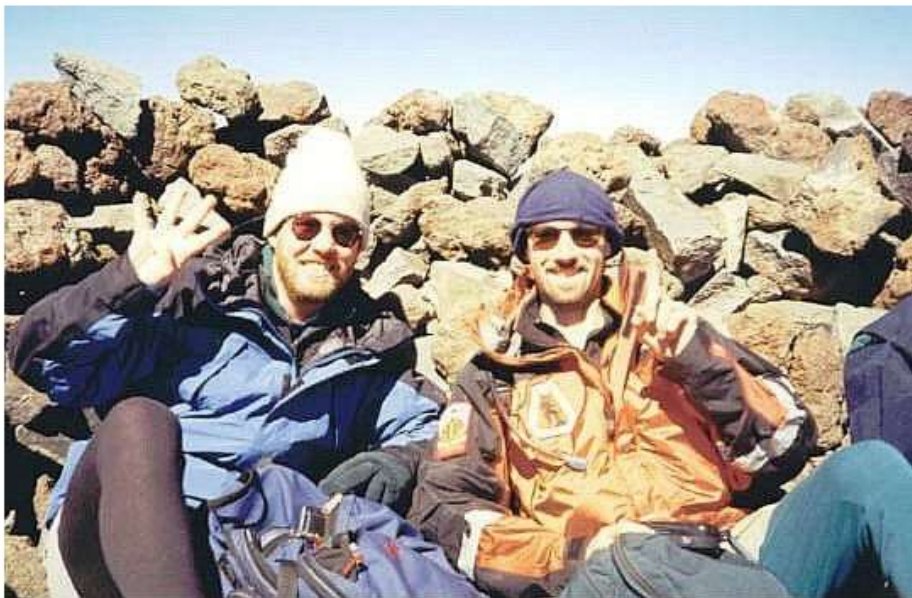


TRI-VALLEY Dispatch

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Arizona highpointers cross borders and hike for the sky

By DARREN BARAKAT Staff Writer May 17, 2017 



Scott Surgent, left, and climbing partner Jason Odrzywolski sit at the top of Humphreys Peak, the highest point above sea level in Arizona, in 1998.

Surgent.net



Doug Kasian moved to Phoenix in 1985 and shortly thereafter was “sick and tired of pushing paper” at his job and ready for something else.

He found his escape climbing mountains. He reached the top of Browns Peak after reading a newspaper article that mentioned it as the highest point above sea level in Maricopa County.

“The thought occurred to me, if this is the highest point in Maricopa County, I wonder how many counties there are in Arizona and what the highest points are,” Kasian said.

Kasian found his answers and climbed to the high points in the 1980s to become one of the first three “highpointers” to complete every county in Arizona.

Highpointing refers to the quest to reach the highest point above sea level in a political jurisdiction such as a state or county. It's an unusual hobby, but its devotees are passionate. They visit cohp.org, a website devoted specifically to county highpointing, and other websites to post written reports about their attempts to visit high points. Several of them have published books, and some of the big names have ties to Arizona.

Andy Martin was raised in Tucson and lives there today. He wrote a book called “County High Points,” which was published in 1994. It includes information from across the United States. He has visited more than 300 county high points nationwide, including every one in Arizona, and 49 state high points.

Scott Surgent, a Scottsdale resident, wrote a 2010 book called “The County High Points of Arizona” and runs a website, Surgent.net, that documents his climbing experiences. He has been to 45 state high points and completed the list of Arizona county high points.

Kasian, a substitute teacher for the Marana School District, lives in the Tucson area. He is an accomplished mountaineer in addition to a hiker and publishes a regular blog at desertmountaineer.com. He's climbed around 2,600 peaks, he said.

The Highpointers Club, devoted to the hobby of state highpointing, began in the late 1980s. County highpointing grew from that and is more loose-knit, connected by a website and email groups.

"It's never been a formal club with any sort of IRS tax code or anything," Surgent said. "We don't have bylaws. We don't keep a formal list. It's all self-selected and people come and go."

