

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Bob Marshall Ricochets up the South Fork

By Keith Hammer

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We time traveling Swan Rangers have taken a day of rest from chasing after Bob Marshall on his legendary 1928 hike through the Swan Range and South Fork Flathead. We are about to take more. We are looking at his hiking logs, know he is about to cover 142 miles in just four days, and decide we simply won't be able to keep up. So we mix up a pitcher of lemonade, pull out a map of the Bob Marshall Wilderness and set about resurrecting his route.

On August 30, Marshall awoke at 6:45 at Black Bear Ranger Station, managed to ford the South Fork Flathead River on his second try at 8:10, and hiked 42 miles in twelve hours. Low Tech traces the route on the map with his finger.

"If maintaining a three-and-a-half mile per hour clip over twelve hours doesn't impress you," he exclaims, "consider that he did it while climbing up Helen Creek, over the Flathead Range's Pagoda Mountain, down through the White River, and up onto the Continental Divide's 'Chinese Wall'. He didn't turn around on Salt Mountain until 2:35, then he beat it on back to Black Bear by 8:14, ate supper, and was snug in his bedroll at 10:10!

"What, no usual evening stroll after his supper?" Techno-Ranger spins his laptop around and gives us a virtual Google Earth tour of the route, pointing out the sheer east face of the Chinese Wall, the large southward loop the White River makes before joining the South Fork Flathead to flow northward, and the copious amounts of exposed and tilted rock in the upper White River. LT feigns interest by sipping an equally copious amount of lemonade in the general direction of TR's keyboard.

"Looks like he took it easy the next day," I interject facetiously. "He slept in until 7:09, didn't get on the trail until 8:35, didn't climb any mountains, and only hiked twenty seven miles to Big Prairie Ranger Station. Well, not counting his four mile upriver stroll after supper."

LT points to his map with his lemonade glass. "So now he's upriver on the South Fork Flathead, above where the White River flows in." TR pulls his laptop further up on his lap.

"Man, the South Fork valley is certainly high, wide and handsome around Big Prairie!" TR spins his laptop around again for us to see. "But it's still surrounded by steep mountains. Look at what Marshall climbed the next day to visit the White River and Prisoner Lake lookouts."

“As well as Woolworth Ridge and Brown Sandstone Mountain,” I add, pointing to Marshall’s hiking log. “And, after ten hours and 26 miles of day-hiking, he goes for what he calls an ‘evening walk’ of eight more miles after supper!”

“And that’s what he considered a layover day at Big Prairie, before leaving the South Fork and Swan Mountains to explore the Mission Mountains!” LT puts a new crease in his already tattered map and flips it over, and begins tracing Marshall’s September 2 exit from the area that would later bear his name as one of the first Congressionally designated wilderness areas in America.

“He heads up Gordon Creek and sixteen miles later reaches Shaw Creek Ranger Station. Then . . .” LT is interrupted by TR, who has closed his laptop.

“We’ve been there. That’s George Lake!” TR pokes his finger into the map, at a trail-less lake high in the Swan Range above the Shaw Creek Ranger Station, then jabs further north. “And there’s Upper Holland Lake.”

“You need to get out more often,” LT quips while brushing TR’s hand aside. “Like I was saying, Marshall continued from Shaw Creek up and over Gordon Pass to Upper Holland Lake. Then he did a couple of several-mile side hikes, one up to Holland Lookout, before dropping down to Holland Lake and civilization.”

“Where he spent fifty minutes at the hotel before reporting in at the Holland Lake Ranger Station,” I note, pointing at his hiking log.”

“Do you suppose they had cold lemonade at the hotel in 1928?” LT raises his glass and the rest of us follow suit. “Here’s to Bob Marshall, an awesome hiker and a true champion for wild country!”

“Here’s to the Bob Marshall Wilderness,” TR adds, and glasses clink once again.

“And here’s to us getting off our sorry behinds and hiking more of the Bob and the northern Swan Range! But at our own pace,” I vow.

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 pack string meets a supply plane from Missoula at the Big Prairie Ranger Station and landing strip in 1933. The trend towards airplane use here was later reversed by both administrative policy and designation of the Bob Marshall Wilderness in the 1964 Wilderness Act. K. D. Swan photo courtesy of U. S. Forest Service.