

# *Stepping Out in the Swan Range*

## *Summer Solstice: A Ray of Hope*

By Keith Hammer

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Summer Solstice arrives in northern climes on June 20, marking the longest hours of daylight in the year and officially launching summer. As I write this on June 8, I am looking for clues of summer in the snow that is falling outside and piling up in the woods, yard and garden!

The colorful grosbeaks are shoulder to shoulder on the bird feeder and the more reclusive Swainson's thrush have now returned to compete with robins for the last bird call of the evening. The mountain maple branches are taking a deep bow as the snow provides their leaves a humbling lesson in gravity and I'm appreciating my father's advice to not get too much of the garden growing above ground before the first of June!

The warmth of bare ground and stone cannot be denied, however, and reminds us the days of summer will in good time be warmer than our comfort level. While solstice may mark the longest daylight, it will take the earth another month or so to warm and conspire to bring on the hottest days of summer.

One of the reasons I love living near the Swan Range is the escape it offers from the July and August heat in its shaded woods, cool lakes and inspirational heights. The enthusiastic call of songbirds at the break of dawn provides the wake-up call to get out of bed and hike the uphill before it gets too hot. Once among the peaks of the Swan Range, however, the cooler air of six- and seven-thousand feet makes a person want to spend the entire day or summer up there!

Jewel Basin Hiking Area provides the highest concentration of cool lakes in the northern Swan Range and lives up to its name when the sun combines with a slight breeze to make them sparkle and shimmer. There's no shortage of lakes north and south of Jewel Basin, however, for those wishing for more solitude and paths less traveled. Among them are Fawn, Doris, Jenny, Lamoose, Strawberry, Tom Tom, Hall, Trinkus, Bond, Crevice and Gildart.

Most of these lakes are reachable in modest day hikes, but it is a welcome break from the heat, hustle and bustle of the valley bottom to backpack and camp for a few days along the Swan Crest. A wonderful trip of three or more days is to hike into the Crest along Napa Ridge just north of Goat Creek, then head north along the historic Alpine Trail #7 to Gildart, Crevice and Rock Lakes. From there, one can head down to Trinkus and Bond Lakes or continue north past a series of shallow ponds teeming with tadpoles and an occasional wallowing elk before dropping down to Hall Lake.

Similarly rewarding overnight trips can be taken further north, with the only break in Alpine Trail #7 occurring between Sixmile and Broken Leg Mountains. Heading north, this break can be negotiated by hiking down the east-side Posey Creek Trail to Quintonkin Road, then up Quintonkin Road and the road-end trail to Alpine #7. Or, it can be negotiated by hiking down the west-side Hall or Sixmile trails to shuttle by car to the Peterson Creek Trail, which climbs back up to Alpine Trail #7. Some have

bushwhacked at higher elevation from Sixmile to Broken Leg, but it is very rugged country and not generally recommended with a loaded backpack.

From Broken Leg Mountain north, however, Alpine #7 is once again well maintained and pretty hard to lose with the exception of where it crosses a couple of beautiful meadows just south of the Jewel Basin boundary. Watch closely for a few rock cairns, look up often enough to enjoy the views, and don't mistakenly head down the newly reconstructed Wheeler Creek Trail like I did a couple summers ago! Keep on going north on Alpine Trail #7 and you will wind up at Highway #2 in Badrock Canyon near Columbia Falls if you don't chose to peel off down one of the dozen or more side trails!

I generally hike the northern Swan Range with the 2006 Swan Lake Ranger District map available for a few bucks at local Forest Service offices or sporting goods stores. It provides useful elevation contour lines and easily understood color codes to denote trails open and closed to motorized vehicles. Some prefer the greater topographic detail provided by USGS quadrangle maps.

So, prepare yourself to escape the heat of summer along the Swan Crest while I go put another stick of wood in the stove on this 8<sup>th</sup> day of June. This snow will melt. I'm sure it will.

*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](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*



Summertime bear grass along Alpine Trail #7 frames Great Northern Peak in the Flathead Range. Keith Hammer photo.