

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Friends with Benefits

By Keith Hammer

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Now that the title has gotten your attention, I'll simply allege that time spent actively outdoors with friends is good for the heart not only in terms of physical exercise but in terms of heart-warming companionship. Though I can't back it up with lots of facts, I'll provide some anecdotal evidence from our Swan Ranger outings suggesting this is true.

Last night I Googled "health benefits of companionship" and came up with scores of links detailing how beneficial the companionship of a pet dog or cat is to our personal health and wellbeing, but nothing at all about the benefits of human companionship. "Companionship and longevity" also resulted in a slew of links aimed at the benefits derived from companionship with pets.

Here and there were links reporting on how human companionship contributes to longevity, but most of it in terms of spousal companions. A few links indicated friendships contribute to longevity, but none really delved into the benefits of companionship while engaged in group activities, especially in the great outdoors. Which leaves me to rely upon my experiences with three years of every-Saturday group outings in the Swan Range.

With 157 outings thus far, the Swan Rangers have averaged more than one new person per outing. Enough folks find the outings rewarding and return often enough that the group size averages about seven on any given Saturday – a nice size for both chatting and hiking with one another. Numbers, however, are not really the point. Here are a few samples of what folks have said about their experiences on Swan Ranger outings:

"The Saturday Swan Ranger outings are a great way to meet interesting and diverse people. They are as good for my mental health as they are for my physical health." (P.W.)

"On occasions when I am unable to hike with the Swan Rangers, I notice life seems a little bumpier. Saturday in the wild Swans has become my compass to navigate the distractions and clamor of the rest of the week." (B. M.)

"Great hike today. I am still smiling. I have met two other women who would like to join the group." (L. D.)

Chatter over breakfast and along the trail reveals that friendships indeed are a primary reason folks join a hiking group. There are times when hearts truly swell along the trail as folks share deeply of their personal experiences with folks they perhaps just met over breakfast. And times when hearts take flight on wings of laughter. Indeed, if laughter is truly the best medicine, Swan Ranger outings litter the trails with little green pills!

Perhaps this tone of openness and light-heartedness is set by the Swan Rangers' attempts to be as inclusive as possible and not a gung-ho "let's bag another peak"

hiking club. No one gets left behind on a Swan Ranger outing, which is why the day's outing is planned over that morning's breakfast – so it suits the abilities and schedules of those who are heading out that day. I mention this because others have asked how best to structure a hiking group in their area.

The outings have indeed brought people together from around the world, even though the destination is always in the Swan Range within a short drive from Echo Lake Café. Last year we had two retired oil executives meet on an outing only to discover they had met years before in Ecuador! This past summer we had two hikers meet for the first time, only to discover they live around the corner from each other in Atlanta!

A good hiking group indeed becomes a valuable network of friends from varied backgrounds rooted in the common denominator of getting healthy exercise and fresh air in the great outdoors. My litmus test for a hiking group is whether I feel better after the outing than before and whether my world seems a little larger and better for the people I met that day. It is my proposition that health and healing is a largely subtle process that occurs whenever we do something that makes us feel better and leaves our lives enriched.

The proof of the pudding, of course, is to try it yourself, either by joining the Swan Rangers or forming a hiking group of your own. You can learn more about the Swan Rangers at www.swanrange.org/hiking.htm, including the fact they continue through winter on showshoes and skis.

To borrow from a saying about the wisdom of heating with firewood: “When you hike with companions, your heart is thus warmed twice.”

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 appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org. This article was underwritten by Musicians United to Sustain the Environment (MUSE at www.musemusic.org).



Swan Rangers enjoy each other's company during a winter outing on Peters Ridge. Keith Hammer photo.