

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Jewel Basin's Southern Reaches

By Keith Hammer

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The southern end of Jewel Basin offers trails less traveled and a nod to the Salish people, being a place both remote by trail and long in historical reference. Although it can be accessed by simply following Alpine Trail #7 south from Birch Lake past Crater Lake, we will take a shortcut up Wolf Creek to minimize driving and maximize adventure!

We park at the Forest Service gate on Bear Creek Road #10319, which stems northward from near the end of the county road of the same name. After a mile and a half, the road rounds a ridge and begins to drop eastward into the Wolf Creek canyon. We note a trail coming down this ridge, which will be our return after circumnavigating the upper end of the Wolf Creek watershed.

Another third-mile and we hike straight off the end of the road, keeping to an informal trail on the south side of Wolf Creek until we meet Broken Leg Trail #544 where it crosses Wolf Creek. We cross the creek and immediately leave the Broken Leg Trail, cutting up over a well-glaciated rock ledge to work our way along a sketchy game trail as it side-hills below the cliffs guarding Crater Lake. We scramble up a few steep stretches and, reaching the top, get a view of Crater Lake not seen by many, with its hidden thumb pointing eastward.

We soon meet Alpine Trail #7 and turn right, skirting the flank of Three Eagles Mountain and side-hilling southward toward Big Hawk Mountain and the divide between Wolf and Wheeler Creeks. We stop briefly at the trail heading uphill toward Three Eagles and Big Hawk Lakes, taking in the view to the west. We see the rugged Wolf Creek canyon and beyond it the pastoral Flathead Valley hard at work becoming urban - and we wonder what this looked like some 200 years ago when Three Eagle was Chief of the local Salish people, or during the time when Three Eagle's grandson Big Hawk was Chief.

We also look across at the east side of the sprawling Broken Leg Mountain, admire the acres of purple tilted bedrock, and are reminded of the patriotic phrase "purple mountain majesties." Seeing the great distance left to cross over Broken Leg Mountain and return to our cars, we decide to leave the hike up and over the Swan Crest into Three Eagles and Big Hawk Lakes for another day - noting with some irony this is precisely why the trails here are indeed less traveled!

We instead exit Jewel Basin south along Alpine Trail #7, as it appears and disappears in a series of wonderful meadows visited only on occasion by humans. The spell is abruptly broken, however, at the junction with Broken Leg Divide Trail #353. Here the Divide and Alpine Trail are both muddy motorcycle ruts six inches deep running through an otherwise green meadow.

Although legally closed to motorized use, Broken Leg Divide Trail and the portion of Alpine Trail #7 continuing south are routinely violated and tore up by motorcycles. Once upon the Swan Crest via the “open” Quintonkin and Peterson Creek Trails, it appears motorcycle riders have little fear of nonexistent law enforcement and little respect for pristine wet meadows as they continue north illegally.

We hike alongside the first stretch of the Broken Leg Divide Trail, unable to fit our boots into the narrow motorcycle rut that has replaced the trail tread, continue up over the divide, then turn north on the Broken Leg Trail, preparing ourselves for stunning views as it runs along the spine of the mountain and also forms the southwestern boundary of Jewel Basin. We are not disappointed.

The larch trees are below us and in their golden fall splendor. The sky is clear and we can see peaks in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness far to the west and peaks in Glacier National Park to our east and north!

Then we descend rapidly along the Broken Leg Trail as it continues northward and down the shoulder of Broken Leg Mountain. We descend even more rapidly when we abandon the Broken Leg Trail at Elk Springs and take the informal trail down the ridge to the gated Bear Creek Road where we began.

It’s been a remarkable 16-mile circumnavigation of upper Wolf Creek, deserving of ibuprofen and a letter urging the Forest Service to close the Quintonkin and Peterson Creek Trails to motorized use to better protect the high alpine meadows of Broken Leg Mountain. It also serves to renew our commitment to someday reach Three Eagles and Big Hawk Lakes in that place both remote by trail and long in Salish history.

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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Three Eagles Mountain (left) and Big Hawk Mountain (distant right) form the backdrop and southeastern reaches of Jewel Basin Hiking Area in this view up Wolf Creek. Keith Hammer photo.