

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Lee Rost: Stories to Learn From

By Keith Hammer

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I had a close call with four grizzly bear several years ago as a result of my stupidity. I was hiking uphill and off trail in the Swan Range when I spotted a congregation of ravens on a bench above me – a bench where I had learned the day prior a deer carcass lay stashed under a log. I'd been trying to avoid the bench but in the end tested the breeze, decided my scent had reached the bench long ago, and proceed to step up on the forested bench under the assumption anything other than the ravens feeding there would have moved on.

My arrival was greeted immediately with the huffing of a large grizzly bear as it fortunately lunged uphill away from me, but my bigger concern was a sow grizzly bear and her two cubs feeding on the deer carcass only a few yards away. I drew my bear spray from its holster instinctively, fully expecting the sow to charge, but luckily the situation defused as I hedged away side-hill.

Similarly, long-time Ferndale area resident Lee Rost ends his book "For a Better Life" with a handful of bear stories. Rost stops short of teaching parables in this recollection of his life, but his experiences are laid down with a frankness that allows others to readily enjoy and learn from them.

I read Rost's book to learn a bit of history of the Swan Range through Rost's life and work as a wilderness outfitter, logger, and road builder. I was not disappointed and of course was drawn to his experiences in places I've grown to love and know well. Rost's book chronicles human settlement along the Swan Foothills and the history of logging and road building there, as well as adventures hunting elk and packing horses in both the Swan Range and the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

I was especially taken with Rost's accounts of pack trips in the Swan Crest's Big Hawk and Tom Tom Lakes areas and his recognition of the neighboring Wolf Creek and Wheeler Creek watersheds as well-used grizzly bear habitat. Indeed, the Forest Service some years ago closed the upper end of the Wheeler Creek Road to motor vehicles to provide better security for grizzly bear often found foraging in the south-facing burn and avalanche chutes there.

Those familiar with the Swan Range may also recognize places like Elk Spring as Rost tells of his adventures along the Broken Leg Trail. Those that have skied or walked the long-abandoned Krause Basin roads may recognize the locations of logging mishaps that happened there prior to the new access road being built up Peters Ridge in the 1960s. Indeed, Rost tells a number of stories of working for the local Krause sawmill and Broeder Brothers sawmill in Creston during their heyday.

As a road builder, Rost relates stories of building logging roads up South Lost Creek and elsewhere in the Swan Range and Crane Mountain. Often these stories are mixed with stories of outfitting with horses in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. At times, the two

coincide, as when the Bunker Creek Road near Spotted Bear was built and brought the road-end trailhead closer to the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Rost has written in a wonderfully descriptive way an unapologetic account of his life and work enjoying the wilderness while also logging, building roads, and subdividing lands for home development. I recommend his book because not all of us were around to see and participate in the changes that Rost did and the better we understand how we all got here, the better choices we can make on how to precede. "For a Better Life" can be found in a number of local stores, including Lakehills IGA.

I'm pretty sure that sow grizzly bear would have charged me that day if she hadn't been busy keeping the other adult grizzly away from her cubs and the dead deer they were feeding on. I'd stumbled the day before upon a sow black bear and her cub feeding on that deer, but there I was again! How's that for stupid?

The ravens that second day were my clue that I had yet to steer a wide enough birth around a feeding fest that may well include critters larger than ravens, but I got a bit lazy at the last moment and almost paid dearly for it. We can learn from the ravens, we can learn from our experiences, and we can learn from the experiences of others – or we can ignore them at our own peril.

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.



Looking east down Wheeler Creek from Broken Leg Mountain. Photo by Keith Hammer.