

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Down Trail #1 with Bob Marshall

By Keith Hammer

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I must begin with an apology for misreading Bob Marshall's log of his August 28, 1928 hike through what is now the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, from the Echo Ranger Station to the Elk Park and Spotted Bear Ranger Stations along the South Fork Flathead River. After getting a view from the top of Mount Aeneas, Marshall made his way to what was then the Crater Lake Divide Trail via Clayton Lake, not Crater Lake.

I'd like to blame this on Marshall's tattered notebook and use of a hard-leaded #4 pencil, but I'm working from a typewritten transcript beside photocopies of Marshall's notebook pages - so I'd best simply fall back on the most reliable adage I use with my hiking companions: "We're not lost, we're just turned around a little bit."

The upshot of this is that it puts we time-traveling tag-along Swan Rangers on a swing north from Mount Aeneas, rather than the south! Having followed Marshall up Mount Aeneas from the Echo Ranger Station on the Switchback Trail, and with that little sprint up to the peak and back under our belts, we now follow Marshall along a trail that drops down into Graves Creek.

Marshall follows this route likely because it is the main Forest Service route across the Swan Crest. Indeed, it in present day still bears the title "Trail #1." Chief Aeneas and other American Indians, on the other hand, preferred Birch Lake and Aeneas Creek off the south flank of Mount Aeneas as their major travel route over the Swans.

We loose elevation quickly as we drop off a series of benches below Jewel Lakes. We switchback down to Black Lake, drop off that perch to Lower Black Lake, and drop off another couple of benches before the trail mellows out and arrives at a flat meadow through which Graves Creek meanders.

What a beautiful and serene place this is! While there are nice alpine meadows to be found in the upper reaches of Graves Creek, this lower elevation meadow is huge by comparison and a welcome opening in the thick spruce forest.

The trail continues flat long enough for our heads to swell at being able to keep up with Marshall. That all changes when we reach the junction with Clayton Lake Trail and Marshall decides to take another little side hike up there - meaning three miles one way up to Pioneer Ridge, then back! Marshall notes the time in his notebook as 1:05 and we are back to counting switchbacks.

We climb eagerly, hoping to get a peek at the sinuous Graves Creek snaking its way through the meadow below, yet don't see Marshall again until the head end of Clayton Lake. He has just scribbled 2:00-2:05 in his notebook to mark his five minute rest there.

Clayton Lake lies in a saddle between Tongue Mountain and Pioneer Ridge and, like Birch Lake, causes us to wonder which end the water flows out of. It looks like it flows out the far end, to the north of Pioneer Ridge, but Marshall has disappeared again.

We chase Marshall back to the Graves Creek Trail and turn left. After four miles of gentle downhill, we arrive at Handkerchief Lake, one of some thirty lakes in western Montana that harbor arctic grayling fish. Montana is the only state in the Lower 48 that is still home to native populations of this unique fish with the big iridescent dorsal fin. Populations in Michigan have gone extinct.

Another half hour down the trail we come to a junction with the Crater Lake Divide Trail where Aeneas Creek flows into Graves Creek. Here Marshall's route down Trail #1 joins back up with the route taken by American Indians. Marshall notes the time as 4:35 in his notebook and we are off for the South Fork Flathead River.

In the present day, it is barely a mile from Handkerchief Lake by road to Hungry Horse Reservoir and its West Side Road. On this August evening in 1928, however, it is nearly five miles down Graves Creek by trail to the still free flowing South Fork Flathead River.

As if to simply get the disappointment over with, Marshall crosses the river and strikes out for the newly built road running from Coram to Spotted Bear, arriving at the Elk Park Ranger Station at 6:35. By 7:00 he is bored and sets out on a two-mile stroll down the road before dinner.

We modern-day Swan Rangers put our feet up and let him go it alone. Twenty-eight miles seems enough for today, we still need to get to Spotted Bear this evening, and we hear Marshall plans to hike forty miles tomorrow.

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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Clayton Lake makes a pretty picture from the shoulder of Tongue Mountain, nestled against Pioneer Ridge near the northern border of Jewel Basin Hiking Area. Photo by Dave Franklin.