

On the Path

Signs of Spring: A Mixed Review

By Keith Hammer

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Signs of spring in the Swan Range began showing up the last few days of February this year. We heard our first varied thrush on a Swan Ranger outing in Krause Basin on February 27, followed a couple days later by the arrival in our yard of the first robin, another member of the thrush family. I think the main reason robins arrive so early is to shame us by greeting slushy snowstorms with song as we grumpily sip our cocoa indoors. Of course many of us stuck around for the winter while the robins went on vacation, and they've returned enthusiastic about mating and nesting!

We encountered signs of spring at higher elevations on a recent Swan Ranger outing up Infinity Ridge, which runs up to the peak overlooking Wildcat Lake in Jewel Basin. Large glide cracks in the snow pack are opening up on south-facing slopes as the sun warms the snow and the moisture seeps down to lubricate the bear grass slopes underneath. Below the black crescent of the glide crack, one can see that the snow is buckling up as it creeps slowly downhill with nowhere to go but to elbow more snow.

The snow ghosts on Infinity Ridge are shedding their winter coats of rime, trying to stand up straight again and look like trees. And the cracks and crevices around the trees are beginning to grow wider as the snow pack settles and pulls away. It's a wonderful, slow dance of sun, warmth and gravity!

We watched a flock of geese wing its way north after circling up from the valley floor to our height of nearly 7,000 feet. It was sort of a birds-eye view of what migratory birds do in spring - and a welcome sight even for the winter lovers among us.

Glacier National Park recently reported that bears are emerging from their winter dens, saying it is again time to carry bear spray in case you stumble upon one. This year, however, Glacier has the extra burden of pleading with folks to not resort to shooting the bears with the guns they can now legally carry in our National Parks. Glacier is reminding folks that fewer folks are injured and they're injured less severely when they defend themselves with bear spray than when they shoot the bear with a gun.

Another sure sign of spring is the almost-daily newspaper reports of ATV's getting into trouble both rural and urban. Folks just can't seem to mind their manners on the things, with one of the latest incidents involving folks mudding it up on the hill above the swimming pool in Kalispell's Woodland Park.

Motorcycles are again out on the roads and they unfortunately include those intentionally outfitted with loud exhaust pipes, as though they're essential to some sort of bizarre seasonal mating ritual. I've been on top of peaks in both the Swan Range and Glacier National Park and heard the blat of such motorcycles on highways miles away. Indeed, Glacier reports that visitor complaints about loud motorcycles are outnumbered only by complaints of noisy helicopter over-flights.

The "Harley" ritual, I suppose, is outdone in spring only by the appearance of

pickup trucks covered with chunks of mud, often loaded up with a couple dirt bikes also covered in mud. While perhaps intended to attract a worthy mate or simply intimidate other males, the sight begs the question of what poor wet meadow has been ripped to shreds in the name of “mud bogging.” Indeed, the Forest Service has had to go to the ridiculous expense of fencing wet meadows in the Swan Valley to protect colonies of rare plants from unlawful, off-road mud-boggers.

A few springs ago a local dirt bike dealer ran an ad that began with a few seconds of a singing bird, promptly drowned out by the rattt, rattt, rattt of a dirt bike and the words “now that’s better!” I’d like to think the ad didn’t sit too well with most people. There’s plenty of foolish and destructive behavior out there without it being encouraged.

Springtime to me, more so than New Years, is a time of renewal and hope. And each spring I hope that peace, quiet and respect will increase as crude, vulgar and boorish decrease. But it takes more than hope to bring about positive change. It falls upon all of us to monitor and improve our behavior and that of our colleagues.

The birds are singing, the geese are honking, there’s a pair of woodpeckers pounding away every day as though they intend to nest nearby, and the retreating snow is “wa-wa-wa-waltzing with bears.” It’s a springtime choreograph to be revered and enjoyed by all.

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.



A snow ghost slowly unwinds from its winter coat of heavy rime. Keith Hammer photo.