



Then: Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* was a best-seller. Now: Nearing the Keyhole on Longs Peak.

other might have been modeled in marble." While most modern-day hikers tackle the mountain from the Longs Peak trailhead, eight miles from the summit and just off Highway 7, Bird's entourage horsepacked south out of Estes Park, 19 miles from the peak. Mountain Jim proved himself the utmost gentleman during the daylong approach to the base, and a fine mountaineer on the ascent itself. He kept his client so tightly roped, she later wrote, that she sometimes felt as if she were being hauled up the mountain "like a bale of goods."

Though the easiest of three hiking routes to the summit, Bird's line is nonetheless exposed and strenuous, especially when passing through the enormous, gatlike stone Keyhole (known as the Notch in Bird's day), which leads to a knife-edge ridge, still a thousand feet short of the summit.

As the group proceeded along the ledges that hug the west side of the mountain—"It was a time of extreme terror," Bird wrote—Jim struggled to find safe passage toward The Trough, a steep and rocky but relatively straightforward section of the climb. Today, red- and yellow-painted bull's-eyes mark this traverse. Bird arrived, bruised, dehydrated, and gasping for air, at the next obstacle—a large chock stone that she referred to as the Dog's Lift in honor of Jim's collie, Ring, who had to be hoisted over it. Boosted on one man's shoulders from below, and hauled up by other hands from above, Bird squeezed around the stone, only to be confronted by another hazard—the Narrows. Even today, most hikers swallow hard before starting up this ramp traversing the south face of Longs Peak. At its narrowest point, the ledge is only wide enough to allow a single hiker to shuffle upward toward the base of the summit mound.

Finally, Bird found herself on top. "It was something at last," she wrote, "to stand upon the storm-rent crown of this lonely sentinel of the Rocky Range, on one of the mightiest of the vertebrae of the backbone of the North American continent." —Rachel Galloway

GET THERE: The Longs Peak trailhead is in Rocky Mountain National Park (970-586-1206), two hours northwest of Denver. **GET GOING:** For a one-day summit attempt pitch your tent at the first-come, first-served campground next to the trailhead and begin several hours before dawn. Those taking two days can camp along the way at the Goblins Forest or Battle Mountain backcountry sites. **BRING ALONG:** Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (University of Oklahoma Press, \$13) is a must-read. Gerry Roach's *Rocky Mountain National Park: Classic Hikes & Climbs* (Fulcrum, \$15) has route details. For a National Geographic Trails Illustrated map of Longs Peak, call 800-962-1643. ➤

AN EDIFYING OUTING ON longs peak



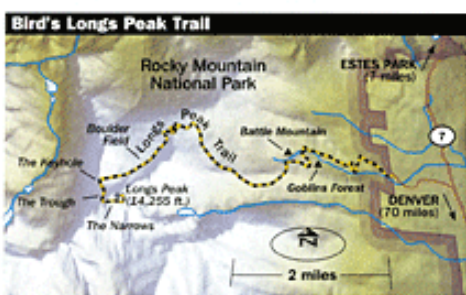
The intrepid Victorian travel writer Isabella Bird found both terror and exhilaration climbing the peak she called the "king of the Rocky Mountains."

Life in the Rocky Mountains. The book was a sensation, part of a new movement in nature writing that celebrated wilderness and helped popularize hiking and camping as leisure pursuits.

Her influence can be felt today, when, during the July-through-September high season, several hundred hikers a day clamber up Longs, most following much the same trail Bird and her

party had all to themselves. Yet even with modest crowding, the classic Keyhole Route remains one of the airiest and most exhilarating non-technical climbs in the Rockies.

Bird's desire to ascend Longs was driven more by a romantic notion of exploring what she saw as the peak's noble personality than by a desire to test her own physical stamina. Fortunately, she was successful in recruiting a local trapper, "Mountain Jim" Nugent, to lead the assault (with the help of two assistant guides). Bird described Nugent as a man whose "life was deeply stained with crimes and vices." He dressed in skins, packed a "bosom friend" (revolver), and lived in a mountain shack that looked like "the den of a wild beast." One of his eyes had been mauled out by a grizzly bear. While "the loss made one side of the face repulsive," Bird wrote, "the



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Standing on the summit of Longs Peak in October 1873, Isabella Bird surveyed the horizon of the Colorado plain. It had been only five years since John Wesley Powell made the first non-native ascent of the 14,255-foot Rocky, and as the breeze caused Bird's ankle-length skirts to flap about her legs, her fatigue gave way to euphoria.

"Uplifted above love and hate and storms of passion, calm amidst the eternal silences, fanned by zephyrs and bathed in living blue, peace rested for that one bright day on the Peak." This is how the itinerant Englishwoman described—in characteristically ecstatic high-Victorian prose—that moment in a letter to her sister Henrietta. That and other equally colorful letters chronicling her explorations in pioneer-era Colorado would eventually be published as *A Lady's*