

# *Stepping Out in the Swan Range*

## *Swan Strolls and Open Spaces*

By Keith Hammer

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Just as there is a need to protect opportunities for quiet recreation high up in the Swan Range, there is a need to provide and protect open spaces and quiet recreation opportunities in the Swan and Flathead valley bottoms. There are a number of initiatives aimed to do just that, but they need our support to be sustained.

In November, Flathead County voters have the opportunity to approve a \$10 million conservation bond to protect what we all often take for granted: clean water, access to the outdoors, and family farms and timberlands. The bond money and voluntary conservation agreements would protect lands that protect water quality and provide access to nearby recreational lands, lakes, rivers and trails. The bond would cost the owner of a \$200,000 home about \$18 dollars a year, a small price readily recouped in gas saved by not needing to drive to more distant recreational access were we to allow all nearby open space to perish.

A number of efforts are underway to provide safe strolls and bike rides for young and old alike. Rails-to-Trails continues to convert abandoned railroad beds into bike and walking paths and other groups are working to link up bike paths in order to provide safe recreation and commuting alternatives to busy streets and highways. The Bigfork Rotary, for example, is utilizing volunteers and donations to link the Wild Mile Trail upstream from Bigfork to the Echo Lake Trail. This will provide a total of over six miles of trail offering wonderful views of both the Swan River and Swan Range.

Conservation groups have established nearby nature interpretive trails that provide quiet strolls with the benefit of tree and plant identification. Swan View Coalition installed and maintains the Krause Basin Interpretive Trail, which makes a three-quarter mile loop through an old-growth western hemlock forest along the Strawberry Lake Road. The trail is designed to accommodate baby strollers, wheelchairs and folks with physical challenges. Nature-interpretive brochures are available along the trail, at the Swan Lake Ranger District offices in Bigfork, or can be downloaded from <http://www.swanview.org/KrauseBasin.html>.

Friends of the Wild Swan established and maintains the Sprunger-Whitney Nature Trail seven miles south of the town of Swan Lake, beginning along the first right-hand spur to the Point Pleasant access road. Signs along the two-mile trail identify various plants and trees, while free brochures can be found at the Swan Lake Trading Post in Swan Lake or the Swan Lake Ranger District and Bigfork Chamber of Commerce in Bigfork.

The result of an Eagle Scout project, a nice walking trail is available at the Creston Fish Hatchery. The trail crosses Mill Creek from the fish hatchery and makes a short loop among towering larch trees along the creek and behind the Fish and Wildlife Service offices.

Trails such as these offer great opportunities for people of all ages to get outdoors, get a little exercise, relax and take in the world around them. Whether limited simply by time or some degree of physical disability, nearby trails and open spaces in gentle terrain fill an important niche in the lives of many people.

Indeed, I've been asked on numerous occasions to suggest more such opportunities. If you don't mind sharing your favorite trail or open space with others, please email or phone me at the address and number listed below.

Imagine our valley bottoms and foothills as a network of pastoral and forested open spaces, both public and private, linked by safe trails for strolling and biking while enjoying each other's company and nature. We can have this, along with safe highways, residences and workplaces, if we think, work, vote and volunteer with a healthy future in mind.

*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).*



No nature-deficit-disorder for this youngster as he strolls along the Krause Basin Interpretive Trail. Swan View Coalition photo.