

On the Path

In Memory of Walkin' Jim Stoltz

By Keith Hammer

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Walkin' Jim Stoltz dedicated his life to the conservation of America's wildlands and moved us through his music and stories about life along the wilderness trail. It is with great sadness I report Jim passed away due to cancer September 3.

In spite of having hiked the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail, trekking 5,000 miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific across North America, and along the Continental Divide Trail from Mexico to Canada, Jim was anything but a braggart. His life was not about the destination, but about the trail along the way and the need to conserve wilderness and our experiences of it.

Jim's 27,000 miles of awareness-raising hikes included a trip all the way around the Bob Marshall Wilderness and along the Swan Range. He performed his "Forever Wild" multimedia show numerous times in the Flathead as fund-raisers for local conservation groups, with his latest Flathead performance in May of 2009 at a packed Swan River Community Hall.

The Environmental Protection Agency honored Jim with its "Outstanding Achievement Award" for his advocacy of nature and wilderness across America. Jim was an outspoken advocate for the protection of clean water and all of America's remaining public roadless lands. He was a supporter of the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, a bill currently before Congress that would protect 24 million acres of those lands as Wilderness in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon.

Jim's genetic predisposition to kidney failure and his acceptance of a generously donated kidney in 2004 came at the price of a suppressed immune system more susceptible to cancer. In 2007 and 2008, Jim fought a then-successful battle with cancer in his tonsils and the lymph nodes in his neck, emerging in good health and with his fine baritone voice undiminished. He'd since been touring the country with his show and he continued making long hikes.

But this summer he cancelled his fall tour schedule after finding cancer had reappeared in his liver, requiring intensive chemotherapy. He was undergoing treatments in his hometown of Helena, Montana, at the time of his death. He was hoping for renewed energy following the treatments that would allow him to return to work. "After all," he wrote, "I do have lots of songs I'd still like to record!"

I visited with Jim at his home in late August. In spite of the physically demanding challenges of both his illness and his treatments, he remained dedicated to telling the story of wild country. While discussing a current wildfire along the Continental Divide, Jim turned inward for a moment, then issued forth with the most eloquent description of that forest when he'd hiked it last, complete with the year it had burned in a prior natural cycle to make it the marvel that it is today.

Jim was a man whose knowledge was shared through his heart, with the integrity that came from his daily practice of keeping his heart fully connected to both his mind

and his feet. He toured with his ever-evolving “Forever Wild” show for a quarter-century and compiled nine CDs of his own music. In addition, he produced several CDs via his nonprofit Musicians United to Sustain the Environment in order to support other conservation groups through monetary grants from the proceeds.

You can learn a lot more about Jim and his wilderness message by visiting www.walkinjim.com. If you’ve been to one of Jim’s performances, his web site is a treasure trove of songs, lyrics, and other components of his show. For first-timers, it is a valuable introduction to the wild world of Walkin’ Jim Stoltz, from backcountry basics for kids to guideposts for cutting-edge wilderness advocacy.

I’m reminded of the chorus from one of Jim’s songs:

“If we could see this world through the eyes of those
Who keep sharing when there's nothing left to give
If we could walk this land with respect for all
Oh, what a life we could live.”

Jim did exactly that and he continues to share his love of the land with us through his songs, books and paintings. His person will be sorely missed but his passion for wild country will live with us forever.

Folks can help Jim’s family with his extensive medical expenses by visiting [www.walkinjim.com/Jims Medical Fund.php](http://www.walkinjim.com/Jims_Medical_Fund.php) and making a tax-deductible contribution . Folks can also help by purchasing Jim’s CDs, DVDs, books, and paintings at www.walkinjim.com, while of course helping spread his wilderness message through the gifting of these creative treasures to friends and relatives.

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.



Walkin’ Jim Stoltz walking that fine line between heaven and earth. Wild Wind Music Photo.