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## **Eye on the Environment: Wind-throw slows trail opening in the Mission Mountains and Swan Range**

By Anne Dahl for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

Early summer hikers in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and on the Swan Range are finding lingering snow fields, hardy wildflowers and hundreds of wind-thrown trees from last winter's storms.

On June 17 I hiked with longtime wilderness ranger Kari Gunderson to Cedar Lake in the Missions. The pass between No Name and Cedar lakes was still covered with deep snow on the north side. The south side of the pass was snow free but huge snow fields remained at the lake.

In the few places near the lake where the snow had melted, standing water and swollen creeks prevailed. Horseback riders should check with Swan Ecosystem Center for an update before going to Cedar Lake or other high elevation lakes in the Mission Mountains. Typically stock travel is not recommended until July 1 due to wet, unstable trail conditions.

Warmer weather is forecasted, at Cedar Lake it was snowing and blowing hard enough to cover our tracks. We couldn't see across the lake—typical June conditions.

Fields of glacier lilies along the trail were quickly disappearing under the snowfall. The bright yellow blooms poking up looked shivery. No worry; those little plants are well named and can withstand June snowfalls. The blossoms of the spring beauties (a small, white early-blooming flower) were closed for the day, waiting for warmth and sunshine before promoting themselves to insects for pollination.

This was a reconnaissance hike to determine the extent of blow-down on the trail. Kari and Lucas Lamar, the Swan Valley resident who works with Kari, will be going back soon with a cross-cut saw and axes to clear the downfall, which this year is about average for the Cedar Lake trail.

On the other hand, Kari expects to find significant blow-down on the trail to Piper Lake. The Piper trail wends up through a dense forest where fire hasn't visited for decades. The trees have reached maturity and are susceptible to wind-throw.

Elsewhere in the Missions, the trail between Lindbergh Lake and Crystal Lake was clogged this year with more than usual blow-down. Kari and Lukas have been removing trees from both ends of this low elevation trail. But as of June 18, downfall still remained on the midsection.

The trail to Crystal from Meadow-Bunyan trailhead, however, has been cleared. But to the south, the walk-log over the Swan River on the trail to Crystal Lake from the Beaver Creek trailhead has been damaged. The crossing is hazardous.

Volunteers are especially appreciated after a windy winter. The family and friends of Mike Laabs volunteer each year to help clear trees in the Glacier Lake area. Mike Laabs died in a 2000 fall from McDonald Peak in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness.

This spring the enthusiastic Labbs volunteers helped Kari and Lucas clear 27 downed trees on the trail to Glacier Lake and as far up as the junction to Crescent Lake. They also helped repair one of the walk-logs on the Glacier Lake Trail. High water this spring had damaged the three stream crossings. Extra care is advised on this trail.

Most Swan Valley residents understand the purposes of federally designated national forest wilderness and the national forest multiple-use lands we have in the valley bottom. But out-of-area visitors often have trouble distinguishing the differences.

Wilderness areas are available for non-motorized recreation, including hiking and horseback riding. On national forest and state lands outside of designated wilderness the rules change, allowing considerable motorized recreation on designated roads. Of course people can hike, mountain bike and ride horses on thousands of acres of national forest and state multiple-use lands, and on Plum Creek timberlands in the valley.

National parks, like Glacier National Park, allow cars on established roadways and are intended to provide for the enjoyment of the public. Most national park trails are maintained to a higher standard than wilderness trails, in keeping with the national park mandate.

In northwest Montana we have a good mix of opportunities. People who like quiet adventure and a “true” wilderness experience beyond maintained trails can recreate in the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex, Jewel Basin, and the Mission Mountains Wilderness.

Also nearby is the Flathead Indian Reservation Tribal Wilderness on the west side of the Mission Mountains. Permits for non-tribal members are required for travel in the tribal wilderness and are available through the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Web site and at several locations in the Mission Valley.

Nationally, the Forest Service has faced budget cuts that limit the agency’s ability to fully open and maintain trails.

A unique partnership between Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) and the Flathead National Forest allows public and private funds to be matched. SEC raises over half of the funds required to maintain the trails and campsites in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and on the Swan Range. SEC employs the wilderness and backcountry rangers, but the Forest Service determines the scope of work and is the ultimate responsible party.

In the Mission Mountains Wilderness, approximately 45 miles of trails are opened each year. Other trails in the Missions are not maintained, as determined by the Forest Service. The national forest land on the Swan Range is not designated wilderness but is managed as non-motorized backcountry. Trails can be opened with chainsaws but motorized vehicles are not allowed.

Mike Childs is the ranger on the Swan Range. He is responsible for clearing downfall on about 13 miles of trails and maintaining about 50 miles. Mike says so far this spring the trails to Upper Holland Lake are cleared of trees, and the Holland Falls and Foothills trails are open. The road to Napa Point is also open.

Kari, Lucas and Mike also meet with visitors and provide information on trailhead signboards about Leave No Trace camping and the Flathead National Forest food storage order that protects people and wildlife. They keep campsites clean and maintain restoration sites where heavy use has caused erosion or created oversized campsites.

Funding comes from the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Recreation Trails Program, the National Forest Foundation, private donors and the Forest Service. Visit [SwanEcosystemCenter.com](http://SwanEcosystemCenter.com) for trail updates.