





Jeff Burke pushes toward the summit of Black Mountain with storm clouds rolling over Mount Cowen in the distance.

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“On the east side of the Yellowstone the eye takes in at a glance one of the most symmetrical and remarkable ranges of mountains I have ever seen in the West. Several of my party who had visited Europe regarded this range as in no way inferior in beauty to any in that far-famed country. This range, which is called on the map Snowy Mountains, forms the great watershed between two portions of the Yellowstone River...”

—Ferdinand Vanderveer Hayden, 1871

Hayden’s astonishment at first sight of the Western Beartooths in 1871 has been repeated countless times by subsequent visitors to Paradise Valley. Having learned the name “Snowy Mountains,” or “Snow Mountains” as printed on his subsequent maps, Hayden rode his horse down Trail Creek from Fort Ellis and gazed upon a full 5,000 vertical feet of relief rising in just over two miles from the dry prairie of Yellowstone River valley. Scanning the scene, he noticed that the steep front face of the range is broken in several places by deep and narrow U-shaped canyons, packed with vegetation. Hayden was particularly intrigued as his gaze climbed the sparsely forested massifs to their culmination at many sharp and rocky summits. When he returned in 1872, he changed the name of this range to the

“Yellowstone Range,” and had the opportunity to ascend one 10,138-foot mountain, which he subsequently named Mount Delano after then Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano:

*In order that I might obtain a more definite knowledge of the structure of this range, I ascended one of the highest peaks that overlook the broad plains along the Yellowstone to the north-east...For a distance of four miles we ascended the grassy slope, covered here and there very thickly with rounded boulders, which greatly impeded traveling...The sides of these mountains are everywhere almost vertical, and difficult of ascent, so that we were obliged to follow up the rocky bed of a stream for a long distance.*

along the west faces of Moe, Miney, Meenie, and Eenie. The far south edge of this snowfield funnels into a fabulous couloir that drops over 1,400 feet to the trees above Elbow Lake. In 1984, Doug Coombs and Emil Tanner skied from the summit of Moe to Elbow Lake by this route.

**Ascent:** Mount Cowen owes much of its obscurity and solitude to a long and difficult approach. Sixteen miles south of Livingston, Montana, turn southeast off Highway 89 onto Mill Creek Road. This road enters National Forest land after 7 miles and becomes Forest Road #486. Two miles from the forest boundary turn left into the east fork of Mill Creek on Forest Road #3280 and drive 1.5 miles to East Fork trailhead. The trail skirts through the forest on the south side of the valley to circumvent a large private ranch, then crosses the east fork of Mill Creek after 1.5 miles. After the bridge, turn left and follow the trail westward as it traverses into Upper Sage Creek. The trail crosses the creek and climbs high onto the main ridge between Mill Creek east fork and Elbow Creek. It descends gradually into Elbow Creek and then climbs through marsh, mud, roots, and rocks to Elbow Lake.

Skirt Elbow Lake on the east shore and ascend the gully between a spectacular cascade and the sheer granite walls of Eenie and Meenie. Follow occasional trails on grassy patches, pass through several large boulder fields, and pass a small tarn on the west side into the eastern lobe of the large cirque west of

**“...so many places and jaunts. Was a good time/town to be a bum. Seemed about every friday we’d be sloggng in deep snow at midnight, get a couple good descents in by noon Saturday, then hit the books again sat. night...or sometimes sunday.”**

—Emil Tanner

Mount Cowen. Climb to the top of a large bowl of talus or snow and enter a steep and loose couloir left of the main summit mass. Near the top of the couloir, exit right at a detached flake, and descend 50 feet to a sloping grassy ledge. Traverse a few hundred feet on this exposed ledge toward the right-center of the broken southwest face, climb back left a short distance, then continue the traverse to the right on an easy windowsill ledge. Avoiding a shallow gully in the left-center of the face, strike upward toward the summit by connecting diagonal ledges with short and sometimes



*Aerial view of Mount Cowen from the southwest.*

- a.** standard southwest face route
- b.** couloir between main and south summits
- c.** south summit
- d.** Coombs-Tanner ski route
- e.** Moe
- f.** Miney
- g.** Meenie
- h.** Eenie
- i.** Montana Centennial Route

## ELEPHANTHEAD MOUNTAIN

[9,431 feet]

One of the most enjoyable and scenic short summit hikes in the entire ecosystem lies in the north end of the Western Beartooths on a mountain that geologist Thomas Jaggar called “a strange looking knob” as he viewed it from the Yellowstone River in 1895. Elephanthead does not dominate the skyline, nor does its elevation even break the 10,000-foot mark, but its strange shape is eye-catching and an ascent of Elephanthead is an excellent introduction to mountain climbing in Greater Yellowstone. Although Jaggar thought the mountain was “apparently a huge dike,” Elephanthead actually is a gigantic tilted flatiron of the region’s finest Bighorn dolomite, protruding like an observation deck with the gnarled granite peaks of the Beartooth core as the spectacle. Elephanthead lies at the southernmost edge of the Western Beartooth limestone formations, where the rest of the overlying sediments were stripped away from the uplifted bedrock. From the head of Mission Creek, the north face of Elephanthead slants upward in a clean 1,200-foot sweep, inviting one to climb above the rolling plains near Livingston, Montana, but then denying further access to the Beartooths with sheer south-facing limestone cliffs. (The trail up Elephanthead actually continues through a break in the cliffs to provide access to the Beartooth core.) The north face is most inviting with a coat of snow, offering skiers and riders a superb run on an eggshell-like face that steepens from 25 to 40 degrees.

**Ascent:** From the business loop of Interstate 90 one and one-half miles northeast of Livingston, turn southeast onto Swingley Road. Drive about 7 miles and turn right onto Bruffey Lane. Drive nearly 2 miles over a hill and turn right through the 63 Ranch gate onto a narrow two-track road. Continue 1.5 miles into



*Eager for a descent in one foot of dry May powder, Jamie Weeks nears the summit of Elephanthead Mountain. Mission Creek flows north into the Yellowstone River and the Crazy Mountains glisten on the horizon.*

spectacular Mission Creek, passing through two gates and bearing right at a fork, to a trailhead at road’s end. With limestone walls towering above, hike this trail one quarter mile and cross the creek on a log. Bear left at the first two junctions and right at a third. The trail then climbs steeply through gneissic bedrock along the east side of upper Mission Creek and gains the saddle just east of Elephanthead. Continue westward past giant dolomite boulders for 500 feet in one quarter mile to the summit.

### ELEPHANTHEAD MOUNTAIN ASCENT

Mission Creek parking elevation: 6,040 feet  
Elevation gain: 3,391 feet  
Distance: 5 miles  
Overall grade by east ridge: I Class 1  
Estimated ascent time: 1 to 4 hours  
Maps: Livingston Peak



*Elephanthead Mountain’s 1,200-foot convex north side holds every aspect from northeast to northwest.*