

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Bob Marshall on Global Warming

By Keith Hammer

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You'd think, after an hour and a half climb up 79 switchbacks to reach Alpine Trail #7, Bob Marshall would take a short rest and then head straight to Birch Lake in order to reach Spotted Bear by nightfall on this hot August day of 1928. Instead, he decides to take a little side hike straight up to the peak of Mount Aeneas.

We time-traveling Swan Rangers protest in want of a short breather. Marshall of course cannot see us tag-alongs, but we take some satisfaction in seeing him brush his hand about his head in order to chase off our subconscious nagging like so many pesky mosquitoes! Then we rush to catch up.

As we reach the shoulder of Aeneas there is no cinder block shack to assault our senses as there is today. We head up the ridge to the peak, with Picnic Lakes on our left and the Flathead Valley on our right.

At the peak, Marshall finally takes a few moments to look around. We see no Hungry Horse Reservoir because it isn't there yet. Instead we witness a sea of forest both burned and green that hides a free flowing South Fork Flathead River in all but a few places.

Marshall surveys the Swan Crest to the south to confirm the route he will follow to Spotted Bear Ranger Station: down to Birch Lake and Crater Lake, then down Aeneas Creek to Handkerchief Lake and eventually to Elk Park Ranger Station along the South Fork. Marshall then eyes the South Fork with noticeable discomfort.

Only a few years ago, the main trail up the South Fork was still a part of the Coram-Ovando supply line run by packers, horses and mules. By this day in 1928 a primitive road runs all the way to Spotted Bear, which means Marshall's epic hike to Spotted Bear will actually be a 30 mile hike to Elk Park followed by an automobile ride to Spotted Bear, the mileage of which Marshall will not even bother to put in his daily log.

The intrusion of roads into wild country has been nagging Marshall for some time. He will soon write in Nature magazine "Wilderness is melting away like some last snowbank on some south-facing mountainside during a hot afternoon in June." Would Marshall today regard his 1930's metaphor regarding vanishing wilderness as merely the tip of a rapidly melting iceberg in the context of today's accounts of global warming caused by the over-industrialization of the world?

Indeed, Marshall appears to be keenly aware of the pace at which the Forest Service is setting about providing road access to the public's backcountry for logging and fire

fighting. Perhaps only in his worst nightmares does he dream the Forest Service will become one of the biggest road-building agencies in the world.

By 1959 the Flathead National Forest would have over 1,000 miles of roads. By 1985 it would have about 4,000 miles of roads - and far fewer trails as the roads swallow them.

Nationally, the Forest Service would build over 400,000 miles of road, so many that the road system would literally and figuratively begin caving in on itself due to the agency's inability to maintain such an extensive road system - especially on steep and fragile mountain hillsides. Today, the agency's road maintenance backlog is on the order of \$10 billion and it has begun removing some of the most environmentally damaging roads as a cheaper and more preferable alternative to trying to maintain them.

Whether all of this was just a premonition or a highly educated guess on the part of Bob Marshall, he heads back down to Alpine Trail #7 after only seven minutes on the top of Mount Aeneas. He is a man on a mission to tour the upper South Fork Flathead River country, the majority of which would later bear his name as the Congressionally designated Bob Marshall Wilderness! Thirteen minutes later we turn south on Alpine #7 after pausing just long enough for Marshall to look at his pocket watch and scribble another entry in his tattered notebook.

The trail to Birch Lake rises and falls gently and we are for once able to keep up with Marshall in spite of his fierce pace. As we round the southwest side of Mount Aeneas, we enjoy the site of Martha Lake below us, nestled in a glacier-scoured shelf of rock that intercepts Birch Creek on its way down to Echo Ranger Station where we began our hike barely three hours ago.

We arrive at the outlet of Birch Lake and watch as Bob Marshall leaves his tracks in the mud - tracks that would be discovered by bush-whacking Swan Rangers almost 80 years later. And it's déjà' vu all over again!

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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A Mount Aeneas view of Birch and Crater Lakes still waiting for Congressional wilderness protection, with the adjacent Bob Marshall Wilderness in the distance. Photo © 2007, James R. Conner.