

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Up the Switchback Trail with Bob Marshall

By Keith Hammer

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We set out after Bob Marshall, leaving the Echo Ranger Station at the base of Mount Aeneas at 9 o'clock the morning of August 28, 1928. We're headed for Spotted Bear Ranger Station on foot and it's already hot. At the pace Marshall is setting, however, we'll be in the cool of the high country soon!

The trail begins to climb through a forest of grand fir, Douglas fir, western larch, and birch. After three-quarters of a mile, we turn off onto the Switchback Trail, which heads up a ridge leading to the peak of Mount Aeneas. Marshall starts making a hash mark in his notebook for each of the switchbacks in the trail (1, 2, 3 . . .).

Marshall grew up hiking in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, which his father fought to protect as a world-class hiking area and essential water supply for New York City. Heading up the Switchback Trail, he holds two degrees in Forestry and is working for the Forest Service in Missoula studying the regeneration of forests after fire. He also has a habit of keeping statistics on almost everything he encounters (switchback 33, 34, . . .).

We top a small knob along the ridge and pause for a breather. Marshall keeps on trucking (switchback 35, 36 . . .). To catch our breath we fast-forward to present-day, finding ourselves standing between thick forest and a more open area set on fire by the Forest Service in 2002. This hillside was partially burned to help reestablish whitebark pine, a tree that has suffered from blister rust, a fungal disease introduced to the United States from Europe in 1910.

Coincidentally, the Forest Service responded to large wildfires across the West in 1910 with a new policy of suppressing all wildfires. This added to the problems faced by whitebark pine, which depend on wildfire to periodically remove shade-making forest cover so they can better compete for sunshine. The combined result of blister rust and fire suppression has been a drastic decline in whitebark pine. Hence the controlled burn in 2002.

We take one more deep breath in the present-day, then return to the time of Bob Marshall, who has now added a PhD in plant physiology to his resume' and added more hash marks to his notebook (switchback 47, 48 . . .). Marshall is critical of forest clear-cutting and of the Society of American Foresters, whom he feels are condoning the depletion of America's forests. His path switches back and forth between various jobs with the Forest Service, National Park Service, and the Indian Bureau. He believes

America's public lands should be accessible to all people, not just the rich, and that forests should be preserved for recreation and inspiration, (switchback 58, 59, . . .).

The Switchback Trail has brought us high on the shoulder of Mount Aeneas now, but it continues to climb (switchback 65, 66, . . .). Marshall is now working with full intent to change the way the Forest Service goes about its business. At his job, Marshall is drafting policy for the preservation of primitive areas to be left untouched by roads and logging. At home, Marshall is writing about the need for Forest Service reform and is helping start the Wilderness Society.

After switchback #79 we are finally rewarded with a long side-hill traverse toward Alpine Trail #7 and the peak of Mount Aeneas! We hike through bear grass, stunted alpine fir and whitebark pine that often take 100 years to produce their first cones. Those cones, however, are a favorite among certain birds and grizzly bears!

The whitebark pine produces a cone containing large, energy-rich seeds somewhat comparable to the southwest's piñon pine seeds we humans crave and buy at Costco. Grizzly bears aren't very adept at harvesting their own whitebark pine cones so they do like we humans do and go shopping at their neighborhood store.

A wonderful bird named Clark's nutcracker is particularly adept at prying the nuts out of whitebark pine cones. Then, as though enlisted by the whitebark's themselves, the nutcrackers disperse the seeds far and wide, giving the whitebark a competitive advantage over trees that rely on the wind alone to cast their seed. As though enlisted by the grizzlies, the nutcrackers cache the seeds in the ground, where the bears shop with a simple swipe of their credit card!

We arrive with Marshall at Alpine Trail #7 at 10:35 AM. The present-day Switchback Trail starts about three miles up the Jewel Basin Road, is of moderate grade due to its many switchbacks, passes through the sun-bleached skeletons of dead whitebark pine, and provides a tour of the now-green controlled burn intended to boost a new generation of the whitebarks.

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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After a mere 79 switchbacks, Switchback Trail # 725 sets a direct course toward Alpine Trail #7 and the peak of Mount Aeneas. Photo by Keith Hammer.