

On the Path

Swan Rangers' 200th Outing!

By Keith Hammer

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The Swan Rangers will take their 200th outing on Saturday, September 19! Yes, it's been nearly four years since the informal group first started meeting at the Echo Lake Café for breakfast every Saturday before heading out for a partial day of hiking, snowshoeing or cross-country skiing in the nearby Swan Range. A lot of adventures have been had and great friendships forged since then!

While a core group of familiar faces has of course emerged, the outings still attract an average of one new person each outing from all walks of life and all around the globe. A couple of romances and partnerships have blossomed over the years and some folks have met during Ranger outings only to discover they are practically neighbors in another part of the country!

So, what is a Swan Ranger's worst nightmare? Perhaps that all 214 people that have been out on previous outings will show up on a single Saturday! Would there be enough pancakes at the Café? How many smaller groups of twelve or less would we need to break into if we were to hike in Jewel Basin?

The group size, however, is generally self-regulating. Group size averages about ten and, when much larger than that, is usually divided into smaller groups to keep the atmosphere jovial and to lessen impacts on other hikers and natural resources. Most importantly, the day's destination and groupings are decided leisurely over breakfast and in the Swan River School parking lot during car-pooling to insure that day's outing suits the needs of everyone involved.

The Swan Rangers are not a gung-ho hiking group and are as all-inclusive as possible. Many outings involve folks heading out as a single group but returning in smaller groups in order to accommodate physical limitations or other afternoon engagements. The simple rule of thumb is that nobody gets left behind and nobody hikes back to their car alone unless that is their wish.

That's not to say the Rangers don't sometimes end up on top of Mount Aeneas, Sixmile, or some other peak enjoying the great views! There's plenty of wonderful Swan Range country to explore within a half-hour drive of the Café; some of it gentle and some of it steep! Indeed, winter ski and snowshoe outings are almost always confined to the lower elevation foothills, devoid of avalanche terrain and the need to have mastered telemark turns in order to survive. Almost!

Perhaps one of the most challenging snowshoe trips was to the top of Infinity Ridge overlooking Wildcat Lake in Jewel Basin. I seem to recall the daylight getting pretty dim by the time we got back to the cars on Foothill Road! But, what a wonderful day!

Perhaps the shortest hike taken by the Rangers was during a Saturday spring downpour. A walk down the Swan River Nature Trail revealed wonderful spring wildflowers and ended up at Brookies Cookies, where the challenge of the day was dining on wonderful cookies and tea with a belly still full of pancakes and coffee from the Echo Lake Café!

Many folks enjoy the Saturday Swan Ranger outings vicariously by subscribing to the Swan Ranger email list, where they receive a short report and a few photographs from each outing along with other important news about the Swan Range. If you'd like to be included, simply email me at keith@swanview.org or via the "Email Keith" link at www.swanrange.org, where you can also keep track of the Swan Ranger outings and weekly reports via the "Hiking" page.

Rumor has it the 200th Swan Ranger outing on September 19 may include a red-checked tablecloth and some sparkling apple juice on ice – if such hefty items can be snuck into a few unsuspecting Swan Ranger daypacks! Join us if you can, especially if you have a little extra room in your daypack!

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.



Never say never: Swan Rangers descend Infinity Ridge during a high-elevation snowshoe outing. Keith Hammer photo.