

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

The Swan Rangers' 100th Outing!

By Keith Hammer

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On Saturday, October 20th, the Swan Rangers will head out after breakfast at the Echo Lake Café on their 100th outing! The informal hiking group started meeting Saturday mornings nearly two years ago to share companionship and knowledge while hiking, snowshoeing and skiing in the nearby Swan Range.

The outings have thus far involved 103 different people from near and far and group size has been as large as seventeen, with an average of about five. The numbers, however, simply don't convey the sense of community that has developed among the participants.

Some folks come to learn of new places to go in the Swan Range and some to share their favorite places with others. Some come because they don't like hiking alone in grizzly bear country. Others come because of the time, expense and fuel consumed in driving longer distances to enjoy Glacier National Park and other wonderful outdoors destinations.

Whatever the reasons for coming, participants have been treated to a heartwarming tour of the lives and experiences of others, not just a pleasant trip through the woods. The diversity of the participants has been honored with respect and good humor, which in turn has created an open atmosphere within which sharing is easy and well received.

Global discussions have ranged from environmentalists discussing energy policy with world traveling oil industry workers to local teachers talking shop with a New Zealander currently teaching in Beijing. On the more local level, talk of education has flowed freely among those involved in public schools and those involved in home schooling. And of course there are plenty of opportunities to talk about issues like global warming - while hiking in this July's 100-degree heat, for instance!

Much of the sharing, however, revolves around the Swan Mountains and the plants and wildlife encountered along the trail. There is little need to carry an identification book when a half-dozen minds are at hand with a keen interest in just such matters! This is definitely a "stop and smell the roses" hiking club that values the trip as much or more than the destination. The group has watched the local plant life go through its seasonal cycles and seen deer, elk, grizzly bear, and many other species of wildlife.

The outings have provided opportunities for folks to make new friends, strengthen old friendships, and have reunited by chance people that met years ago in other parts of

the world. The outings are even rumored to have sparked at least one romance! Primarily the outings have served as a wonderful way for folks of all ages to share time together.

If there is a common denominator among those who have attended Swan Ranger outings, it is the simple desire to spend a quiet day getting healthy exercise with good people in a welcome atmosphere and beautiful place. Each Saturday's destination is decided by those who show up and is based on abilities, desires, and time constraints in order to insure that the outing is suitable for all. Outings generally cover 3 to 8 miles, on rare occasion as long as 12 miles during the long days of summer. All outings are in the Swan Range and have thus far been between Columbia Falls and Swan Lake, insuring that very little of the day is spent driving.

The Swan Rangers currently meet for breakfast at 7:30 at the Echo Lake Café and leave at 8:30, carpooling to the trailhead from the Swan River Community Hall parking lot kitty-corner from the Café. Those not wishing to eat breakfast at the Café can catch the group as it leaves the parking lot, although it is a good idea to step into the Café and let the others know you are there.

Outing times generally shift back an hour later for Fall and Winter, so keep an eye on the "hiking" page at www.swanrange.org for current times and suggestions on how to prepare for any outing. Photos and a written summary of each Saturday outing are later posted and archived via a link on the "hiking" page. If you'd like to receive each week's outing summary automatically by email, simply email me at keith@swanview.org.

If you can't join the Swan Rangers on October 20th for their 100th outing, come whenever you can – everyone is welcome. And if Saturdays simply don't work as your day in the great outdoors, head on out any day of the week to enjoy and help protect the beautiful Swan Range.

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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Swan Ranger outings provide healthy exercise, companionship and a shared outdoors learning environment for people of all ages. Keith Hammer photo.