

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Autumn Equinox

By Keith Hammer

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Fall is in the air and indeed Autumn Equinox is right around the corner. As we approach the days of equal light and dark, it is a good time to give thanks for a wonderful summer and tune into the best that fall has to offer.

This August was thankfully nothing like August 2007, which set records for heat and drought. This years crops, from domestic cherries to wild huckleberries, show it. I can't remember a year when they were as plump, meaty and sweet as this one!

Nor have I ever had so many cucumbers in my garden or beets averaging the size of baseballs! Those periodic thunderstorms this summer brought more drenching rain than lightning to our area, as our gardens, yards and countryside now reveal.

Indeed, what a welcome respite to have few local wildfires and little smoke in the air, along with few fire-related restrictions on our enjoyment of the great outdoors! What a treat to hike in relative comfort this August, unlike our search for cool stream bottoms and high alpine lakes to cool off in last August!

As I write this article a week ahead of its publication, fall colors are beginning to appear in the Swan Range. Some leaves are turning yellow to compliment the ripening of mountain ash berries from green to blazing orange and red. That familiar smell I call "fall tea" has returned as dying vegetation is steeped in the heavy dew that accompanies the cooler nights.

Differences in aspect and elevation in the Swan Range, however, continue to provide us with both summer and fall. While seeds have replaced wildflower blossoms on the more southerly and lower slopes, wildflowers blossoms are still in their prime on more northerly and higher slopes where snow banks lingered through late spring and into summer.

And the huckleberries just won't quit this year! While in places past their prime on southerly slopes, they are still bringing hikers to a standstill along trails at higher elevations and on northerly slopes. Large piles of berry-filled scat along the trail indicate the bears too are indeed enjoying the huckleberries, as well as the ripening berries of mountain ash.

The needs of we humans are not unlike the needs of the bears as they try to store up enough food energy as fat for their long winter hibernation. Looking out on the Flathead Valley from the Swan Crest, our pastoral landscape persists as a checkerboard of farm fields ripe with grain, green with pasture, shorn of hay, or rich in the brown of fallow. The Swan Range never fails to provide a unique perspective on life both wild and domestic and that is why I love it so!

Unlike the bears, we humans remain active during winter and Autumn Equinox helps us mark the transition from long summer days to the dark evenings of winter. While we may already be missing those outgoing, footloose days filled with long summer romps, we nonetheless are reminded of our need for the introspection that

comes with fall and winter. As Greg Brown sings in his song “Grandma Put it All in Jars:”

“Oh, she’s got magic in her, you know what I mean.
She puts the sun and rain in with her beans . . .
You bet, Grandma, as sure as you’re born.
I’ll take some more potatoes and a thunder storm.”

It is never too early to give thanks for the abundance provided by our backcountry, our gardens, our neighbors, and loved ones. May you have a wonderful Autumn Equinox and all that follows.

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.



A late-August view of Flathead Valley farm fields from near the Swan Crest. Keith Hammer photo.