

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Protecting Krause Basin for 25 Years!

By Keith Hammer

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A hike or ski into the upper reaches of Krause Basin always renews my spirit and sense of wonder at nature, but my trip up there a week ago also reminded me of the rewards of citizens working to protect and conserve such special places. Facing the Flathead Valley just north of Jewel Basin and Strawberry Lake, the upper reaches of Krause Basin have remained roadless and secure habitat for a wide array of wildlife.

On last week's trip up there I opted for snowshoes. It was a sky-blue day up there while thick fog blanketed everything below Foothill Road – and it got warmer the higher I climbed.

I came across fresh wolverine tracks that looked like they'd been made earlier that morning, or at least since the trees quit dripping the evening before. Our paths soon parted, however, as the wolverine headed up toward Peters Ridge while I followed the north fork of Krause Creek along the base of Strawberry Mountain. Before long I crossed older wolverine tracks and the usual but nonetheless delightful signs of other wildlife.

Snowshoe hare had scampered here and there and left occasional spots of orange Kool-Aid pee amidst their big-footed tracks. I was reminded of the time I came across a goshawk in Krause Basin feeding on a snowshoe hare and later found the only remains a rabbit foot – as though the goshawk didn't need any further luck that day.

In several places I noticed the snow-tunnels of weasel and the tiny tracks of their comings and goings. Much more common were the dirty trails of squirrels leading from their under snow caches to sunny-spot middens, where they'd feasted on the seeds and discarded the scales of their stashed pine cones.

There were old tracks of two elk that appeared to have successfully crossed over the Swan Crest, having zig-zagged from one tree well to the next and dragged their bellies in the deeper snow between. A few years ago I found a cow elk in Krause Basin that hadn't survived such a difficult crossing and had instead become a meat cache to the delight of area wolverine, which tromped down several snow verandas on which they appear to have dined, picked their teeth with sticks, sunned, and napped!

The last leg of the route into upper Krause Basin is an old gully-bottom and often gently sloped avalanche run-out chute that leaves one to wonder how on earth enough snow could slide off the slopes of the upper basin to possibly flow this far down hill. Last week I got a partial answer as I found this route plugged with tree-and-snow avalanche debris a couple hundred yards below the upper basin itself.

Detouring around the avalanche debris in the relative safety of timber, I arrived at the upper basin to find a slide path of about a half-mile long – about twice the length of the New Year's Eve 1993 avalanche that killed five snowmobilers there as they sought to short-cut across the Swan Crest using the avalanche chute and a trail cut illegally through the forested Krause Basin. The slide appeared to have run sometime in

January, starting in the cliffs of Strawberry Mountain, crossing the ravine at its base to climb and scour trees off the opposite hillside, crossing back across the ravine to scour trees off a lower reach of the eastern hillside, and finally flowing back into the bottom of the ravine to come to rest in an area I've not seen buried in my fifteen years of visiting the area each winter! Trees up to a foot in diameter, broken off or snatched out by the roots and carried downhill, indicate this S-curve slide path had not run in a much longer time.

The sheer power of nature displayed in Krause Basin is matched only by its vulnerability. In 1984, the Forest Service surveyed a road through the middle of Krause Basin and announced its plans to log old-growth forests there, along with twelve 20-acre square clear-cuts on the valley side of the Swan Range. In response, a diverse bunch of folks formed the nonprofit Swan View Coalition and the resulting public uprising stopped the roadbuilding and logging plans dead in their tracks. In 1999 Swan View and its neighbors secured a court order closing the illegally cut and fatal trail to snowmobiles, re-securing the basin for wildlife, peace and quiet.

Last week's snowshoe trip was a revitalizing reminder of the endurance of both nature and of the human spirit. As Swan View Coalition celebrates its 25th Anniversary this year, I'll be writing more on these matters.

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.



Avalanche paths and debris attest to the sheer beauty and power of nature in Upper Krause Basin. Keith Hammer photo.