

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Winter Solstice: The Long and Short of It

By Keith Hammer

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Winter Solstice arrives in Montana at 11:08 pm this Friday, December 21. As the sun reaches its lowest point on our southern horizon it is a mixed blessing - marking the least daylight of the year while promising more with each new day of winter. The coldest part of the winter is yet to come, however, as it takes another month or so for this corner of the earth to finish spilling off heat before warming again under the longer hours of daylight in February.

For those who like to ski and snowshoe, this is a great time of year. The warmer Pacific rains occur less often and are replaced with snow and powder-saving Canadian cold fronts! Parts of the Swan Range virtually impassable in summer due to brush are transformed into vast expanses of open snow waiting to imprint the tracks of snowshoe hare, lynx, wolverine, and the occasional human.

The long dark evenings of winter offer opportunities for reflection, reading and music. They also provide the time for get-togethers that often escape us during the long, busy days of summer. Swan View Coalition and its neighbors are offering a number of community activities this winter – both indoor and outdoor – and you are invited!

Swan Range Community Music Jam Sessions will again be held every other Sunday in January, February and March. They will be held free at the Mountain Brook Community Library the first Sunday of each month and at the Swan River Community Hall the third Sunday. They begin at 5pm with a potluck, followed by music until 9. These are family oriented and for folks of all musical abilities. Bring a bit of food, your dinnerware, an instrument, your voice, or just your ears and tapping feet! No alcohol, please.

We are still working out the details, but hope to also hold Swan Range Swing Dances at the Swan River Community Hall. They will likely be from 6-9pm every other Saturday beginning January 19, cost no more than a few dollars admission, and will also be alcohol-free. We'd like the first hour to be instruction, so please let us know if you or anyone you know who would like to help teach or help with the door and other arrangements.

For daylight fun and exercise, the Swan Rangers continue to meet every Saturday morning at 8:30 at the Echo Lake Café for breakfast, leaving the Swan River School parking lot next door at 9:30 for a partial day hiking, snowshoeing or cross-country skiing in the nearby Swan Range and its foothills. The folks that show up decide that day's destination, based on their abilities and time limitations. Every one is welcome! Notes and photos from past outings, as well as current information, can be accessed at <http://www.swanrange.org/hiking.htm>.

The Swan Rangers didn't miss a single Saturday for an outing this year! Group size averages five people, including an average of one new person each week. Last winter's

six public Jam Sessions continued informally, passed from home to home through the spring, summer and fall. Group size has averaged eight people per session over twenty-five sessions!

Winter Solstice for me is a great time to give thanks for all the gifts of past seasons and to look forward to the quiet blessings of winter. Winter is a great time to renew friendships, dust off neglected musical instruments, share food and companionship, get fresh air and exercise in the quiet winter wonderland that is the Swan Range, and get even more exercise dancing with our friends and neighbors!

I'd like here to give thanks to the hundreds of folks who are helping make the Swan Ranger outings and jam sessions a big success and to invite you to join us. These are folks from all walks of life whose common denominator, if I may, is the simple and graceful appreciation for quiet exercise in the outdoors and an equal appreciation for friendship and community in all things.

I hope to meet more of you this winter, whether outdoors, in local shops and cafes, or at one of our Swan Ranger outings, jam sessions or swing dances. Though daylight may be short and darkness long during winter, there are still plenty of both for getting out there and enjoying the Swan Range and its neighboring community!

Happy Solstice, Happy Holidays, and see you in the New Year!

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.



Just in case the Swan Crest hasn't taken your breath away in the summer, it most certainly will in winter! Peters Ridge photo by Keith Hammer.