

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Skate Trekking in Holland

By Keith Hammer

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What on earth does ice-skating in Holland have to do with the Swan Range? Plenty if we look for the common denominators and then revel in the differences! But, aren't ice-skating and trekking a contradiction in terms? Not if you live in Holland!

My introduction to Holland, beyond that of always loving the story of "Hans Brinker or the Silver Skates," began upon meeting Jan and Willy Verhoef as I biked along Foothill Road in the summer of 2000. The Dutch couple had found Wayfarers State Park closed for reconstruction and were looking for a place to camp, preferring the social atmosphere of a campground or someone's back yard to the relative isolation of a motel room. I invited them to come camp in my yard, which they did for several days. A long-term friendship was born and an open invitation to visit Holland was issued.

I spent a week in July 2002 visiting the Verhoefs in Holland on my way to explore Scandinavia and my family roots there. They took my partner and I on a wonderful boat tour of some of the canals in nearby Weerribben National Park and we also spent time in their son's home that, like many others, floats atop a concrete box basement alongside a canal.

Essentially a large river delta for several of Europe's major rivers including the Rhine, some 25% of Holland lies below sea level and another 50% just above sea level. The incredible network of dikes and canals that make human habitation and farming of the fertile soils possible also serve as major transportation routes for shipping, boating and wintertime skating.

Where the Rocky Mountains are sparsely populated and of course mountainous, Holland is flat and densely populated. What folks in both areas have in common, however, is the desire for lots of fresh air and exercise. A National Park in Holland is likely to be largely settled by people and utilized agriculturally, while we in a relatively young America still have large tracts of unsettled and wild country to designate as National Parks and wilderness areas.

The Verhoef's recently joined our Swan Ranger email list and, in response to our photos of cross-country ski outings in the Swan Range, sent along some great photos of their ice-skating treks near their home in north-central Holland. With many thanks to Jan and Willy for sharing with us, I'll let a few of their photos provide a snapshot of wonderful winter recreation in Holland!

- PHOTOS ON FOLLOWING PAGES -



A Dutch winter landscape with skating on canals.



Skate trekking on Beulaker Lake in Weerribben National Park.



Farmer houses along the frozen canals in Dwarsgracht.



The harvesting of reed, still used to roof many farmer houses, is a primary business alongside tourism in Weerribben National Park.

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.