

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Springtime Cruising!

By Keith Hammer

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Early springtime is often the easiest time of year to get around off-trail in the Swan Range, though it still requires cross-country skis or snowshoes. Fresh powder snow has become rare and the snow pack is usually at its firmest due to warm days but still-freezing nights, providing a hard-pack surface on which to travel.

Snow pack depths are still near their maximum, covering much of the brush and small trees that in summertime can make off-trail travel a difficult challenge. As a bonus, the tops of the taller brush and trees bent over but not completely buried during winter (our equivalent to Australia's impenetrable "horizontal scrub" I suppose) are springing free of their snowy bonds and again standing upright to allow us easier passage around them.

Early spring's crusty hard-pack conditions offer a rolling landscape otherwise deeply chiseled and jagged in summer. Besides its sensuous beauty, a snow-sculpted gentle swale in a springtime route beats the harsh up-and-down crossing of the same deeply incised ravine in early winter! Hard-pack conditions provide access to the Swan Crest in what feels like something less than half of the exertion required when breaking trail through fresh, unsettled snow earlier in winter.

Other than those ski-begging choice powder days sprinkled throughout the winter, early spring is when I most often trek into the highest reaches of the Swan Range on snow. Words can hardly describe the rarified atmosphere that one encounters in those high basins, on peaks and ridge tops – and I still wonder whether it is due to the physical surroundings alone or indeed in combination with the fact this is not your usual everyday experience!

Early springtime conditions, while not yet the bottomless rot of the late-spring snow pack, have their own set of quirks that demand our respect and caution. A good hard crust on the way up in the morning may very well become soft in the afternoon warmth and sun, suggesting a better route in the shade if too punchy. And the same can be said for driving one's car a bit too far on a frozen road that morning, only to find the road impassable with mud and slush upon return from an otherwise fun outing!

Fresh snowfall on the older and often crusted snow pack offers its own set of challenges. The safest rule of thumb is to expect that snow to slide on most hillsides, as it will be poorly bonded to the old snow below, especially when first warmed by the sun and lubricated with its own water. Expect it to be very heavy and to set up like concrete immediately after coming to a stop. A few inches of fresh snow can quickly become avalanche debris several feet thick in a matter of seconds! And keep an eye peeled for sizeable, pin-wheeling snowballs like the 4' one in the photo accompanying this article!

On ridge tops where some trees remain at least partially cloaked as snow ghosts, fresh snow can also mask the small crevices that form near their base as the warming snow pack shrinks away from them. Some of these crevices are large enough to regret

with a misstep, so it's a good rule to give snow ghosts a bit of a berth when able and to probe ahead of your skis or snowshoes with your ski poles when you must pass close to them.

Last among my cautions, but not least, is to remember that heavy, wet snow is well known for its ability to wrench ankles and knees in directions they are not intended to bend. When mashed-potato snow lies on top of that wonderful springtime hard-pack, the skiing is likely to be both discouraging and risky, so I often switch to snowshoes when leaving the relative security of the lower-elevation and lower-pitch approach.

In spite of short daylight hours in winter, many parts of the Swan Crest are reachable as day trips to modestly experienced skiers and less experienced snowshoers, without the aid of snowmobiles. The springtime bonus of longer daylight hours, while taking their toll on powder snow and flashy ski turns, make these day trips all the more enjoyable in terms of lounging in the sun on a high ridge with pleasant thoughts of a sunburn rather than frostbite!

I urge you to get out and enjoy the Swan Range before the warm days are joined by warm nights and the snow pack rots to where even snowshoes posthole into the depths. Take along some sunscreen and rejoice in this season that predates mosquitoes and black flies!

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.



Large pin-wheeled snowballs along the Swan Crest near Strawberry Mountain reveal Mother Nature's sense of humor. Photo by Keith Hammer.