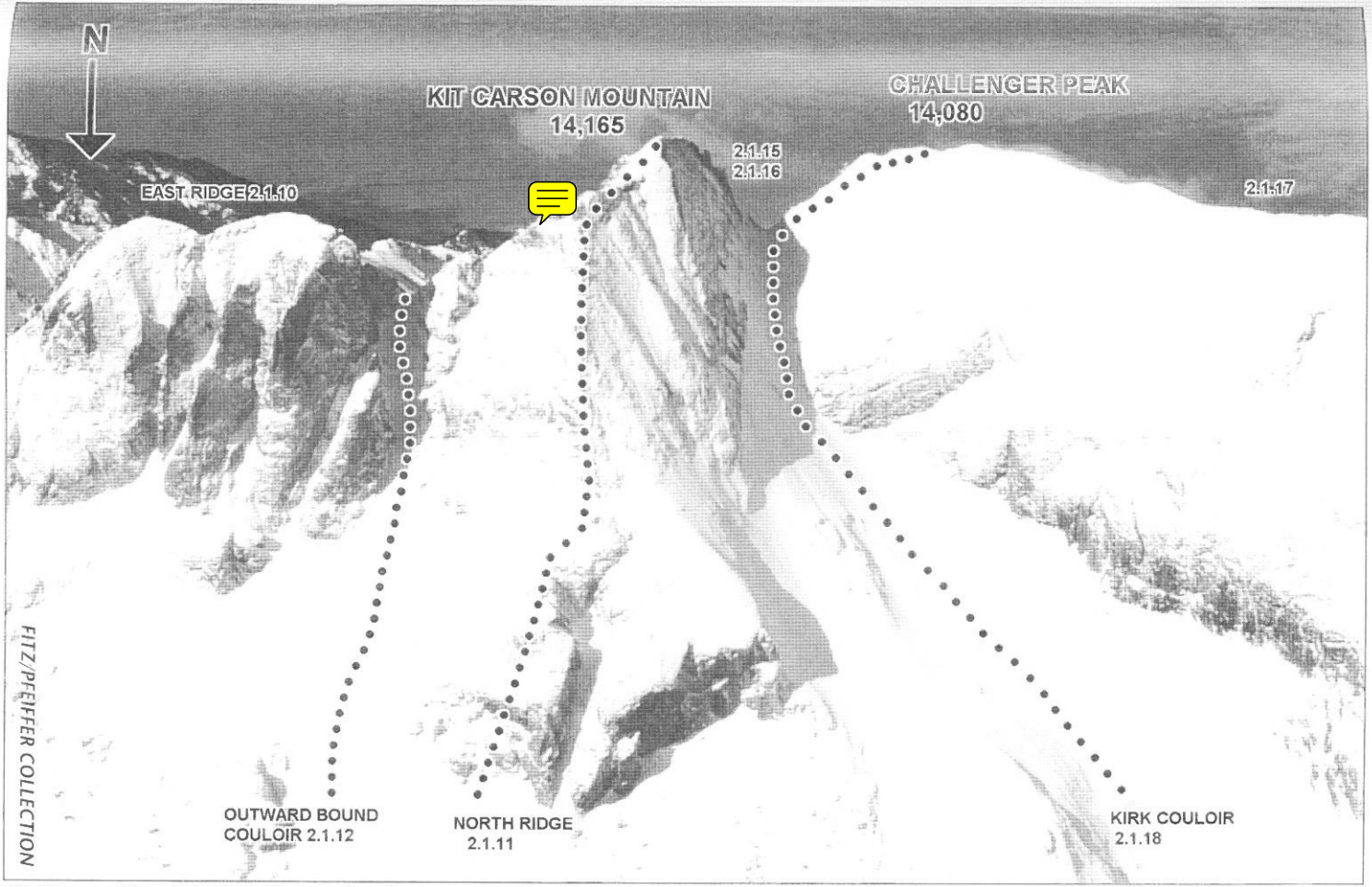

Kit Carson Mountain from the north, winter.

2.1.11 Kit Carson Mountain—North Ridge

Ratings:	Ski Descent—N.R. Snow Climb—N.R. Summer Climb—Advanced
Season:	Summer
RT Data:	14 hours, 12 miles, 5,095'↑
Start:	WIllow Lake Trailhead, 9,070'
1 Day from Rd:	Yes, for the fit, high camp recommended
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

One of the best lines in the Crestones, this relatively easy technical climb takes an airy ridge. While the climbing is certainly of the hand-and-foot variety, it's almost all easy 4th Class. Bring a rope and a light selection of rock climbing hardware.

