteeners (peaks over 14,000 feet) and the highest 47 thirteeners. According to the [Colorado Mountain Club](#) (CMC), a little more than 200 people share the honor. It was the culmination

of an 11-year journey for Holle; in all, he's climbed 347 mountains for an average of about 31 per year. Peak-bagging season lasts for around two months of the summer in Colorado, which means many of Holle's summits were winter excursions that demand more technical equipment, more training, more safety awareness, and more stamina.

There's no shortage of accomplished mountaineers whose names are cemented in history for some alpine feat or another. This coming spring, Holle's climbing buddy and friend, Lysdahl—the pair has tackled about 120 mountains together—plans to finish the Centennials himself by polishing off the remaining seven on his list, then continue on to complete all 741 peaks over 13,000 feet (a task he predicts will take him six more years).

Yet, among the avid mountaineers that Colorado breeds, Holle's brand of outdoorsmanship is special. He harbors no tragic circumstances, nor has he accomplished his feat with any superlative records. Rather, it's Holle's inherent everyman-ness that distinguishes his journey—a trajectory fueled by self-discovery, pure faith, and a desire to transform into a better version of himself.

Holle's starting point was, by his own admittance, low. Although he'd spent part of his early childhood in Boulder, hiking and fishing on family trips to nearby Rocky Mountain National Park, that kinship with the wilderness faded as he grew older and moved away. It was during college at the University of Oklahoma that he slipped into what he refers to as “the dark side.”

He went to classes. He had a girlfriend. He did what he thought he was supposed to do—which was, in a word, exist. He aspired toward nothing. “The best way to describe it is complete complacency,” Holle says. “I had no motivation to define my career or define my next step. Mediocrity was completely acceptable to me at that time. I didn't even know I was being mediocre.”

The summer after Holle's junior year, his brother, Paul, floated the idea of climbing Longs Peak—

one of Colorado's most notorious and challenging mountains—in their old childhood playground. At 235 pounds, Holle couldn't even run around the block. He was spinning, drowning, really, in a void. He knew something wasn't right. This emptiness wasn't what he was meant for. So he agreed. "I had to rediscover who I was," Holle says. "Really force myself to get up and get going again."

Three months later, he conquered the formidable Longs—his first fourteener. A subsequent backpacking trip with his family in Vail reaffirmed what he could already feel in his core: a change in perspective; a flicker of passion. "On the drive back, I realized what I was missing," Holle says. "Living for the moment."

After graduation, he moved to Vail with no job, no place to live, and \$500 in his pocket. "It was one of those things: Leap and the net will appear," he says. "Like a trapeze artist, you have to let go of one ring to reach the other."

The thing about letting go and leaping is that you have to have faith. Lots of it. The more Holle took to the trails in Colorado, the more he found they were an avenue to connect with God. He drew strength from his beliefs that helped him uncover the person—the soul—that he'd lost. He's even performed the marriage rites for four of his climbing buddies. "I grew up Lutheran and have had faith in God my entire life," Holle says. "It's been tested and tried at some points. But I have no doubt in my mind that any opportunity or blessing in my life has come from God."



*Holle (right) and Lysdahl in Vail, November 2014.*

His faith might be the reason he's alive today, Holle says. In 2006, he'd been descending a slope with Lysdahl after a long, three-summit day. It was only their second climb together. The terrain was relatively flat, the snow was soft and deep, and they were hoping to reach bottom before dark. Both men stowed their ice axes in their backpacks and heel-planted along the exact route of their earlier ascent. Unexpectedly, the powder gave way to a sheet of icy, rock-hard snow, and Holle

slipped. He began plummeting down the slick surface toward a cliff, with no way to self-arrest. Lysdahl watched helplessly from above as his friend slid down the mountain out of view, concluding the worst. But training helped Holle maintain enough focus to orient his body in a way—flipped with elbows in the snow—that eventually slowed his descent. “Obviously, someone else was watching out for me,” Holle says.

Lysdahl remembers picking his way down the slope to find his friend, in rough shape and disoriented, but mobile. The pair hiked out together, shaken, for the next six miles on an icy road, arriving well after dark. “When something like that happens, it brings you closer together,” Lysdahl says. “You know you can depend on each other. And the more close calls you have, the more you realize it’s not worth dying for.”

It’s these moments that have taught Holle the importance of choosing the right people to share his journey with—those who respect the power but crave the challenge of the mountains. Tim Pearl, another mountaineering partner, was Holle’s best man in 2010. “Adventure doesn’t exist if there’s not failure and danger looking at you,” Pearl says. “There’s a certain wisdom that comes with taking a risk that’s like riding a bike. It does change as you age.”

The thought is never far from Holle’s mind. This past spring, he summited three thirteeners in a row, ending with Thunder Peak. Two weeks later, a very experienced mountaineer—one who’d climbed twice as many mountains as Holle—attempted the same peaks. He didn’t make it back. “Any time something like that happens, I question if I’m doing the right thing,” Holle says. “Have I used up all my chances? Am I pushing it too much?”



Holle’s wife, Amy, doesn’t think so. The pair met in 2008 when Holle noticed Amy’s “eligible bachelorette” profile in the *Vail Daily*—part of a charity auction to benefit the Salvation Army—which revealed that she was looking for a guy that shared her faith. In 2009, Holle proposed in front of the historic shelter on Notch Mountain near Vail, which offers the best view of the spectacular cross couloir on Mount of the Holy Cross. When weather moved in, Holle was prepared: He’d stashed champagne and firewood nearby days before so they could celebrate in the shelter. A year later the couple married on top of Vail Mountain.

At the time, Holle was only partway through the Centennial Peaks. He admits that his commitment to Amy impacted his decisions and risk perception on the trail, especially in trying circumstances like icy winter climbs or extended and constant time away from home. He also knows that starting a family will ultimately affect his future commitment to projects as demanding as this one. But the two have a trust that's thus far transcended Holle's love affair with the mountains. Says Amy, "A question I get a lot is, 'how do you let him do that?' Well, it's not up to me. It's up to him. We reached that agreement very early on in our relationship. He's a better man when he comes home. He gets filled up, in a way."

Holle agrees. He's the first to admit he's got it all these days: a great job as the marketing director for Vail Resorts' popular [Epic Mix](#) app (the company's signature mobile ski and snowboard technology); an unconditionally supportive spouse of the soul-mate variety; a home on Colorado's Front Range at the edge of one of our country's greatest outdoor paradises. But sometimes,



*Amy and Eric Holle in front of Mount of the Holy Cross shortly after he proposed, July 2009.*

he says, you just need to reset the clock and gain some perspective. “Being in the mountains gives me the opportunity to unwind and recharge at the same time,” says Holle, whose go-to playground is the Gore Range, a slice of wilderness so off-the-radar that it doesn’t appear in some guidebooks. “It’s so powerful. I wish more people would take advantage of that. I don’t think people realize the importance of separating yourself from everything else.”

As for the decade-long Centennial Peaks quest, sure—it was about accomplishing an epic goal. Reaching the summit of the 100th mountain, sitting on that rock, breathing in the victory—Holle can never recreate that feeling. But more than that, it was about how the journey itself changed him. “It opened my eyes to what I wanted from my future; to what was important,” Holle says. “It gave me that clarity to go back to the real world and figure out what I wanted out of life.”

For Holle, completing the Centennials was about becoming a leader in his own reality. It was, simply, about losing himself on the trail to find himself in life. “I’m not going back again to those days of complacency,” he says. “You have to work at everything you do. There’s just such a big difference in making each day count.”

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