

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Bushwhacking Among Goats and Bears

By Keith Hammer

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We descend the southeast ridge of Mt. Aeneas and begin looking for a good spot to drop off the ridge toward Birch Lake. "Good" is a relative term when it comes to bushwhacking.

Birch Lake is clearly visible below us. What remains hidden is a big chunk of landscape between it and the cliffs only a few yards to our right. Intuition and the survival instinct guide us a little further down the ridge before looking for a path down through the cliffs.

Of all the lakes in the northern Swan Range, Birch Lake does the best balancing act. It sits smack on the spine of the Swan Crest and, from a distance, it's hard to tell in which direction its waters flow: east toward the South Fork Flathead or west toward the Flathead Valley.

We can see Aeneas Creek making its way down the steep canyon to the east, where old clear-cuts and logging roads fill the space between Jewel Basin and Hungry Horse Reservoir. At Birch Lake, however, a solid rock buttress traps the east end of the lake and keeps it from flowing into Aeneas Creek. At the western end of the lake we spot the outlet where Birch Creek plunges off the Crest to Martha Lake before continuing its cascade to the valley bottom.

A faint trail breaks off the ridge toward the cliffs and we follow it to get a view of what lies below. A series of chutes in the cliff lead to a big bowl-shaped, glacier-carved hillside still migrating toward Birch Lake. A rolling stone gathers no moss and the upper part of this hillside harbors little vegetation. We launch down one of the chutes in what could better be described as rock surfing than hiking and, like the stones we have dislodged, keep moving for lack of our ability to stop.

At the base of the cliffs we come to rest and turn to scan what is now behind us. Several mountain goats look down nonchalantly from ledges that look to be all of two inches wide. This is the rocks-and-ice habitat that is great for goats but offers a scant living for grizzly bear.

Turning our attention to Hungry Horse Reservoir, we can see that the bears here are caught literally between a rock and a hard place, with 23,000 acres of their formerly lush creek and river bottom habitat now flooded. The options on the Flathead Valley side aren't much better either, with most of the low elevation habitat now occupied by humans and such grizzly bear pitfalls as bird feeders, apple orchards, garbage cans and . . . well you get the idea.

We are standing in the middle of an area where Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks conducted a ten-year study of the local grizzly bear population. The good news is that grizzly bears, listed as threatened with extinction under the federal Endangered Species Act, are still here. The bad news is that this local population is declining at about two percent per year and, while that may not sound like much, it is enough to halve the population in just thirty years!

The study found that female bears require over two-thirds of their home range be free of motorized vehicles to be secure enough to successfully rear their young. Flathead Forest Plan standards were subsequently adopted, requiring 68% of each bear management subunit to be motor-free security core habitat, but federal officials are providing as low as 27% in subunits of the northern Swan Range in order to favor pickups, snowmobiles and ATVs instead.

A low rumble catches us a bit off-guard, wondering if it might be a rockslide headed our way. When no such slide materializes, we decide it must be Chief Aeneas rolling over in his grave as the federal government reneges on its promised grizzly bear reservation just as it did with the Salish and Kootenai tribes.

We stumble on downhill to the bottom of the scree slope, where enough soil has stabilized to support vegetation. As we continue toward the lake, the true bushwhack begins as trees and brush thicken. A few token scrapes and bruises later, however, and we emerge on the shore of the lake. Behind us is Mt. Aeneas and ahead more peaks of the Swan Crest, but to our left and right is nothing but blue water and blue sky as Birch Lake lies perched in the heavens.

We follow a footpath to where Alpine Trail #7 crosses the outlet of the lake. There in the mud are none other than the footprints left by Bob Marshall in 1928.

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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Goats and hikers eyeball each other along Alpine Trail #7 near Birch Lake. Keith Hammer photo.