

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Bee Notch

By Keith Hammer

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A unique wildlife encounter awaits hikers along the Peters Ridge Trail during the right time of year. I'm not talking about the sighting of black or grizzly bear in the open bowl at the head of Brown Gulch, nor the calving of baby elk in the spring, nor the occasional glimpse of wolverine or their sign. I'm talking about wild bees. Serious buzz!

From the end of Peters Ridge Road #5388, Peters Ridge Trail #37 begins its climb along an old log-skidding trail and clear-cut, turning into a true trail that then side-hills through large trees along the south slope of Peters Ridge. The trail offers great views of Flathead Lake and Valley, making a single switchback before crossing to the north side of Peters Ridge and traversing into the sweeping open bowl of upper Brown Gulch.

Wildflowers are abundant in this bowl during summer and provide the first clue to what awaits atop the Swan Crest a little further up the trail. Hiking through these wildflowers when the sun is upon them, you pretty much need an iPod stuck in your ears to not hear the bees happily gathering nectar and pollen. It's a colorful smorgisbord that includes larkspur, forget-me-not, columbine, virgin's bower, glacier lily, trillium, and Indian paintbrush.

After traversing to the midpoint of the bowl, the trail climbs a series of short switchbacks through even more wildflowers before crossing over the Swan Crest between rocky crags and stunted alpine fir trees. It is here that, before you are able to fully take in the emerging views of Glacier National Park and Great Northern Mountain, you may instinctively duck the low-flying bees!

Being the lowest local spot in the Swan Crest, Peters Ridge Trail at Bee Notch is the funneled flight path of bees working the acres of wildflowers on the west side of the Crest and packing the nectar and pollen to hives on the forested east side. Arrive here when the sun is fully on the flowered side of the hill and the bees will likely be buzzing by in both directions faster than you can count them. Although it may seem akin to standing in the middle of a busy freeway, take a deep breath, stand still, and enjoy the agility of these little creatures as they pass by within a gnat's hair of your head!

These little wild bees on more than one occasion have shown an apparent affinity for human sweat, alighting by the score on hikers legs to tickle their fancy while licking up a salty treat. Take care not to pinch them under the hem of your hiking shorts, however, and know that a friend of mine was stung during an otherwise peaceful lick-fest when her pager buzzed unexpectedly!

Perhaps this is not the best sport for folks with an allergy to bee stings, who may prefer to negotiate the high-traffic portion of Bee Notch in the few seconds required at a normal walk. For the curious if not truly foolish, however, Bee Notch offers a unique window into the world of wild bees. Turn off your cell phone and pager and enjoy!

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.



Wild bees fly the Peters Ridge Trail at Bee Notch, where it crosses over the Swan Crest. Keith Hammer photo.



Peters Ridge Trail switchbacks through a steep hillside of wildflowers at the top of Brown Gulch, with Peters Ridge and Flathead Lake in the distance. Keith Hammer photo.