

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Huckleberries: The Great Equalizer

By Keith Hammer

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Huckleberries are the great equalizer among hikers fast and slow. The pace of even the most physically fit and devout hiker has been known to slow to a crawl when these little purple gems are found along the trail in summer. It is as though all that early season conditioning and vigorous exercise has gone right down the drain, reducing the hiking elite to mere dawdlers along the trail!

This is of course good news for those who often lag behind the leaders due to either a shortness of breath or a preference for dawdling. With the appearance of ripe huckleberries, the trail hierarchy should begin to dissolve immediately - unless the leaders are so goal-oriented they don't see the berries. A good shout of the word "huckleberries" from the rear guard is usually enough to correct this problem.

Once the leaders begin to spread off the trail in search of more of the little purple globes, the rear guard can move to the front and, if they've come prepared, insure for themselves enough time to both catch their breath and eat their fill of berries. If they've thought to bring some baggies along, they can offer a few to the leaders while suggesting they pick enough to take some home. This allows the rear guard to dawdle on up the trail and snack on berries hand-to-mouth while the leaders add extra pounds to their packs.

Even better is to convince the leaders to empty their water bottles in order to have more protective hard shell containers to pick berries into. Besides the delay caused by picking the extra berries, the pace of the leaders is bound to slow during the hot August afternoon as the predictable dehydration sets in.

Should these efforts fail, and the rear guard is faced with the prospect of an equally blistering pace on the return to the car, a good lie may be in order. Something along the line of "I saw a great patch of huckleberries a couple more miles up the trail last week that were just about ripe" ought to do it. When the leaders are once again out of sight up the trail, the rear guard can safely turn around and set a leisurely pace in the direction of the car.

Such deception is seldom necessary, however. As nature distills the essence of Rocky Mountain summer into these much-prized berries, few can resist the urge to pig out on them. Nothing else tastes like a huckleberry and their season is short. With stained fingers and one's nose and eyes seeking out the next bush, it's easy to forget you were headed somewhere, let alone remember where or why!

Huckleberries are a good reminder that the trip is just as important as the destination and a good litmus test for whether we are willing to slow down and truly savor the best things that life has to offer. The time is ripe in the Swan Range and elsewhere, as are the huckleberries!

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.



Hiking comes to a standstill amid huckleberries on a recent Swan Ranger outing. Keith Hammer photo.



Huckleberry abandon ensues on yet another Swan Ranger outing. Pam Willison photo.