Social media changing adventure with deadly consequences

By Sarah Tory, High Country News

On July 14 of last year, Peter Doro and Jake Lord joined the Friday afternoon stream of people leaving the sprawling cities of Colorado's Front Range for the mountains. They planned to summit Capitol Peak, a soaring mass of granite 14,130 feet tall near Aspen on the state's Western Slope. They reached Capitol Peak's trailhead late in the day and set off on the 6.5-mile hike to the mountain's base. The sun sank low, filling the sky with streaks of red, purple and orange, and a few cows meandered across the trail, which followed a creek through a sliver of valley that widens abruptly into a vast alpine basin. Capitol Lake lay before them, ringed by the high peaks of the Elk Range, a view so stunning that Doro felt as if he had entered Middle Earth, the setting of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy, Lord of the Rings.

The Elks are among Colorado's highest and most challenging mountain ranges, with seven of the state's 54 peaks over 14,000 feet. And Capitol Peak is considered the hardest of them all – so difficult, in fact, that the Forest Service posted a sign near the trailhead, cautioning would-be climbers about "down-sloping, loose, rotten and unstable rock" that "kills without warning."

For Doro, 25, and Lord, 24, both avid outdoorsmen, the sign was little more than a formality. As they hiked, their thoughts were not of death, but of the endless beauty and possibilities that the mountains seemed to hold.

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