

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Oh, Go Jump in a Lake!

By Keith Hammer

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The first 18 days of July 2007 exceeded 90 degrees in the Flathead, a record-setting streak of heat brought to an end by nothing less than rain, hail, and a tornado! Folks trying to survive the heat indoors found themselves hard pressed to even find an air conditioner on store shelves. Those of us hiking in the outdoors tended to hike early and to a cold lake for a swim!

Which reminds me of the lyrics to a song I wrote about the kindest words anyone ever said to me: "Take a hike, go jump in a lake, why don't you just get lost now, for heaven's sake!" That's pretty good advice any day of the week, but especially in the heat of summer.

Luckily, the higher elevations of the Swan Range offer cooler temperatures and lots of cold lakes. The early daylight hours of summer allow comparatively cool uphill hiking on even the hottest days, with the hardest part being the mere thought of coming back down later to the sweltering heat in the valley bottoms!

Lamoose Lake and Strawberry Lake both offer a gently sloping gravel beach, while Lamoose provides the added joy of lounging in a field of wildflowers. If you can't decide which lake to visit, both can be swum on a looping day hike by arranging a car shuttle between the Strawberry Lake Trail #5 and Peters Ridge Trail #57 trailheads.

Peters Ridge Trail starts at a higher elevation, crosses the Swan Crest, then drops to Alpine Trail #7. From there, head north about a mile to Lamoose Lake for a rest and a swim, then backtrack and continue south on Alpine #7 to Strawberry Lake. From there it is all downhill to Strawberry Lake Road #5390 on Trail #5!

If diving off rocks into the deep is more your style, Crater Lake in Jewel Basin is perfect. Just south of where Alpine Trail #7 crosses the outlet, a good foot trail spurs off to a narrow peninsula of rock. Besides good diving and swimming, the peninsula can offer relief from bugs as breezes blow up out of Wolf Creek canyon and across Crater Lake! And if Crater Lake seems too far on a hot day, Birch Lake will do just fine!

The best way to put off the return to sweltering valley bottom heat, of course, is to stay a few nights in the high country. Again, backpack the uphill as early in the day as possible (yes, this does require getting out of bed), then swim and kick back in the heat of the afternoon and evening. Enjoy a lake for a day or two, perhaps making short hikes or moving camp to other lakes to add a little spice to the relaxation.

The close clustering of lakes in the Jewel Basin Hiking Area offers many such opportunities, with the added bonus of the quiet afforded by prohibitions on motorized

vehicles. So too with the cluster of high alpine lakes just inside the Bob Marshall Wilderness above Holland Lake.

The somewhat dusty hike up from Holland Lake is rewarded by a great tilted bathing and diving rock along the trail at Upper Holland Lake, complete with several tent sites. A bit further up, along Trail #120, wonderful camping and bathing spots abound at Sapphire Lake. A little further along Trail #120 are even more swimming and camping options as the trail passes by Necklace Lakes.

Relatively short side hikes abound in this area, offering brisk exercise for the cooler mornings and views off mountaintops and cliffs - all with the luxury of a dip afterward in the lake of your choice. And, once forced to return to the lowland heat and civilization, a cold beverage and swim at Holland Lake Lodge helps ease the transition!

One need not climb the Swan Range however, to enjoy its cool waters. Broken Leg Trail #544, for example, provides gently sloped hiking access to both Birch Creek and Deer Creek, crossing Birch Creek only a few hundred yards from the trailhead along the base of Jewel Basin Road #5392. These streams offer shade and ready refrigeration, not to mention the beauty of mossy rocks and the crouching taunt of ouzel birds wondering why we aren't "water dippers" too!

Indeed, there are times when bushwhacking slowly along a cool stream can be a welcome alternative to a dusty trail. After all, the idea is to get out there, stay cool and enjoy the outdoors, not accomplish some goal - unless of course that goal is to swim in a cold mountain lake!

Next time you get that sinking feeling in anticipation of a day confined to the air conditioning of your home, office or car, set out instead to a cool stream or lake in the Swan Range. Take along a good friend and a good book and enjoy!

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Lamoose Lake, like many others in the Swan Range, offers a cool break from the heat for humans and their hiking companions. Keith Hammer photo.