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Eye on the Environment

The Gift of Public Land

By Anne Dahl, President, Swan Ecosystem Center

As we anxiously await the gift of abundant snowfall this winter, we can appreciate the gift of public land. Most Swan Valley residents live only a mile or two from a glistening holiday-card scene in which to cross-country ski, snowshoe, and ride snowmobiles—or to twirl on ice skates while waiting for snow in deep enough layers for the more common winter sports

Many residents are neighbors to public land and can simply put on skis by the porch and swoosh off without starting the truck. With the ground well-frozen, we don't need many inches for this to be fun.

Looking back over the 2011 big game season, hundreds of hunters spread out across the Swan Valley's public land, hunting from open forest roads or slinking through the woods on foot to stock their freezers with white-tailed deer and elk.

While some of us grumble about government rules and a perceived lack of private land for development, many applaud the gift of public access we citizens have given ourselves.

It's true the Swan Valley is hugely blessed with national forest land. Yet the potential "footprint" for private land development in the Swan Valley, if you compare maps, remains larger than the private acreage already developed around Seeley Lake. The Swan Valley Community Council's Growth Policy

Committee is addressing the future of our private lands in a collaborative community forum. But that's a topic for another time.

Between Christmas and New Year's Day, celebration is on my mind. In that spirit, I bought myself a Christmas present of a new compass after being turned around (not lost!) during the Thanksgiving weekend. The 15 inches of falling snow (now evaporated) and the vigorous sapling growth brought on by recent rainy summers had changed the scene in the once familiar national forest out beyond my place. I crossed my own tracks while walking a straight line more than once last fall.

The Elk Creek Conservation Area is a square mile of land at the confluence of Elk Creek and the Swan River, co-owned by Swan Ecosystem Center and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Though privately owned, the land is open for public access, just like the neighboring national forest. SEC and CSKT acquired the land in 2006 from Plum Creek Timber Co. to protect fish and wildlife habitat. But the land affords plenty of opportunity for people, too.

The Elk Creek Conservation Area is blessed with several small ponds and wetlands revered by bird watchers and painted turtles. The amphibians are now buried in muck until spring, protected in the mud beneath the icy surface. The ducks and Neotropical migrants are far away to the south. And binoculars are trained on bald eagles and other raptors plying the winter sky.

Mountain lions and human hunters like to stalk the triangle of land that forms a wedge between the dry channel and the rip-roaring main stream of Elk Creek. The high bank is a good place for predators to launch an attack on unsuspecting prey below. Once when I crouched beneath a Douglas-fir rooted high on the bank, I heard the ssschick, ssschick, ssschick of footsteps beneath me. A coyote was

approaching, following the ice-crusting dry channel below.

The song dog's presence explained the quick departure of a doe and two fawns from the bottomland a moment before. I had thought the deer had caught my wind. But neither the predator nor the prey were aware of me on my high perch. It was one of many memorable moments spent observing wildlife in this protected area.

This past hunting season, several parties set up camp along the roadsides in the Elk Creek Conservation Area, as they had always done when Plum Creek owned the land. From their camps, they fanned out on foot, far beyond the Conservation Area to hunt on national forest land on either side of Elk Creek and along the banks of the South Fork of Cold Creek.

One year I encountered a hunter wearing jeans and a cotton coat. He was drenched in rain and lost. After listening to his vague description of where he thought his camp was located, I finally realized it was along the road in the Elk Creek Conservation Area. He had been briskly walking in the wrong direction.

December 1 marked the opening day of snowmobile season. I heard a few engines rev up in the neighborhood—then spotted the machines looking discouraged in front yards, waiting for winter.

I checked Mike McGrew's December 15 blog on Seeley Lake's Nordic Ski Web Site. Mike is a Swan Valley cross-country ski racer and instructor, and an avid backcountry skier. He has rigged his snowmobile to carry skis in upright PVC pipes attached behind his seat.

Mike typically tows his friends on skis to trailheads in the Mission Mountains, where they park the machine and ski into the alpine wilderness. Last

year, Mike towed three skiers at once and carried a fourth behind him on his machine. Backpacks were Bungeed to the PVC pipes in a huge and bulging mound.

Mike's blog, titled "Waiting for La Nina," quickly devolved into "What I did Last Summer": He caught a huge pike in Siberia!

As I write this, La Nina (or is it her brother El Nino?) is blowing herself out over Texas, where most of the land in this huge state is privately owned.

One advantage of a late snow season is an easy Christmas tree harvest. Easy for some, anyway. Another Swan Valley resident, Mike Childs, dragged his 14-foot grand fir about a mile on a tiny plastic sled—over bare, frozen ground.

The Flathead National Forest sells Christmas tree permits for five dollars each. It's a pretty good deal, if you don't have a nice conifer on your own property threatening to block the view from your kitchen window. I dragged my perfectly shaped 8-foot spruce about 100 feet to the house.

Back to the Elk Creek Conservation Area, volunteers in 2010-11 planted about 700 cottonwood and willow saplings near the mouth of Elk Creek to secure the banks. The young trees are protected from browsing deer, elk and moose with 7-foot fencing. But a thick layer of winter snow is on the Wish List this holiday season. We're counting on snow to protect and nurture the roots—while we shush off into a vast and sparkling winter wonderland, rare in most parts of the world.