

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Take a Hike!

By Keith Hammer

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Bill Bryson's book "A Walk in the Woods" is a hilarious yet informative accounting of his hikes along the 2,100-mile long Appalachian Trail stretching from Georgia to Maine. He tells not only of life along the trail but issues relevant to walking and hiking everywhere. On the whole, his book is a tribute to those with the foresight to preserve opportunities and habitat for quiet recreation.

Bryson begins the book and the trail overweight and out of shape, matched only by his equally novice hiking companion. Midway through the book, he reflects on how little most Americans walk, relating that 93% of all trips outside the American home involve getting in a car. On average, he writes, an American walks only 1.4 miles a week or 350 yards a day, including walks from the car to the office, the office to the car, and around the supermarket or shopping mall.

Bryson then tells of an acquaintance who drives the 600 yards to work each day and another who drives a quarter-mile to the gym to walk on a treadmill. These examples would be funnier if they weren't replicated in neighborhoods across the country. I know of a local man who drives his 4-wheeler ATV down 50 yards of level driveway to his mailbox while smoking a cigarette. By contrast, his retired neighbor intentionally walks the several hundred yards to his mailbox in order to get some fresh air and exercise.

Luckily, most of us have choice in walking or driving reasonable distances but, as Bryson points out, walking in many places is being made impossible or highly undesirable due to the press of motorized vehicles and lack of pedestrian walkways. In even less crowded environs, the noise, smell or ruts left by motor vehicles causes people to either stay home or go elsewhere for some peace, quiet and healthy exercise.

Traffic levels on Foothill Road north of Bigfork have increased over the years to where it is seldom a quiet walk and is nearly always a troublesome place to try and walk the dogs. As a result, many folks now walk or ski their dogs on public forest roads and trails stemming off of Foothills Road. Strawberry Lake Road, a Forest Service road usually too dusty and busy in summer, has become a popular wintertime route for walking, snowshoeing and skiing when it is snowed in.

Strawberry Lake Road sees a number of skiers headed toward Spider Bowl above the trailhead, locals getting some fresh air after work, folks walking or skiing their dogs, and young couples pulling their youngsters in sleds attached to their waists as they ski along. A single pickup truck a couple of weeks ago, however, rendered the road virtually unusable for skiing and pulling sleds as it left squiggly axle-deep ruts for several miles in an apparent attempt to simply see how far it could go. I ran into several backcountry skiers cursing the ruts on their return from Spider Bowl and I haven't seen folks pulling kids in their sleds there since. One person's pursuit of bragging rights ruined great family recreation for weeks.

We can all help keep our public roads and trails safe and desirable for walking, skiing and biking. We can slow down our cars and give pedestrians and bikes a wide berth rather than give them the cold shoulder, if indeed a shoulder to the road exists at all. We can also slow down on gravel roads to reduce the dust we create. We can use motor vehicles on roads and trails only when it is lawful and doesn't ruin the road or trail for others or, better yet, choose to walk, ski or bike instead.

We have plenty in today's modern world working against our getting outside for some fresh air and exercise. It behooves all of us to walk, ski and bike whenever possible and avoid the use of motor vehicles whenever we can. We will not only be doing ourselves a favor, we'll be setting a good example for our kids and providing a safer and quieter place that welcomes others to do the same.

Not unlike Bryson's book, the last verse of Julie Miller's song "Face of Appalachia," speaks to the importance of getting our kids outside with us while we can:

"Grandpa made me quite a promise for the day I came of age
He said we'd walk through Appalachia, northern Georgia up to Maine
Well, dreadful sorry by beloved, such a promise he could not keep
All my dreams of Appalachia were just an old man's memories."

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.



Illegal motorcycle use has ruined this stretch of the historic Alpine Trail #7 on Broken Leg Mountain. Keith Hammer photo.