

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Working for Big "W" Wilderness

By Keith Hammer

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It is easy to look at the Swan Mountains and take them for granted. Or to assume they will remain pristine for our children and grandchildren. But there have long been forces at work to destroy the wilderness qualities of the Swan Range and, fortunately, people working even harder to preserve those qualities.

Jewel Basin didn't become a non-motorized hiking area by accident. Cliff Merritt, now 88 and living near Hamilton, Montana, helped secure Congressional Wilderness protection for many areas in Montana in 1964, including the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and helped form the Montana Wilderness Association to advocate for more Wilderness in Montana. He and many other Flathead Valley residents, like Loren Kreck, Jack Whitney and Elmer Sprunger, then worked on getting Jewel Basin designated Wilderness, accomplishing a first step by stopping motorcycles from trashing Jewel Basin's high alpine meadows via its designation as the Jewel Basin Hiking Area in 1970.

But the work of securing more permanent protection for Jewel Basin and the rest of the Swan Crest as Congressionally protected Wilderness continues. Many folks don't realize that administrative protection like that afforded Jewel Basin can be withdrawn at the stroke of a Forest Service official's fickle pen. True Wilderness designations, however, can only be changed by an act of Congress.

It is a good thing when someone hiking to Strawberry or Lamoose Lake recognizes the pristine and worthy attributes of the area by referring to it as wilderness. Yet it is a disservice to securing the areas as Congressionally designated Wilderness with a capital "W" when the lack of that formal, lasting protection is not recognized. Indeed the area between Strawberry and Lamoose Lakes, among others, has been routinely and illegally violated by snowmobiles and off-road vehicles because it lacks Wilderness protection and motorized advocates think they can thwart such a future designation by building illegal motorized trails there.

Swan View Coalition, a local conservation group, took the Forest Service to court and won the removal of illegally cut trails and bridges in Krause and Lost Johnny Basins. They had been constructed illegally in an attempt to create a motorized trans-Swan Crest route and to extend snowmobile access well into spring, long after natural snow bridges have collapsed and mother grizzly bears with new cubs have emerged from their winter dens but cannot yet flee motorized vehicles.

Ignoring its middle name, Montana Wilderness Association instead proposed areas north and south of Jewel Basin, including the Krause-Lost Johnny roadless areas, become snowmobile "play areas" rather than Wilderness. The Forest Service promptly topped that by granting an unprecedented snowmobile season lasting through the month of May in the northern Swan Range, leaving grizzly bear moms and cubs to fend for themselves, and withdrew its prior recommendation that Congress designate Jewel Basin Hiking Area as Wilderness.

Swan View Coalition and others, remarkably not including Montana Wilderness Association, are back in court challenging the late-spring snowmobiling, and are urging Congress to protect all public roadless lands in the Swan Mountains as a part of the broader, five-state Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act. NREPA was given a hearing before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands on October 18, where Montana's Representative Denny Rehberg spoke against it, having provided on his web site a misleading and pointed survey by which the manufacturers of off-road vehicles could mount their challenge against NREPA.

The road to Wilderness has always been bumpy, largely because it is not a road at all. It is instead a trail of human work negotiated by the truly dedicated with an overriding desire to leave America's few remaining roadless lands free from the onslaught of motor vehicles - for their own sake and for the sake of Americans seeking ever-dwindling opportunities for healthy exercise in the quiet of what God has given us.

Cliff Merritt was finally acknowledged for his lifelong work in fish, wildlife and wilderness conservation last spring, when he was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Montana. Bigfork's Elmer Sprunger and Jack Whitney have been honored by a nearby nature trail bearing their names, but both recently left this life to fish that big lake in the sky. Along with Loren Kreck and many others, these remarkable folks created a legacy of preserving what is special about the Swan Range and other public lands, rather than see them overrun with motorized vehicles and carved up like the rest of the country.

Sprunger's political cartoons consistently remarked on the beauty and quiet of the Swan Range and lampooned those who would destroy it. Whitney years ago laid out the simple reason all of us should work to secure Wilderness designation and lasting protection for the Swan Range when he said "from Bigfork to Kalispell it's going to be one big town, and people are going to be wishing more people had seen fit to set some space aside."

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 will appear regularly in this paper and will also be archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.