

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Swan Range Community Resources

By Keith Hammer

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We time-traveling Swan Rangers are taking a day of rest after Bob Marshall's 40 mile trek from Spotted Bear to Black Bear "yesterday." We'll return to his legendary hikes of 1928 soon, but take this opportunity to note present-day community efforts that honor the quiet, beauty, wildlife, health benefits, and rich history of the Swan Range.

At www.swanrange.org, Dr. Stu Levitt encourages folks to explore the Swan Range as a way to reduce stress, blood pressure and cholesterol. "Outdoor exercise can be every bit as effective as taking medication for these health problems, and is less expensive and a lot more fun," he says. The web site also includes a Virtual Trek along the Swan Crest from the Bob Marshall Wilderness to Columbia Falls for times when folks can't get out to the mountains. The Trek includes a map and a chart of mileposts along the way that folks can visit and check off as they meet exercise goals elsewhere - while seeing photos of those waypoints along the Swan Crest and learning about the natural and cultural history of the area.

There's also a Kids' Page at www.swanrange.org with lots of fun activities, but don't miss the web site of the Crusta family at www.rockymountainkidskorner.com! The Crusta family encourages families to explore the outdoors while preserving nature at its best and their web site is chock full of the adventures of youngest sisters and intrepid hikers Eileen (9) and Mallory (10).



Mallory and Eileen Crusta share their hiking, camping and other adventures on their web site at www.rockymountaintinkidskornet.com. Keith Hammer photo.

Folks of all ages and abilities have been getting together every Saturday morning at the Echo Lake Café since November 2005 to hike, snowshoe and ski in the nearby Swan Range. It's a fun way to meet new people, get healthy exercise, and help foster a sense of place-based community in today's busy world. The informal Swan Ranger group meets for breakfast at 7:30 and leaves the café at 8:30. Visit the Hiking Page at www.swanrange.org for outing journal entries, photos and current information.

Folks of all ages and abilities have also been getting together along the Swan foothills on various Sundays for community potluck dinners and music jam sessions since January. The every-other-Sunday schedule at the Mountain Brook Community Library and Swan River Hall will resume next winter, but folks can contact me if they'd like to join in on the sessions being passed from home to home this summer.

The Missoulian newspaper did an excellent print and multi-media feature of one of the jam sessions held at the Mountain Brook Community Library. It also discussed efforts by the library and Mountain Brook Homestead Foundation to foster education and community through the old Mountain Brook school campus. To see, hear and read about the jam sessions and the Homestead Foundation go to www.missoulian.com, click on "Go to Multimedia Vault" under Multimedia News, then click on Swan Range Jam. And don't miss the artwork of Amanda Wunderlich, also a volunteer at the library and talented musician, that accompanies this article.



Pencil drawing of Keith Hammer by Amanda Wunderlich.

Our treks with Bob Marshall would not be nearly as interesting were it not for the historic photos provided by Tim Light and Kyle McGuire, archeologists with the Flathead National Forest. And their work is made easier thanks to their predecessor Kathy McKay, whose excellent history of the Flathead we all rely upon.

Last, but not least, are the legions of folks carrying on the work of Bob Marshall in preserving the natural communities that are essential to the health of the human community. The Swan Range is among the 20 million acres of public land proposed for Congressional wilderness designation in the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, written by folks living and working in those communities in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon. For more information on NREPA, how to get a pdf or hard copy of the bill, and links to track bill cosponsors, go to www.wildrockiesalliance.org.

The Flathead and Swan offer a beautiful place to nurture community by residents and visitors alike. What we do to the land, we do to each other and how we treat each other likewise is reflected on the land. Computers and newspapers have become an important part of how we network with one another, but nothing beats getting together to chat, hike, camp, play music, eat and simply enjoy each other's company in the majesty of the Swan Range.

I hope to run into you along the trail soon, if not in one of the businesses blessed by the view of these wonderful mountains.

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.