Summer after snow melt-off: Park at the Willow Creek Trailhead (section introduction). Hike the Willow Creek Trail as it follows a north-facing hillside for about 3/4 mile, then stays on the south side of the Willow Creek drainage for several miles to 11,000', where it crosses to the south side of the valley in the midst of a headwall studded with cliffs and ledges.

Once past the first headwall, stay in the drainage to Lower Willow Creek Lake. Follow the north shore of the lake, then climb up and around another headwall. Continue up the drainage to 12,000'. The bulky north ridge of Kit Carson will now be almost directly south. Swing south, and hike 1/4 mile up the low-angled valley side to the base of the ridge. Start just to climber's left of a notched couloir. Don't mistake this for the Outward Bound Couloir (2.1.12). For your descent, downclimb from the summit to Challenger Peak (2.1.15), then descend Challenger's North Face (2.1.17).

Safety notes: All but elite climbers should have previously climbed their chosen descent route. While this is not a 5th class climb, you could run into such terrain. Start early, and use standard sunrise for sunhit.

2.1.12 Kit Carson Mountain—O.B. (North) Couloir

Ratings:	Ski Descent—Extreme Snow Climb—Advanced
Season:	Spring or Summer Snow
RT Data:	14 hours, 13 miles, 5,095'↑
Start:	WIllow Lake Trailhead, 9,070'
1 Day from Rd:	No
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

Used by Outward Bound as a training climb, this couloir is a fine way to climb Kit Carson Mountain from the north (Willow Creek drainage). The climb is only recommended as a snow route. It also makes a good Extreme ski descent. The late Stuart Mace, musher and pioneer from Ashcroft, Colorado, described a near deadly fall down this couloir during his climbing days in the early 1950's. He said, "it gets pretty icy." Take heed.

Spring snow season: Since an early start is a must for any snow route, backpack in to Willow Lake and set a high camp. Start at the Willow Lake Trailhead (section introduction).

2.1.15 Kit Carson Mountain from Challenger Peak

Ratings:	Ski Descent—Advanced Snow Climb—Advanced Summer Climb—Intermediate
Season:	Spring Snow or Summer
RT Data:	12 hours, 11 miles, 5,170'↑
Start:	WIllow Lake Trailhead 9,070'
1 Day from Rd:	Yes, in summer; in spring, high camp recommended
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

With a wilderness approach on a good trail, fewer people, and a relatively direct climbing route, this is one of the better routes for Kit Carson. Portions of the route finding near the summit are slightly more intricate than on the East Ridge (2.1.10), but it goes.

Summer after snow melt-off: Park at the Willow Creek Trailhead and use Challenger Peak route 2.1.17 or 2.1.18 to reach Challenger's summit. From Challenger's summit, hike the easy ridge a few hundred yards down to the Challenger/Carson saddle (13,790'). The trick

from here is to get on a ledge system known as Kit Carson Avenue. This ledge system traverses south from the Challenger/Carson saddle, then swings east to the Prow/Carson saddle (13,920', see route 2.1.13).

From the Prow/Carson saddle, continue NE along a slightly dropping traverse on the obvious ledge system which leads to the east side of the Kit Carson summit pyramid. Once to the east of the summit, take easy terrain W about 400 vertical feet to the summit.

Spring snow season: Use the summer route described above. While you can't ski most of the terrain between the two summits, both routes up Challenger Peak are good ski descents, hence this route's Advanced ski rating.

Safety notes: Though this route is technically easy, it involves more route finding than many other fourteeners. Take your time. During spring snow season beware of unstable snow on the ledge systems, especially when daily thawing commences. Before you climb the final section to the summit, be sure you have traversed well around to the east side of Kit Carson's summit.

2.1.16 Challenger Peak—East Ridge from Kit Carson Mountain

Ratings:	Ski Descent—N.R. Snow Climb—Intermediate Summer Climb—Intermediate
Season:	Late Spring or Summer No Snow
RT Data:	Overnight, 18 miles, 5,880'↑
Start:	South Colony Trailhead (2X2), 9,600'
1 Day from Rd:	No
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

Challenger Peak (14,080') is one of those quasi-fourteeners that some folks quibble about. It was unnamed and on few climber's tick lists until the space shuttle Challenger exploded; it was then named for the shuttle, and has become a more popular goal. It's a good climb after melt-off, and provides two classic summit ski descents that are slightly less intimidating than the usual Crestone "adult" skiing. Though Challenger is certainly dubious as a truly separate mountain, it meets the aesthetic requirement when climbed from the Willow Creek Drainage.

If you like long hikes, with some intricate scrambling, this route from the summit of Kit Carson could be attractive. Other routes described here are less tedious.

