

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Mindful Hiking Habits

By Keith Hammer

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Fall reminds us to keep our heads on our shoulders while hiking. The chill in the air lets us know it is time to find those gloves, warmer hats, coats and gators cast aside in summer. And with general big game hunting season starting October 26, it is time to find that hunter's orange safety vest to wear on the trail, whether hunting or not.

Mindful hiking habits, however, enrich our outdoor experience at all times and during all seasons. Are we paying attention to what watershed we are in should we wish or need to navigate off-trail and cross-country? Are we making mental notes of landmarks along the way that help us judge location, time and distance so we can make a safe and timely return? Are we looking at tracks along the way, both human and wildlife, and noting what the critters have been eating by what is left in their scat?

While maps and GPS devices are handy, there is nothing like paying attention to our surroundings to insure we remember our way and our experience. I once met some folks that had hiked up Peters Ridge Trail from the Flathead Valley side of the Swan Crest and later mistakenly hiked the wrong trail "back" until they ended up at Hungry Horse Reservoir – where they fortunately caught a late evening ride back around the north end of the Swan Range to the Flathead Valley and their car. Hiking off the wrong side of a mountain range is a pretty big mistake - a good reason to keep track of which direction the streams are flowing and noting when we have crossed over even the slightest ridge into the next watershed.

On the continental scale it can make the difference of whether we end up in Portland, New Orleans or Hudson Bay. At the local scale, it can make the difference of whether we return home on time, late, or after a substantial search-and-rescue mission.

Of similar importance are to note landmarks along the way that help us judge where we have been and our relative current location. Landmarks range from a mountain peak to a notable tree, stump or rock along the trail and help us remember trail junctions where directional signs may be absent. The simplest rule of thumb upon coming to a fork in the trail is to turn around and note carefully what the trail you came in on looks like from the opposite direction, noting a unique rock or tree nearby that identifies it as the trail you'll want to take on your return.

There is no need to hang unsightly survey ribbon or build a rock cairn as a reminder of our path. Not if we develop a habit of appreciating the infinite variety provided by nature and mindfully tucking unique landmarks into our memory for later use. Indeed, if we are paying attention while hiking or skiing, our return trip will be a rewinding of strikingly familiar sights, sounds and smells. Conversely, a stretch of return trail absent these familiarities will sound the alarm that perhaps a wrong turn has been taken.

Watching for tracks and trails of wildlife also enriches our outdoor experience and adds to our sense of place within the watershed. Why does that well-beaten elk trail head down that draw or up that ridge or across this hillside? Indeed, game trails often

provide an alternative and shorter distance between two points or over the lowest pass into the next watershed. Provided we've kept track of some good landmarks, a game trail can provide an interesting way to turn our hike into a loop rather than a simple out-and-back, although some who have followed me on such excursions would likely regard "interesting" as an understatement!

While chatting it up with friends along the trail is a good way to warn bears and other wildlife of our approach, it also pays to pause in silence to take in the sounds of the trees, birds, and breeze. Nor must our enjoyment of one another preclude our awareness of all that surrounds us, including warning signs like a gathering of ravens signaling carrion perhaps being fed upon by bear or lion as well.

Mindful hiking and skiing provide a tapestry of ever changing sights, sounds and smells that keep even our oft-traveled trails new and interesting. The great outdoors never feels the same way twice – a phenomenon guaranteed by the changing of the seasons and our attention to all things wild and wonderful.

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Hikers wear hunter's orange while hiking the Patterson Creek watershed in November 2007. Keith Hammer photo.