Highpointers are often technical, detail-oriented people who love maps and lists as well as the physical experience of climbing, sight-seeing and being surrounded by nature.

Martin is a retired software developer and mining engineer. He earned degrees from the University of Arizona in math, engineering and computers.

"The hiking is good for keeping in shape," Martin said. "It's also, for me, the maps. Seeing things on maps, then plotting out a route. That led me to county highpointing. I'm into lists. It's rare I'll do a peak twice."

He began climbing state high points in the 1980s when he lived in New Jersey. At one state high point, he found a card with a phone number that led him to information about the Highpointers Club. After Martin moved to Arizona, he shifted his focus to county high points.

Kasian spent "months" in the Arizona State University library looking at the 2,000 or so quadrangle maps that covered Arizona. He kept a list of every mountain range (193) and the high point in each range, and climbed them all.

"I think it's just completing a list," Kasian said of the appeal of highpointing. "Peakbaggers (similar to highpointers, only more focused on peaks without regard to political borders) are usually working on a half-dozen lists at a time."

Surgent started climbing state high points in 1993, around the time he moved to Arizona, and later focused on Arizona county high points.

"It forces you to go places you would never go," Surgent said. "You learn about an area. My wife and I are history buffs."

Some county high points in other states, such as Denali in Alaska, require mountaineering skills and equipment. Some of Arizona's high points are difficult to reach, but all can be done as simple day hikes with no special equipment as long as weather permits.

High points typically have a marker, such as a cairn, and often a register where visitors can sign their names. The register might be stuffed inside a jar and buried within the cairn. There is also a chance the register won't be there when you arrive.

"Some people don't like registers," Martin said. "People who are big into wilderness think registers aren't supposed to be in nature. So there's register makers and register destroyers." Brass government benchmarks can often be found on peak summits, but they are not necessarily placed at the highest point. Hikers should read trip reports beforehand to know what they are looking for, such as a cairn.

The Pinal County high point, when done as a hike, is one of the toughest in Arizona. It covers 7 miles of distance and 3,000 feet of elevation gain. An all-terrain or robust four-wheel-drive vehicle can drive to the summit of Rice Peak, which is 700 feet away from the Pinal high point. Among Arizona's 15 counties it is the only "liner," a high point that's not a peak and is along a county border, Kasian said.

Some of the easiest Arizona high points to reach are the unnamed spot in Greenlee County, which is about a 1,000-foot walk from Highway 666, and Mount Lemmon in Pima County, which can be reached by passenger car.

Some hikers challenge themselves by finding a more difficult path to the top. Kasian once climbed Mount Lemmon from the desert floor at its base, about a 7,000-foot gain in elevation. On Mount Lemmon, to reach the true high point, "you have to sneak inside the observatory, within a fenced area closed to the public," Kasian said.

Other Arizona high points present similar difficulties and challenges.

Humphreys Peak in Coconino County is the highest point in Arizona at 12,633 feet. The first time Kasian did it, he vomited on the way down because he wasn't used to the altitude.

The Navajo County high point, Black Mesa near Kayenta, requires a permit from the Navajo Nation.

In Graham County, the summit of Mount Graham is home to a red squirrel refuge and has been the subject of fighting among the University of Arizona, which has an observatory there, environmentalists who want to protect squirrels, and Indians who believe the site is sacred. The Forest Service has declared the summit off-limits to the public.

In Apache County, Baldy Peak is on Indian reservation land and off-limits to the public. Apache County is also one of two counties in which the location of the exact county high point is in dispute, according to a list reviewed by Martin. The other is Gila County.

Martin is retired, and both he and Kasian are old enough to draw Social Security benefits. Climbing helps them feel younger.

"You are not going to go out and hike Mount Everest anymore. It keeps you in better shape, and mentally too," Martin said. "You drive and navigate around and figure out the best way to go after these peaks."

Highpointing, he said, "is a pretty good introduction to the Arizona mountains. It's a fun little project."