

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Inversions are for the Birds!

By Keith Hammer

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Weather inversions are for the birds - and anyone else willing to venture above a valley filled with fog!

We in the Flathead often begrudgingly endure weather inversions that fill the valley full of cold, dank fog for days on end. And, as disappointment slips toward depression, it is easy to forget warmer temperatures and full-on sunshine await us only a few hundred feet above.

I am convinced mountains are for rising above the inversions they themselves help to create and trap in the valleys below. The trick, of course, is to not let the fog dampen our motivation to get out of the house and head uphill!

To escape an inversion on foot, the steeper the trail is the better. There's no need to prolong the lateral agony of gray fog when bright sunshine and colors are directly overhead! Some of my favorite Swan Range routes in this regard are the Crater Notch Trail, the informal trail up to Elk Spring on Broken Leg Mountain, and the utterly trail-less Infinity Ridge.

Indeed, the very first Swan Ranger outing departed a foggy Echo Lake Café during an inversion on Saturday, November 19, 2005. We headed straight east down Highway 83 to Bear Creek Road, hiked up past Elk Spring, then headed south around the shoulder of Broken Leg Mountain to face directly into the sun for a glorious lunch!

A year and fifty-five outings later, on December 9, 2006, we found ourselves hiking and snowshoeing to Crater Notch to escape another valley fog. As we enjoyed the sun and views, we wondered if Glacial Lake Missoula had looked like the vast expanse of valley-filling fog below us, with its huge bays extending down the Swan Valley and over Flathead Lake. All that remained "above water" were the tops of the Mission, Swan and Salish Mountains. Yes, the topside of an inversion is exceptionally beautiful and a great way to imagine flooding of historic proportions!

While we lunched and lingered in the sun at Crater Notch that day, we were visited by seven cedar waxwing birds that lit briefly in the stunted alpine fir trees beside us. Perhaps that is part of why the foggy side of an inversion can be so depressing; lacking the song of birds that have wisely escaped to higher, sunnier elevations!

The primary culprit foiling a weekday escape from an inversion for most of us is work. Given that many of our worst inversions occur in late fall and early winter, however, there is still hope for the gainfully employed because mid- to high-elevation forest roads may not yet be snowed in and still offer a quick getaway by car.

The sudden onset of a migraine or upset stomach at work has been known to subside once in the car and yield a late afternoon drive up the Peters Ridge or Jewel Basin Road for an equally quick hike once above the fog (don't miss the wonderful sunsets that splash across the top of the fog before descending)! Preferred, however, is

the outright declaration of an inversion-induced Mental Health Day with all the benefits of a full day hike.

There is also good reason to head out early to hike above morning valley fog even when the weather is not inverted and the fog may well “burn off” as the day warms. Hiking up through the zone where the warm valley fog meets the cold, clear sky above often reveals the nighttime work of Jack Frost, with long feathers and other forms of hoar frost wed to bush and tree – an art form not long for the world once the sun shines on it!

I have to admit the most difficult part of escaping valley fog is when it comes time to hike back down into it. And some say hiking is for the birds anyway. Well, the early bird gets the worm - and the most hours of sunshine above the fog!

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 appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Cedar waxwings dot the sky over an inversion seen from Crater Notch. Photo by Keith Hammer.