

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Springtime Changes

By Keith Hammer

June 5, 2008, Lakeshore Country Journal

The sound of the breeze changed in May with the first few days of 80-degree weather. As the western larch needles emerged in little tufts, the sound of the breeze softened as it was once again sifted through limbs of fresh green cushion, no longer rattling against the bare bones of winter.

Within days it changed again. The aspen, silent for months, began to announce the breeze with a gentle flutter of quaking leaves. A robust explosion of greenness and wildflowers accompanied these subtle changes in sound.

I first spotted yellow glacier lilies along the Wild Mile Trail just upriver from Bigfork, where the sun makes short work of the snow on the south slopes above the Swan River. In shadier and damper forests, it is often the three-leave, three-petal trillium that makes the first big showing, although they and glacier lily often share this distinction side by side along receding snow banks.

On a hike along the Echo Broken Leg Trail on May 3 of this year, the Swan Rangers spotted two or three trillium on the way in, but were surprised to find dozens of them on our return, apparently having opened as the sun rose higher in the sky! Hiking the same trail on May 17, it was glacier lilies that made their debut among recently exposed mats of brown leaves and grasses flattened by the press of the winter snow pack.

It is hard to tire of hiking the same trail when it offers a different array of sights, smells and sounds each time. The low-elevation Echo Broken Leg Trail is outstanding in this regard as it climbs gently through moist forest to then traverse a dry and brushy south slope in Wolf Creek Canyon. The southerly aspect that makes this excellent big game habitat also produces an early array of wildflowers outnumbered only by ticks. The ticks are but a small annoyance, however, and the hike is rewarded by a great lunch spot on the south-facing glaciated cliffs just above where the trail crosses Wolf Creek.

Spring in the woods is again being announced by the "drumming" of the ruffed grouse and, as witnessed by the Swan Rangers on May 24 along the Switchback Trail, a full courtship display by a male blue grouse. And the flickers this time of year can at times raise quite a ruckus in multiple voices as they go about their woodpecker ways!

The robin and varied thrush have been around for quite a while of course, but the spiraling, flute-like call of their cousin the Swainson's thrush is yet to be heard at the time of this writing. Perhaps the Swainson's has a bit more sense not to return too early, avoiding the typical springtime snow and slush storms - and this year's atypically long string of them.

It is wonderful to live in a place where the changes in season are so extraordinary. Springtime marks the end of winter's white hush, transforming it into a green jungle teeming with the song of birds and insects. What is extra special about the Swan Range and other mountains in Montana, however, is that we get to see spring wildflowers well

into July and August at the higher alpine elevations, where summer takes the baton from spring and waits patiently for winter snow banks to finally give way.

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.



Trillium (left) and glacier lily (right) are among the first to poke through winter's mat of fallen leaves. Keith Hammer photos.