

# *Stepping Out in the Swan Range*

## *A Snowy New Year*

By Keith Hammer

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We in the Flathead and Swan Valleys have certainly been blessed with plenty of snow thus far in 2009! Up here on Foothill Road we've been plowing, blowing and shoveling snow from our driveways and roofs every single day just to keep up with it!

Last Saturday's Swan Ranger outing was a welcome respite, giving folks a chance to ski on the stuff rather than carving it into blocks and pitching it off sagging roofs. Watching those snow blocks shear into multiple layers when disturbed, however, is a homeowner's indication of the high avalanche danger that currently exists on any slope steep enough to slide – be it in the backcountry or in our yards.

Indeed, the Glacier Country Avalanche Center is currently rating the avalanche danger as "HIGH over most all of the mountain ranges of Northwestern Montana. The new snowfall is building a more consolidated, dense, slab layer which is now sitting atop the weakly bonded and lower density snow received earlier in December." A rating of "high" means both natural and human triggered avalanches are likely and that travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended.

The closing days of 2008 offered grim reminders of how dangerous snow avalanches can be. On December 28, eight snowmobilers died in a pair of avalanches striking the same location in short order near Fernie, British Columbia. On December 30, a snowmobile passing another on the Canyon Creek Road north of Columbia Falls triggered an avalanche on the road's cut slope that buried the lower snowmobile. While fortunately not fatal, the Canyon Creek incident serves as a reminder that a sliding foot-deep slab of snow can quickly become a six-foot-deep pile of debris.

Indeed, popular local roads like the Jewel Basin Road and Peters Ridge Road have cut slopes large enough in places to demand respect during even the most conservative snowmobile or ski outing. Given that an avalanche can be triggered from either the top or the bottom of the slide, it pays to be careful in even the most innocent looking terrain.

Saturday's Swan Ranger outing was taken in the relative safety of the dense hemlock forests of Krause Basin, yet several small avalanches could be seen on steep slopes across Krause Creek from the old road we skied upon. Being safe in snow country is a matter of getting good avalanche training, which is available locally and for free, and always remaining aware of the ever-changing circumstances that surround us.

I recommend folks carry a compact but sturdy avalanche shovel during even the simplest of outings. If not needed to dig your own skis out from under a small slide that didn't even knock you off your feet, you never know when it may come in handy for an impromptu snow sculpture contest or the digging of a comfy "lounge chair" in which to eat lunch!

Snow can be the ultimate in fun or it can be deadly. It is the stuff that makes our Montana winters special yet it commands our respect at home, along the road to work or school, and in the backcountry. For folks that like to snowmobile, ski or snowshoe,

checking avalanche conditions should be as much a routine as the commuter checking the road report. And in both cases, the actual conditions encountered trump the best of published reports if we are paying close attention to our surroundings.

I urge folks to get acquainted with their local avalanche forecasting center, which for the Flathead area can be found at <http://www.glacieravalanche.org>, and to learn all they can about winter safety. I also offer a simple rule of thumb learned this past week: If you're too busy shoveling snow off roofs to go skiing in the backcountry, it's probably not the safest time to go ski those steep slopes anyway!

Be well, be safe, and have a wonderful 2009!

*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).*



Swan Rangers break trail through abundant snow recently in Krause Basin. Keith Hammer photo.