

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Tracks: The Script of Wintertime Stories

By Keith Hammer

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Winter snow is like a giant tablet with stories written across it. It is as though the wintertime Swan Range is purposefully silent so we must rely instead on the script of tracks written in snow to understand its wintertime stories.

While we ski or snowshoe snug in our parkas, with energy bars nestled safely in our packs, tracks often tell a more heart-pounding story of winter survival. So a story began a couple of winters ago as I was nearing the Swan Crest on snowshoes.

I came across the tracks of two elk headed downhill. The smaller elk barely dragged its belly in the deep snow while the larger plunged repeatedly beyond its belly, leaving flank and shoulder marks in the snow. I wondered how this floundering elk could possibly survive its wintertime crossing of the Swan Crest.

It didn't. A few weeks later I came across numerous tracks of wolverine in the same area. Wolverine had been feeding on the carcass of an elk, which I found lying in a deeply incised stream near where I'd earlier encountered the tracks of the struggling elk. It had apparently been unable to get out of the steep, narrow ravine, which had been drifted over by snow but was now a narrow thread of open water.

The elk's demise was a boon for wolverine. The area was littered with day beds and elk hair, where wolverine had feasted for what looked like days on end. Gnawed sticks were strewn about like so many toothpicks used to floss wolverine teeth!

I'd seen wolverine tracks in this area before, but never of this density. I once came across what I thought was the track of a single wolverine - until the tracks parted to nose around opposite sides of a small group of trees. Up to that point and thereafter, a young wolverine was stepping precisely in the footsteps of its parent, which I later learned is indeed the habit of wolverine.

A couple of years later I came across a wolverine den dug in the snow beneath that very same group of trees, making me wonder if it was often used or considered as a den site. I felt badly at first for stumbling right upon the den, but was relieved to find only one set of day-old tracks entering and one fresh set leaving the den. Numerous tracks radiating from the den would indicate a maternal den where young were being reared, as opposed to an overnight den used while traveling.

I've seen northern goshawk on numerous occasions, but one winter saw one feeding on a snowshoe hare it had clobbered. It immediately flew off with its catch in talon, but I later saw two more spots in the snow where it had rested and fed on the hare.

Birds feeding on prey in winter are seldom witnessed in real time, but the lingering story scripted in snow is obvious. There go tiny mice tracks, skittering around only to end abruptly between the feather marks of two large wings grazing the snow. Oops!

I also enjoy seeing pine marten and their tracks in winter, as well as their favorite prey, the squirrel. But what really gets me excited is the track of the lynx, which is

unfortunately rare enough to be listed federally as threatened with extinction. This is a big-footed, long-legged cat built to travel on snow as though its sole purpose is to run down snowshoe hare, which is indeed its primary prey.

Most humbling, however, is when I am high on some ridge and about to turn around due to the exposure to blasting wind and cold. There in the snow is the poop of blue grouse, which spend the winter roosting in high elevation trees, living on a diet of evergreen needles!

Indeed, not all tracks and stories are about life and death situations. A few weeks ago my partner and I were skiing in knee deep powder only to find snowshoe hare tracks in a ravine below us that barely dented the surface – not unusual given the large feet of the aptly named hare. What was unusual and hilarious was that the hare had been jumping many yards off huge humps of snow as if to see just what it might take to get buried upon landing!

And so we humans play about in the snow, fastening devices to our feet to make us more like the large-footed wolverine, lynx and snowshoe hare. We are blessed that these and other critters still write their stories across the Swan Range and, if we travel quietly and mindfully, we may help insure they thrive here forever!

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.



An overnight wolverine den complete with morning sun deck. Photo by Keith Hammer.