

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Watching Wildlife

By Keith Hammer

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Recreation doesn't have to be big for business in order to be worthwhile. Besides its obvious benefits to our physical and mental wellbeing, however, an activity as simple as viewing wildlife can also mean big bucks to our economy.

In releasing a recent addendum to its 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that "expenditures for wildlife watching are equivalent to the revenues generated from all spectator sports, amusement parks and arcades, non-hotel casinos, bowling centers and skiing facilities combined." The report utilized state-by-state reports to find "the direct expenditures of wildlife watchers generated \$122.6 billion in total industrial output. This resulted in 1,063,482 jobs, a federal tax revenue of \$9.3 billion, and a state and local tax revenue of \$8.9 billion." All spurred by watching birds and stuff!

What surprised me was that, of the 71 million Americans over age 16 that watched wildlife in 2006, 95% of them did so within one mile of their homes! This is explained in part by the fact that many folks like to watch and feed birds in their yards. But many people also recognize the value of establishing and maintaining wildlife habitat, natural areas and public parks in their local neighborhoods – and actively participate in doing so.

When folks did travel to view wildlife in 2006, they spent almost \$13 billion on transportation, lodging and food. They and the stay-at-home folks, however, also spent nearly \$33 billion on cameras, binoculars, books and other equipment used to view, learn about, and better appreciate wildlife. The nearly \$46 billion spent directly on wildlife viewing in 2006 is estimated to have produced another \$77 billion in related economic activity.

Measurable economic activity aside, we benefit greatly from conserving wildlife habitat in our neighborhoods, nearby rural lands, and in our American backcountry. The less distance we need to drive, the more often we are inclined to take a walk around the block, in the neighborhood park, or on a mountain trail. The more we walk, the more relaxed we become and the better we are able to appreciate our surroundings, including the wildlife that inhabit the greener areas we have conserved for them.

Learning to identify wildlife enriches our outings, as do our efforts to learn more about their habits and habitat needs. We'll likely learn early on that, while some species do well in urban and pastoral environments, many need more remote habitats with greater security from human disturbance, not to mention food and shelter found only at higher elevations.

Here in the Flathead and Swan valleys, we are blessed with the best of both worlds and can conserve both with a little forethought and effort. We can watch and listen to red-winged blackbirds in the cattail lowlands that are too wet to farm, see wild turkeys and geese gleaning grain leftover in farmers' fields, and catch a glimpse of flagging

whitetail deer as they seek shelter in the river bottom. Or we can take a short hike up into the Swan Mountains and see the likes of mule deer, bear and mountain goats in a single afternoon!

Wildlife deserve conservation in their own right, whether we humans stand to benefit or not. But benefit we do! The sighting of wildlife enriches our lives, as does finding their tracks or scat along the path. And, while our purchase of a camera or pair of binoculars may not seem like a big deal, it contributes to a sector of our American economy estimated in excess of \$122 billion.

Not a bad benefit from doing something that is fun and improves our mental and physical health! The addendum report "Wildlife Watching in the U.S.: The Economic Impacts on National and State Economies in 2006" can be downloaded from http://library.fws.gov/nat_survey2006_economics.pdf.

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Mountain goats photographed during a Mount Aeneas day-hike. Keith Hammer photo.