

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

The Big Picture En-route to Black Bear

By Keith Hammer

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It is almost 7:00 p.m. on August 29, 1928. Shadows are getting long, and we time-traveling Swan Rangers are still at it, following Bob Marshall up the South Fork Flathead River toward Black Bear Ranger Station. We've just gotten a crash course from Techno-Ranger in how local residents lost the battle over keeping Bunker Creek roadless, but how that loss spurred passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act and Congressional designation of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

TR is our sometimes annoying link between past and future not because of his shamanistic talents, but because he carries a satellite-linked laptop computer in his backpack. While a few of us joked earlier in the day about how he should take a flying leap into Meadow Creek Gorge, his chatter at this late hour is helping pass the time. He's trying to lift our spirits after telling us a bill that would have designated another 80,000 acres of the Swan Range as wilderness, including the upper forks of Bunker Creek and its now-abandoned roads, was vetoed by President Reagan in 1988.

"Well, not everything about the 1988 bill was peachy," he cautions. "It included language that would have made it really difficult, if not impossible, to protect areas that weren't immediately designated wilderness so they could be considered for wilderness by our kids and theirs."

The rest of us look at each other with a newfound appreciation of someone we thought a geek. This guy had the big picture in mind and was thinking along a long time line.

"We have to guard against making deals with the devil," TR continues, "which is what 'hard release' legislation is. It pretty much says folks can't ask for more wilderness later, in exchange for getting a little bit designated today. If the Bob Marshall had been designated that way in 1964, it could not have been expanded through the Scapegoat Wilderness additions in 1972 or the Great Bear Wilderness additions in 1978."

"That's fine and good," Low Tech pipes up, "but when are we gonna get to cross the South Fork?" LT doesn't trust GPS and likes to carry several hard-copy maps of various dates so he can document where trails have been replaced by roads. He holds a crumpled map above his head and indicates with his thumb and index finger the short distance that will be left to Black Bear once we ford the river.

"Right after I tell you about the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act," TR grins back. "Enreepa," he says "is just what it says it is, an ecosystem protect bill. It is a wilderness bill and then some!"

LT takes the bait. "Then some what?"

"Enreepa will designate over 20 million acres of wilderness in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and Wyoming. And," he pauses with his finger raised, "it will designate 1,800 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers, 3.5 million acres of biological connecting corridors, and a million acres of wildland recovery areas where roads will be removed to recover watersheds, fish and wildlife!"

"Oh, is that all?" LT mocks. "Who's going to pay for recovering a million acres of messed up wildlands?"

"By not logging roadless lands at a financial loss, taxpayers will save more than enough money to pay for the restoration work," TR says matter-of-factly. "In the first ten years, there will be a net saving of 245 million dollars. And that recovery work will create over 2,000 high-paying jobs."

Marshall has stopped at the bank of the river and is singing softly to himself "the river is wide, I cannot cross over." He writes "Cross South Fork; 8:00, 37.5 miles" in his notebook, moves downstream a few steps and wades out in his trusty sneakers without hesitation. We follow suit.

LT, delighted to be within a few miles of our destination, chides "Pardon the metaphor, but just who's going to carry Enreepa across the wide water . . . for neither have I wings to fly . . . ?"

"We all are," TR replies, hiking his pack higher up on his hips to keep it dry. "Last Congress, Enreepa had the bipartisan support of 188 cosponsors in the House of Representatives. Fiscal conservatives like it because it saves the taxpayer money and conservationists like it because it protects wildlife and wildlands. You might like it because it designates all remaining roadless lands in the Swan Range as wilderness and removes those roads from Bunker Creek."

"Where do we sign up?" we all chime in.

Marshall pulls up short in a meadow when he sees Black Bear cabin. He pulls out his notebook, writes "Black Bear R.S.; 8:50; 40 miles," and heads for the cabin. We Rangers are glad our day was just 24 of those 40 miles and that August has lots of daylight!

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.

- PHOTO ON NEXT PAGE -



Black Bear Ranger Station along the South Fork Flathead River, 1927. Photo courtesy Flathead National Forest.