

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Spring Equinox: A Shift in Seasons and Community

By Keith Hammer

March 20, 2008, Lakeshore Country Journal

This article appears in the Lakeshore Country Journal on Spring Equinox. As I write, the higher elevations of Foothill Road are getting their first full-on rain rather than the sleet and snow of weeks prior. Indeed, more signs of Spring arrive daily along the Swan Range, along with a shift in human activities.

The song of robins and varied thrush are heard once again, as is the honking of geese migrating northward. Snow is vanishing rapidly at lower elevations and, in places, the frost is leaving the ground and allowing puddles of snow water to perk downward instead of waiting patiently for some other sort of rescue.

Indeed the days are getting longer and, in spite of our recent anthropocentric shift to Daylight Savings Time, Spring Equinox marks the point of equal hours of light and dark. As the dark evenings shrink and the days grow longer, we give thanks for warm winter community events and say goodbye to some of them until next winter.

Five Swan Range Community Swing Dances were held at the Swan River Community Hall on alternating Saturday evenings during January, February and March. In spite of a blizzard, the first dance drew fifteen folks of all ages and numbers quickly grew to thirty, which fills the dance floor comfortably! The no-alcohol venue provided a secure setting for high school students that came from all corners of the Flathead Valley as well as a smoke-free place for adults who love to dance but hate smoky bars.

A special thank you to Vicky and Bob Hyde for teaching swing dancing on the nights they were able, for helping involve the Flathead High Swing Dance Club Vicky advises, and for providing lots of good music for our sound system. Similar thanks to Pam Willison for helping me teach the nights Vicky and Bob couldn't, for helping get Bigfork High students involved, and for even more good music to dance to. And thanks to all the folks that showed up to have a good time and taught each other some cool moves!

Six Swan Range Community Music Jam Sessions were also held this winter, alternating between the Swan River Community Hall and the Mountain Brook Community Library as numbers swelled from 7 to 22 participants! We're still trying to figure out if it's the good music or the good potluck food that's drawing people in! These wintertime community get-togethers are indebted to the many people who work tirelessly to maintain and offer the Community Hall and Community Library at affordable rental fees!

The public-venue swing dances and jam sessions now ride off into the sunset until next winter as people become busier with other activities during the now-sunlit evenings. Like last year, however, the potluck jam sessions will continue to be held on alternating Sundays, but passed from home to home along the Swan Foothills. Just send me an email at keith@swanview.org if you'd like to be involved. And The Company Brass band plays on at the Bigfork Inn on Friday and Saturday nights from 8-11 for

those wanting to continue dancing – with a wholesome, smoke-free restaurant atmosphere that makes it a favored spot for dancers of all ages and stripes!

Then there's the Swan Rangers, who simply refuse to ride off into the sunset! Instead, they simply switch from skis to snowshoes to hiking boots throughout the year. They've taken 120 outings since November 2005 and average six people per outing. They meet each Saturday at Echo Lake Café for breakfast at 8:30, then carpool at 9:30 from the Swan River School parking lot next door for a nearby partial-day outing geared to the abilities of those that show up that day. Everyone is welcome and you can keep track of the outings and other Swan Ranger news at <http://www.swanrange.org/hiking.htm>.

The common denominator in these Swan Range Community events is folks seeking wholesome, healthy, non-competitive fun, exercise, and companionship in full view of the beautiful Swan Range. If you'd like to receive weekly-plus email updates on the Swan Ranger outings, jam sessions, swing dances, and other activities related to enjoying and conserving the Swan Range, send an email to keith@swanview.org.

Part of the joy of living near and hiking in the Swan Range is that the transition from winter to summer lasts for months. Wildflowers that appear near our homes in April or May often are still just making their debut in July on the Swan Crest! Enjoy these seasonal changes in our natural and human community and I hope to bump into you soon on trail or email!

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.



Swan Crest snow ghosts remain cloaked in late February, while the valley bottom bares its soul. Photo by Keith Hammer.