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Students to learn animals' ways in Swan Valley

by Tori Norskog | February 3, 2010 | *Montana Kaimin*

Environmental studies students at the University of Montana have one of the best classrooms around: the Swan Valley.

Over the next few weeks, Northwest Connections will offer a pair of two-day animal-tracking clinics, where instructors will offer a hands-on approach to learning about Montana wildlife, as well as an opportunity for students to earn academic credit.

Participants will learn how to recognize animal tracks (or footprints), and analyze animals' patterns of movement, habitat selection and behavior.

Adam Lieberg, an instructor who has been teaching the clinic for six years, said the first part of each day is spent learning the basics of track identification, as well as studying the Swan Valley ecosystem.

"We want to teach people to look at the big picture," Lieberg said. "To be a good animal tracker, you need to understand the habitat. Knowing the habitat, you can anticipate what kind of animals you'll find."

The Swan Valley is a good classroom because of its location, Lieberg said. He added that the ecology of the area is unique because of its low-elevation timber valleys, wetland features that were created by glaciers and mountains to the east and west of the valley. Montana's winters make the classroom better by providing good tracking conditions.

"Four months out of the year, we have a blanket of snow to interpret animal behaviors and movements on," Lieberg said.

Winter is also a good time for learning how to track animals in the Swan Valley because the animals are there. The deep snow at higher elevations forces larger animals, like deer and elk, down to the valley. Predatory animals, like wolves, follow. Students can also expect to track fox, bobcats, mountain lions, moose and river otters.

Lieberg said the classes have come in contact with animals in past years; however, the point of tracking is not to see the animals, but to study them without any direct contact.

"We don't have to see the animals to see what they're doing and eating and hunting and what types of forest they're living in," Lieberg said. "It's a non-invasive way to study wildlife."

The clinics aren't limited to university students. Outdoors enthusiasts and professionals alike take part and use what they learn from the clinics to do their jobs better.

Mark Vander Meer, owner of forest restoration company Watershed Consulting, has taken the clinic and requires all his foresters to do the same. They use what they learn in the clinic to properly restore habitat to its natural state. Vander Meer also said the clinic is very enjoyable.

"It opens your eyes to a whole new world," Vander Meer said. "I would take it every year if I could."

This is the 11th year that Northwest Connections has offered the clinics. The clinics will run Feb. 13 and 14 and Feb. 20 and 21. The cost is \$150, and there is a \$135 credit-recording fee for students who wish to earn environmental science credit. The registration form can be found at <http://www.northwesternconnection.org>.

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