

On the Path

Getting Outdoors

By Keith Hammer

June 3, 2010, Lakeshore Country Journal

I asked a young grandniece a few days ago what her favorite grade-school class is. She replied without hesitation, "recess!" Not too surprising an answer, given the times she has led me on excursions through the Fairy Forest next to her grandma's yard! Most kids are born with a natural love of the outdoors, an interest that can last a lifetime if nurtured.

My daughter spent much of her first few years riding on my back in one of those child-carriers where her legs were left hanging down. I always knew when she'd fallen asleep because her feet would relax and I'd hear her boots fall to the ground. When I failed to hear them hit the ground, we'd have to retrace our loop through the woods to find them back!

When the weather was really cold, I'd instead swaddle her up in a sleeping bag and slide her down into my backpack, leaving only her face exposed for the fresh air and to watch the treetops passing overhead as I skied along. When she got a little older, she got her first pair of cross-country skis and she especially enjoyed leading me on bushwhacks where she could easily duck under leaning trees and brush that would prove a problem for her dad to get past!

I remember a cold springtime float trip down the Middle Fork Flathead with her when she was still a young kid. The raft we were passengers in flipped over in a frigid rapid. As I swam toward shore with her in tow by a grip on her life vest, and with no raft in sight, she calmly but with a shivering voice asked "D-d-d-dad, are we floating towards home?"

She also came along on a number of longer white-water river trips, including two 18-day trips through the Grand Canyon as an adult and a week-long trip on the Green River as a young adult. Upon waking her one morning from her tent along the Green River, she asked me to look at something really cool. There by her pillow lay a small translucent scorpion, the more poisonous variety, which she'd smacked with her shoe while reading by flashlight the evening before. I would have at least had to flick the dead scorpion out the tent door to get to sleep!

What I learned from my daughter, who currently leads a bit more urban life, is that her love of the outdoors has not diminished and that the self-confidence she developed during those early adventures has served her well in life. She has retained that courage to try new things and remains unafraid though respectful of things like snakes, scorpions and grizzly bears. (And she still remembers in the desert to shake potential scorpions out of her sleeping before climbing in and to shake out her clothes and shoes before putting them back on).

One of those bonuses of being a grandparent arrived recently when she invited Pam and I to go camping with her, her husband, and not-yet-two-year-old son this summer. She wants grandson to have an outdoor adventure with grandpa like she did! Getting outdoors and passing the tradition along through generations is indeed important.

Some folks have opened schools and camps to help out when parents can't always fill the bill. The Cedar Song Nature School on the Puget Sound's Vashon Island, for instance, provides three hours of outdoor adventure in five acres of forest, four days a week, rain or shine, for preschoolers. Founders of the school were inspired by Richard Louv's book "Last Child in the Woods." Louv coined the phrase "nature-deficit disorder" as a way to describe the disconnect between children and nature in our modern culture. Louv argues that less dwelling in nature contributes to childhood obesity, attention disorders and depression.

Here in the Flathead, we are lucky to have outfits like the Ravenwood Outdoor Learning Center, which conducts school programs and outdoor camps to keep kids connected to nature. It's good to know there are folks doing their best to help parents fill in the gaps in nurturing their child's inherent interest in nature and the outdoors.

Indeed, our interest in nature can last a lifetime and provide us with an endless supply of free entertainment and education. Last week I drove two elderly cousins from Salt Lake City through the National Bison Range, where their love of nature was rewarded by several hours watching bison, elk, antelope, deer, bear, birds, bees, and wildflowers do their thing.

We're never too young or too old to love and enjoy nature. In fact, I'd argue it is love and nature that keep us young at heart!

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.



Mother and son enjoy a trail together in Jewel Basin. Keith Hammer Photo.