

LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the
Dishman Hills

October 2005

DOG DAYS OF FALL

This month the Dishman Hills hosted a small but important group of public servants, the Spokane County Search and Rescue (SAR) dog team. Permission was granted for a practice session in the forest of the natural area even though the activity involved some off-trail use that is normally not encouraged. We feel that the benefit to public safety was important. Most people don't realize the help these canine volunteers offer to us including finding lost, injured, or dead people in the forest, in avalanches, or in bodies of water, or detecting drugs, explosives, or fleeing felons. The SAR dogs use their powerful sense of smell to follow a near invisible trail of skin cells that flake off the body and float in the air or drop to the ground as a person moves through the woods. The SAR team wanted to use the Dishman Hills forest to present a new variety of smells for the dogs and practice search and rescue in an area where their services may be needed some day. The group included specialized cadaver dogs as well as rescue dogs. Breeds included Springer spaniel, Australian Shepard, and European-breed German Shepard.



The search and rescue exercise started early on a rainy morning at Camp Caro with a bunch of very excited dogs and barely awake handlers. The general method is to assign task then reward with praise and treats. The process started with greetings, lots of shop talk, and the distribution of donuts to the day's human volunteers. Then individual "subjects" dispersed to various locations in the woods and the search was on. Search patterns involved the dogs moving fast and probing every nook and cranny in the topography while handlers lay out a search grid. The older dogs did the longer searches and the pups the shorter. One exercise involved the dogs discriminating between a number of people placed out in the woods to find one whose scent had been given to the dog. These dogs are problem solvers. After a command of "find" they sweep the woods keeping track of the handler while searching or following the scent trail. The effects of wind and weather are handled by the dogs as well as complications of hidden targets such as "up a tree" or buried. The natural area again provides a benefit to our community in a small but important way.

DUFF STUFF

As the fall leaves float in the air and settle to the ground, they are becoming a part of a very important component of the forest structure, the duff layer. This organic rich layer is sandwiched between the plant community and the soil, and is part of a nutrient recycling system for living materials in its transition to the soils that make life on this planet possible. Duff layers consist of both dead or

There is not a sprig of grass that shoots uninteresting to me
Thomas Jefferson

dying plant and animal litter, and a living community of insects, fungi, and algae, most of which are busy breaking down organic materials (decay). The layer is usually only several inches thick. Duff also provides several other important functions that are maybe not so obvious. For one, it acts as a spongy retainer of water providing plants with moisture and it prevents soil erosion caused by water or wind. Moist duff layers can protect tree roots during wildfires that periodically burn through the forest. Duff also serves to trap sediments from the air or rain to add to the soil. The layer acts as a natural filter for certain elements such as phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium and both converts and retains them for plant use. This blanket of decaying mass gives off CO₂ and heat byproducts that combined with captured solar heat, serves to warm the soil and promote seed germination. Another effect of this decay process is to alter rainwater into a weak acid. This is accentuated in the Dishman Hills by the addition of a carpet of pine needles that adds acidity as they decay. This acid solution is important in the breakdown of the underlying rocks into soil.

For forest and ecological health we are concerned that our duff stuff remains as intact and healthy as possible. We are concerned that too many trails or surface erosion will remove too much of it. Downed trees and plant debris should be left where possible to slowly decay. While you may see the forest floor as a jumble of wood and plant debris which appears as a mess, a fire hazard, or a barrier for easy walking, this miraculous material is an integral part of the web of life.

ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month on the third Tuesday at Opportunity Elementary School, S. 1109 Wilbur, in the teacher's lounge, 7pm. Since we are on summer break our next meeting will be November 15.

The following are our September donors that have consented to be listed: William Bender, Ted Brandt, Bruce Calkins, Joseph Collins, Dave Deline, Jeff Lambert, Terry and Sue Nelson, Steve Peterson, Ruth Stickey, Jan Strobeck, St. Mary's Garden Club, Irene Zimmer, and two anonymous donors. Thank you for your continued support.

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