Summer after snow melt-off: This is a technically easy, but long and strenuous route. You must get an early start to avoid afternoon thunderstorms. First, climb Kit Carson Peak (hikers will probably prefer using the East Ridge route for this, route 2.1.10. The remainder of the route to Challenger is simply the reverse of route 2.1.15. To begin, from the summit of Kit Carson drop E the way you climbed up for approximately 400 vertical feet, then carefully traverse the Kit Carson Avenue ledge system SW to the Carson/Prow saddle (13,920'). Swing NW here and continue along ledges to the Carson/Challenger saddle. From the saddle, climb W for 300 vertical feet up the obvious ridge (easy hike terrain) to the summit of Challenger. Return via the same route.

Spring snow season: Firm spring snow can make this route much easier, but beware the afternoon thaw.

Safety notes: This can be a reasonable winter route, provided you can get from South Colony up the couloirs to the Bears Playground (route 2.1.10) with minimal avalanche risk. However, it would be a very hard day. Use standard sunrise for sunhit.

2.1.17 Challenger Peak—North Face

Ratings:	Ski Descent—Advanced Snow Climb—Advanced Summer Climb—Intermediate
Season:	Spring Snow or Summer
RT Data:	10 hours, 9.5 miles, 5,010'↑
Start:	WIllow Lake Trailhead 9,070'
1 Day from Rd:	Possible in Summer, no Spring and Winter
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

This is perhaps the best ski route for Challenger Peak (route 2.1.18 is a good bet, but harder to get from the summit), and it makes a passable summer climb as well. Dry season climbers, however, would be smart to get here in the spring to enjoy the snow climbing instead of the scree and steep slabs which you'll encounter later in the summer.

Summer after snow melt-off: The route is simple. Park at the Willow Lake Trailhead and hike up the Willow Creek Trail (see section introduction and route 2.1.11). Take a poorly maintained trail around the north side of Willow Lake, which leads to the shelf above the lake (11,800'). Climb S and a bit SW out of the drainage up scree and low-angled rock slabs. The terrain steepens below the summit but is little more than a steep hike.

Spring snow season: With a spring snowpack this route is a superb snow climb or ski descent. The snow route is similar to the summer route described above, but with good conditions it ends up being more direct. Follow the Willow Creek Trail (see routes 2.1.11 and 2.1.12) to Willow Lake, then continue around the north or south side of the lake, depending on snow conditions, to 11,800' in the drainage above the lake. Climb S and a bit SW to a well defined "one-sided" couloir on the left side of the face. The couloir is termed "one-sided" because the right side is well defined by a rock ledge, while the left side blends into the mountain. Take care here not to go too far left into a very steep, cliffy area. Follow the couloir until it peters out, then continue up to the summit ridge west of the summit. Follow the ridge to the summit. Descend your ascent route, and be careful of cliff bands.

Safety notes: Spring comes early to the Sangre De Cristo; skiing and snow climbing may soon become marginal after a normal winter's snow accumulation. Don't hesitate; snow in this couloir could be in condition as early as April. Beware of cliff bands on the north face of Challenger. Locate these during your climb so you can avoid them during your descent. As with most "non-ridge" routes, summer climbers should be aware of rockfall danger. Consider wearing a helmet. This northerly route gets a late sunhit.

2.1.18 Challenger Peak—Kirk Couloir

Ratings:	Ski Descent—Extreme Snow Climb—Advanced Summer Climb—N.R.
Season:	Spring Snow
RT Data:	10 hours, 9.5 miles, 5,010'↑
Start:	WIllow Lake Trailhead 9,070'
1 Day from Rd:	Yes, but high camp recommended
Map:	Kit Carson, pg. 76
Photo:	pg. 83

This classic line makes a superb ski descent or snow climb. The route is as clean and clear as can be.

Spring snow season: Park at the Willow Lake Trailhead and follow the Willow Creek drainage to the shelf above lower Willow Lake (see section introduction and route 2.1.12). At 12,000' in Willow Creek, climb the obvious snow bowl up and S between Challenger Peak and Kit Carson Mountain. At 13,000', the bowl steepens and narrows into a nice couloir (maximum angle 48°), which leads directly to the Kit Carson/Challenger saddle (13,790'). From the saddle, follow the ridge W for 300 vertical feet to the summit of Challenger. For your descent reverse the route. Skiers may find little snow on the summit ridge—but the couloir is always well stocked. You'll usually find the best ski snow in late April, before the snow is channeled from spring melt-off.

Safety notes: Remember, spring comes early to the Sangre De Cristo. This north and northwesterly route gets a late morning sunhit.