

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Of Bears, Bladders and Berries!

By Keith Hammer

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In some parts of the world, purple fingers indicate you have just voted in a public election. In Montana, it is a dead giveaway that you've been picking huckleberries!

I've heard of some weak-willed folks actually bleaching their stained fingers to protect the location of their favorite berry-picking patch. Apparently they can't stand up to the interrogation that befalls the purple-fingered!

Wild berry season in the Swan Range adds a tasty bonus to hiking. It is also the time of year one wants to be extra careful about the choice of hiking equipment, especially the choice of water container.

For economic reasons, truckers hauling freight one direction try to line up freight to haul back on the return trip - what they call a "backhaul." Similarly, any hiker worth their weight in berries will carry a backhaul-worthy water container during the summer wild berry season.

I've got plenty of reasons for seldom using a water bladder. It's hard to tell when they are near empty and, once empty, hard to fill from a trickling spring when in need. Water in the hose is hot in summer and frozen in winter unless you remember to blow it back into the bladder after every sip. And, when mindlessly abandoned between trips, bladders grow a really disgusting strain of internal green goop!

Most importantly, bladders fail the backhaul test. They are very poor containers for berries picked along the trail unless you have two hands for holding the mouth open and a third for picking. Or unless you want the berries turned into a smoothie by the time you get back to the trailhead, which may be the only way to get them back out of the bladder anyway.

My preference is to carry two double-duty, one-liter, wide-mouth Nalgene bottles, worn near the hips like a pair of trusty six-shooters. They are rigid enough to protect the berries from getting smashed and you'll delight in the essence of berries imparted to your drinking water for weeks to come! The narrow-mouth bottles not only fail the giardia-inviting trickling-spring filling test, they also fail the "dump your berries into here" test.

Why only two liters? Have you ever tried guzzling more than two liters of water upon discovering a good berry patch? Remember, it is important to stay hydrated while

hiking, so you can't just dump it out on the ground. Plus, it's really stupid to pack heavy water uphill and then not drink it!

To some it would appear a no-brainer to simply carry berry-picking containers in addition to one's hiking gear. That, however, constitutes "berry-picking." We're talking here about "hiking with benefits," an hybrid form of berry-picking that occurs in addition to the primary endeavor of hiking after one has stuffed as many berries into one's mouth as the stomach can tolerate.

In emergencies, such as when one's water bottles are already full of berries and the heavenly berry patch is not yet exhausted, one can resort to gulping down all available lunch and snacks in order to free up those baggies and containers as well. Care must then be taken, however, to adjust one's hiking stride in order to provide a smooth ride for all berries nested in soft-sided containers.

While huckleberries seem to get all the attention, there is no reason to turn one's nose up at the thimbleberries, serviceberries and other berries that grace the trailside. The red thimbleberry is a tasty little morsel that one can rationalize eating on the spot due to its delicate nature and poor ability to withstand transport. The serviceberry, while a bit mealier than the huckleberry, is also good tasting and a great way to stretch huckleberries in the making of pies and jams.

There is nothing wrong with heading out into the woods with buckets and a clear intent to pick berries. It is, however, a federal crime to not practice the fine art of "berry-hiking" in a conscientious manner. If we are going to steal berries from the bears while hiking, let's make sure we get them home in edible condition!

Speaking of stealing berries from bears, it is generally a good idea to yield to bears in a berry patch. Indeed, finding bear poop in the middle of the trail and littered with undigested berries is a good indication the berry-picking season is in full swing thereabouts. It is also a good reminder that we should chew our food before swallowing and keep a can of bear spray on our hip next to our Nalgene bottles!

But far be it from me to scare you away from my favorite berry patches with talk of bears. They are waiting for you along most any trail in the beautiful Swan Range – the berry patches, that is!

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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Hiking comes to a standstill for a group of Swan Rangers distracted by huckleberries along an undisclosed trail in the Swan Range. Keith Hammer photo.