

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Fourth of July Freedom

By Keith Hammer

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I call bear grass blooms the "Fourth of July flower." Each flower stalk is topped with a cluster of hundreds of tiny white five-petal flowers exploding like fireworks in the sky. Not only does the blooming of bear grass coincide roughly with Independence Day, it also marks the season when we can most easily celebrate our freedom in the Swan Range.

Indeed, paring our daily needs down to the bone, whether for day hiking or overnight backpacking, lifts a great burden from both our backs and our psyche. Reducing our possessions to what fits in our pack and striking out on a trail gives us freedom and a new lease on life.

No telephones or email to answer! No car to break down or cause cardiac arrest at the gas pump! No standing in line at the grocery store or stalled at a traffic light! It's either right there in our pack and the woods around us, or it doesn't really matter - at least for the time being.

Perhaps that is why it is called recreation. It is our opportunity to re-create a simpler life and relationship to the earth; one more independent of all the stuff we accumulate. No more being spoon-fed life through computer, radio and television. This is the real deal.

Hiking with our self-contained household on our back also gives us the opportunity to reflect on how simply we do or do not live at home. Cleaning our trail dishes or dirty socks in a small pan of water provides quite a contrast to the average household's consumption of 250 gallons of water a day!

Our range of freedom, of course, depends on how much stuff we choose to bring along with us. The less stuff, the lighter the pack and easier to get around. Our choice of shelter can range from a bivy-sack or piece of plastic to a full-blown tent.

For a simple overnighter, I often take my bivy-sack, which includes a small section of mosquito netting for bug-free ventilation, and no-cook foods requiring no stove be carried nor campfire impacts left behind. This I squeeze into my daypack, rather than be tempted to fill a larger backpack.

For longer trips, dried foods in need of cooking necessitate a small cook stove in areas with frequent human use or woods too dry for campfires. When hiking in a group, however, stove, fuel, cook kit, and water purifier can be shared to avoid duplication of weight. Shared gear also improves group cohesion and provides a pleasant reminder of the benefits of communal living.

I've found the greatest freedom in the mountains comes from setting up a modest mid- to high-elevation base camp and then being free to radiate outwards from there on day hikes, carrying little more than a snack and a water bottle. The only thing that beats leaving all our worries and stuff behind at home is to then leave what little we've brought with us behind at camp!

With more and more people heading to the woods to “get away from it all,” however, conscientious camping requires a balance of appropriate technology and common sense survival skills. While I encourage everyone to learn basic survival skills like emergency fire and shelter building, campfires and lean-tos are not appropriate in many places, especially in areas of frequent human use or where expressly prohibited.

“Leave no trace” and “pack it in, pack it out” are the codes by which we afford the next person the freedom to enjoy the outdoors in the same or better condition than we did. A few ounces of pack stove and fuel, while high-tech, can save considerable impacts on vegetation, soil and aesthetics.

Indeed, hiking and backpacking provide a microcosm of the challenges we face at home each day: how to handle our daily needs for fresh water, wholesome food, shelter, and waste treatment while leaving the smallest footprint possible on the land. Freeing ourselves of our home possessions and habits while hiking and backpacking can help us identify ways to become more independent and freer of debt at home.

Bear grass in bloom marks the time of year that higher-elevation trails in the Swan Range are generally melting freer of snow and providing greater freedom to roam. As I think about camping along the Swan Crest this summer, I am reminded of lyrics from a song written by a young couple in Duluth, Minnesota: “I’m going to have a good time, with less stuff!”

May the Fourth of July and summer season bring you many opportunities to enjoy the freedom and independence afforded us in the Swan Range!

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.

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Bear grass explodes in a silent celebration of life. Keith Hammer photo.