

On the Path

Giving Thanks!

By Keith Hammer

November 18, 2010, Lakeshore Country Journal

I don't know if it was the sight of critter tracks in the snow or the snow itself that made last week's hike up Hemler Creek extra special. Both signaled the changing of the seasons and the depth of the snow forced us to turn around just shy of reaching the Swan Crest, reminding us once again that it is the journey and not the destination that is most important.

The critter tracks, be they large pine marten or small fisher, were a welcome reminder of those extra verses of poetry that winter writes across the landscape as it inscribes it with the movements of local residents. This was just a taste of winter.

The larch trees were still shedding their now-golden needles and the cottonwoods their yellow leaves. The snow itself was a promise of life moving forward, even if toward hibernation for some and more trying times for others. Indeed, the onset of snow signals both increased difficulty in accomplishing daily tasks and entirely new opportunities to appreciate life and community.

We were joined that Saturday by a banker from Boston, in Kalispell for a week to work with a call center that handles some of the bank's customer support. So we were also reminded how large and interconnected community is these days.

The call center employs local people helping people around the world, but also draws business folks like our new Boston friend to the Flathead, where they invest in meals and lodging and perhaps inquire about a good sporting goods store for gear to help them enjoy the beautiful outdoors while here.

We were blessed with the opportunity to hear about life in the Northeast and to hear a bit about how other parts of the country are dealing with the economic recession. We were reminded of the common ground and common pursuits we share with folks of diverse backgrounds and all had a wonderful day up Hemler Creek!

It's a bit quieter than usual in the northern Swan Range backcountry this fall due to the closure of two major access roads for their reconstruction. Both the West Side Reservoir Road and the Jewel Basin Road are closed, putting a number of popular trailheads out of easy reach. Whether one agrees with Congress' spending of "stimulus funds" or not, it is hard to overlook the jobs and work going on as these roads get long-needed repairs, backcountry trails without maintenance for years get cleared of brush, and new signs help folks find their way around their National Forests.

It's that time of year when we take stock of our lives and those around us, and give thanks for our many blessings. We give thanks for the fruits of our labors, be they vegetables from our gardens, wild game from the woods, firewood in the wood shed, or the money from our jobs that enable us to buy food and keep a warm roof over our heads.

But we also give thanks for the endless procession of life that surrounds us and gives us hope: the toddler that so wonderfully interrupted our meeting the other day when his mom couldn't find a baby sitter, the deer fawns that have now lost their spots

and put on their winter coats, the carpet of larch needles that has turned the driveway into the “yellow brick road,” the grandson that is just old enough to ask mom to dial grandpa on the telephone so he can say hello, the opportunity to help our neighbors with their fall chores, and those little critter tracks up Hemler Creek that still have us scratching our heads over whether it was a pine marten or a fisher!

The change in the seasons can remind us that changes in our lives are not the end of the world. They instead test our ability to adapt and to learn new ways of dealing with difficult conditions. Hiking season may be coming to an end, but the time for snowshoeing and skiing is just beginning. We can finally put the lawn mower away, but it’s time to get out the shovel and snow-blower!

During these economic hard times, may we remember to give thanks for what we have, share it with others, and know we will all be stronger for adapting to new circumstances. I hope everyone’s Thanksgiving includes friends, family, and wherever needed, the warmth of a helping hand and companionship.

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.



Fresh snow signals a change in seasons from Peters Ridge. Keith Hammer photo.