

On the Path

Signs of Spring, Summer and Wildlife

By Keith Hammer

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It's nearly the end of May as I write this and the signs of spring are turning towards summer along the Swan Range. As the seasons change, we are reminded once again of the delicate balance we seek to maintain with the wildlife we love.

We listen each evening now for the first arrival and call of the Swainson's Thrush, with its upwardly spiraling flute-like song. Unlike its early-arriving cousins the American Robin and Varied Thrush, the Swainson waits out our slushy Montana spring weather elsewhere before making its appearance on the eve of something a bit warmer.

While the Swainson emphasizes the beauty of its song by also making it the last heard in the evening, it was the remarkably long-winded, bubbly warble of a Townsend's Solitaire that recently caught the ear of the Swan Rangers during their every-Saturday outing! On another recent outing up the Crater Notch Trail, the Swan Rangers encountered two male Blue Grouse acting quite testy and proud, humming in deep voices and puffing out the reddish-purple patches on their necks. The mating season "drumming" of the Ruffed Grouse, on the other hand, is being heard more commonly and sounds amazingly like an old single-cylinder John Deere tractor starting up!

Some geese are still V-ing their way northward and grizzly bears have headed downhill from their winter den sites to feast on the "green-up" at lower elevations – and at times to feast on the likes of improperly contained garbage, bird seed and chickens along the Swan foothills. Fish, Wildlife and Parks has already trapped and removed two sow grizzly bears and their young from the Foothill Road area and is reminding folks to either remove or correctly contain foods and animals that may attract bears.

The fifteen grizzly bears FWP says are currently in the foothills and valley bottom between Lake Blaine and Swan Lake indeed deserve a break as 23,000 acres of their equally low-elevation habitat on the east side of the Swan Range is submerged under Hungry Horse Reservoir. This limits their choices for snow-free habitat selection when they emerge hungry after some six months in their higher elevation winter dens - and human attractants along the western foothills only makes matters worse. To visualize the reservoir's impact on wildlife habitat, simply imagine that the Swan Mountains are made of glass and you can see the reservoir water level 600' above our homes in the Flathead Valley bottom!

Yep, there's nothing like late-season frosts, deer, black bear, and grizzly bear to add a challenge to gardening! But we wouldn't have it any other way here along Foothill Road. We keep our vegetable compost in thick, bear-resistant plastic barrels with screw-on lids and never put meat scraps or grease in the compost. We keep a 6'-high deer fence in good repair around the vegetable garden and a shorter one around each and every flowerbed and flowerpot!

I follow my late father's gardening advice and don't rush to get many freezables above-ground prior to June 1, when we are finally getting past our last likely frost and the ground is warming enough to spur rapid plant growth. This also prevents our garden from being the most attractive green food in the area during spring green-up. And, in the fall, we try to harvest our fenced plums and apples as early as we can, before the bears are nonetheless tempted to get into them.

The moral of the story is that we can enjoy wildlife in the outdoors by taking measures to keep their habitat secure and by taking measure to secure our yards, homes and outbuildings so wildlife are not drawn to them. FWP provides a wealth of information on how to coexist with wildlife, including an easy to use Residential Assessment for Wildlife Attractants, at <http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingwildlife/beBearAware/default.html>.

We're waiting for the Swainson's Thrush to arrive and announce summer is here, but there's still over 4' of snow in the Jewel Basin parking lot – so don't expect the bears to head back into the high country very soon!

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.



A male Blue Grouse goes out on a limb along the Crater Notch Trail in the Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.