

## *On the Path*

### *It's a Jungle Out There!*

By Keith Hammer

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It's a jungle out there! With lots of rain this spring the woods are lush and green, full of bird song, and the grasses are already in a race to make seed! It's a wonderful time of year to be savored, as it all too quickly turns to shades of summer brown with vegetation going to seed and the birds quieting down following the mating and nesting season.

For now, however, we are awakened each morning at 4:30 to the songs of the all-weather robin and its fair-weather cousin the Swainson's thrush, which indeed arrived on-schedule the last few days of May. They're also the last to serenade us as we attempt to go to bed at 10:30, with dusk stalled out in a great Montana sky approaching summer solstice's longest day of the year.

Wildlife appears everywhere as we anticipate seeing our first whitetail deer fawns and the bucks display antlers cloaked in velvet. We heard our season's first deer stomping and blowing out a warning last night – often a sign there is a fawn hidden nearby. And we expect those doe with the heavy, full bellies will soon appear much relieved and more slender. A few years ago I awakened one morning to the bleats and sight of a fawn suckling its doe beneath our bedroom window!

The bears are certainly out and about, both grizzly and black. We came across grizzly bear tracks in snow high up on Mount Aeneas a few weeks ago and noticed the scat had what looked like domestic grain in it. It made us wonder if these two bears had paid a visit to Old McDonald's Farm down in the valley, so I inquired of Fish, Wildlife and Parks whether it had tracking devices on any griz in the area. The response I got was more than I'd bargained for, with reports of a half-dozen bears moving both ways between the valley floor and the northern borders of Jewel Basin!

There have been newspaper reports of grizzly bear near Lakeside and as far east as the Missouri River between Fort Benton and Great Falls this spring, so it pays for all of us to adopt good "sanitation" habits around our homes, farms, camps, and while on the trail. Securing our camp food, pet food, horse feed, cattle feed, compost and other bear attractants is equally important to avoid problems with black bear, raccoons, skunks, and other critters looking for a free lunch. Throw mountain lions into the mix, and it's all the more important to be aware of our behavior and our surroundings as we work and play outdoors.

There are a number of good pamphlets available at Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Forest Service offices on how to get along in bear and lion country. More information can be found online at:

<http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingWithWildlife/beBearAware>  
<http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingWithWildlife/mountainLions/default.html>  
<http://www.nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/bears.htm>  
[http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/wildlife/grizzly\\_bears\\_index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/wildlife/grizzly_bears_index.shtml)

We need not fear bears and lions if we respect them and adjust our behavior to their needs. We may be gung-ho to get some exercise this summer after putting on a few extra pounds over the winter. For most wildlife it's the opposite; they're looking to put on lost fat without getting a lot of run-around.

This is especially true for bears that den for six months of winter without eating and even more so for pregnant females bearing their young while in the winter den and producing milk for them that is 30% fat! To them summer and fall are a mad rush for food, a phase known as hyperphagia, absolutely necessary for them to replenish the fat needed to survive another winter in the den!

There are simple things we can do to avoid harm to ourselves, bears and mountain lions when recreating in their habitat. Wildlife managers, through the online links provided with this article, tell how to keep clean camps and recommend that folks hike in groups and during daylight hours. "Trail running is discouraged as there have been an increasing number of injuries and fatalities due to runners surprising bears at close range." Indeed, a trail runner was mauled by a surprised grizzly bear in Glacier National Park last June.

This advice is being put to the litmus test as the Forest Service decides whether or not to grant a commercial permit application for a foot race that would run 50 paying participants, spread out over 100 miles of Swan Crest trails, in grizzly bear and mountain lion habitat, overnight, for 36 hours, in late July as huckleberry patches are coming ripe and bears need them most. It's a jungle out there, but we can all enjoy it safely with our families by following simple recommendations for our behavior, not pushing the limits to extremes, and by respecting the needs and safety of both wildlife and our fellow campers.

*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](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*

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A wild growl in the jungle! Keith Hammer Photo.