

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Backcountry Safety: Thrill or Skill

By Keith Hammer

January 24, 2008, Lakeshore Country Journal

Perhaps the Swan Lake Ranger District is being too literal in its new "Over Snow Vehicle Use Map." Shown is a speeding snowmobile entirely airborne over the snow. But lack of caution isn't limited to snowmobiling.

There is a difference between "thrill" and "skill" in snowmobiling, skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, hiking, mountain biking, and other outdoor activities. My intent in discussing this difference is to encourage folks to adopt an outdoor ethic that is rooted in skill rather than cheap thrills - for the sake of safety and to foster greater appreciation of mountains as more than piles of dirt or snow to simply climb up, race down or jump off of.

When pursuit of thrill dominates, the physical skills needed to go farther, faster or steeper overshadow the skills needed to return home safely and not trigger a search and rescue mission. So we witnessed over the past several weeks in Canyon Creek along the north side of Big Mountain.

December 19 and 20 saw two snowmobiles buried in separate snow avalanches in the same area, with one rider's leg broken. In spite of warnings by the Forest Service of considerable avalanche danger and for folks to steer clear of the area, at least two skiers died there in an avalanche on January 13.

I encountered two young people skiing in the Swan Range a couple of years ago and convinced them to avoid a similar result. They had excellent skiing skills and were headed for Spider Bowl at the head of Krause Creek above the Strawberry Lake trailhead. What they lacked were avalanche beacons, shovels, probe poles, and backcountry safety skills - and they intended to follow an ill-advised route that would lead them up the bottom of the avalanche chutes.

I cautioned them and when they persisted, I offered instead that they follow me up Infinity Ridge, a safer route to the peak overlooking both Spider Bowl and Wildcat Lake on the opposite side. We worked our way up a forested side-ridge then up the spine of the main ridge where exposure to avalanche is minimal and the snow pack pretty well anchored by trees. Looking into Spider Bowl they of course drooled at the thought of carving turns down through it.

When asked to dig a test pit with my shovel for them and assess the avalanche risk I declined, telling them it is Russian roulette to jump onto an avalanche slope regardless of the conditions, but especially without beacons, shovels and probe poles. We instead enjoyed each other's companionship, lunch and the 360-degree views atop the peak then headed down the same route we'd come up. They got in some nice turns in small openings along the way and all ended well.

Perhaps not so for three mountain bikers that sped up behind me and several friends along Alpine Trail #7 south of Trinkus Lake a couple of summers ago. We had

hiked in from Napa Point, spent our first night at Crevice Lakes, and were going to camp at Trinkus our second night before exiting via Bond Creek the next morning.

After an initial startle by the first mountain biker, I asked him a few questions while he waited for his two buddies. He didn't know which route they had come in by and didn't know which route they were going out by – only that they were going to do it in that single day. I learned from the group leader they were following the same route we were taking three days to cover on foot.

On the drive out from the Bond Creek trailhead, we found a split bicycle helmet and smashed pair of sunglasses along the road, hoping the guy's head wasn't in them when it happened. The larger lesson learned from this is that, had something happened to them in the backcountry, especially the group leader, they appeared ill prepared to self-rescue him or themselves – let alone spend the night out if necessary.

Learning and practicing backcountry safety skills are thrills in themselves, as is taking the time to smell the roses, watch for wildlife, enjoy each other's company, and enjoy the quiet of the outdoors. With winter upon us, I encourage anyone that enjoys the outdoors to visit www.glacieravalanche.org and take the brief online avalanche course as well as attend one or more of the hands-on courses offered there.

As more and more people seek out the backcountry, we need to replace images of cheap thrills with those of safe, sustainable outdoor skills. In doing so, we will help increase our appreciation of human life, wildlife, and the great outdoors.

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.



The beauty of flat hoarfrost crystals sparkling in the sun belies the unstable house-of-cards avalanche layer they become when buried by the next snowfall. Infinity Ridge photo by Keith Hammer.