

# LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the  
Dishman Hills

March 2009

## AGE IS SHOWING

Have you ever walked through the woods and wondered how old the forest is that surrounds you? A new publication by Washington DNR titled Identifying Old Trees and Forest in Eastern Washington can help. We know that the forest in the Dishman Hills are old. The absence of cut tree stumps is the first clue. If indeed there has been any logging in the Natural Area, it probably was before 1900, allowing for a number of decades for wood leftovers to recycle back into the soils. Look around and you will find more evidence of oldness in our forest. Canopy closure or tree-crowns that cover the sky and the lack of middle story foliage suggest age. The thick biomass layers on the forest floor indicates a hundred years or more of growth. The horizontal diversification of our forest or the variability from place to place of tree size, ground plants, and gaps in the forest are considered as classic old growth features. These features in Eastern Washington often begin at 250 and 350 years of age. But forest are dynamic and ever changing. Cycles of fire, storms, and bug infestation are constantly redefining our ecology and the term "climax forest" does not seem to apply here.

Maybe a better idea of age can be obtained by looking at the trees. The ponderosa pine, our most common tree, is a good place to start. These trees live for 300 to 600 years with the oldest in the western U.S. clocking in at 1,047 years! Size is not a good indicator of age since it depends heavily on the local environmental conditions. A better indicator of age is the bark. While your face is up against the trunk take a deep breath of the sun-warmed bark and enjoy the aroma of vanilla, butterscotch, pineapples, and even cream soda caused by the presence of terpenes, a complex hydrocarbon that provides scents for many spices, herbs, and perfumes. The thick bark that protects the ponderosa is dark brown to nearly black for the first century of growth and the vertical fissures that separate plates of bark are just beginning to form. During the second century the outer layers of the bark plates begin to flake off, revealing the reddish brown color characteristic of mature trees. With more age, more flaking causes the bark plates to get wider while the width of the separating fissures remain the same. By the third century the plates are more than three times wider than the fissure, a sign of old age. Foresters refer to these geriatrics of the forest as "yellow-bellies". Other signs of age involve the branch whorls that the tree forms every year. Whorls are formed at the crown and as the tree grows up a succession of branch whorls are left behind to mark each year's growth. After a 100 years, older, lower branch whorls start to fall off leaving scars, and in trees hovering around 200 years old these scars are completely covered. Some trees in stressed environments such as the rocky terrain of the Natural Area develop a spiral grain that gives the appearance of a twisted piece of licorice stick. This is an adaptation that gives the trunk



"Twisted" ponderosa, Caro Cliff

*Advice from a tree—Stand tall & proud, remember your roots,  
Reflect the light of your true nature, drink plenty of water, enjoy  
The view! Anonymous—2000*

more strength and a better capability to deal with moisture stress by increasing the connection between the roots and all the tree's branches. The bark does not twist thus leaving this feature visible only on dead, bark less trees, or in trunk scars. While an indicator of old age, many of these "twisted" pines don't live to ancient ages due to the perils of their environment.

Douglas fir, another common tree in our forest, is like the ponderosa in that size does not necessarily signify age. It's protective bark remains thin, brown to grey, hard and bony for the first 100 to 200 years. After that the bark thickens up to 14 inches, and appears very coarse and rugged. They usually die by a slow-growing fungus.

A fire history study done by Washington DNR in 1999 tested a number of pines for their growth history and confirm the ancient age for our forest. The oldest pines tested were all over 200 years old. So as you wonder through the Dishman Hills, please appreciate the age of our forest and remember that some of it's senior citizens were born about the same time as our nation.

## BUTTERCUP TIME

The annual buttercup hike is scheduled for Saturday, April 4, 1 pm, starting at Camp Caro. The parking lot is open. We will hike back to last summers burn area to tour our replanting efforts and also check out what mother nature is doing. A visit there last week confirmed that most the snow is gone. Spring is here and it's time to get out and to start enjoying a new season of growth accompanied by the seasons first wildflowers. See you there.

## ASSOCIATION 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 questions. Our board meets every other month on the third Tuesday. May 19 is the next meeting, 7pm, at the Moran Prairie Spokane County Library, 6004 South Regal St. Members and the public are always welcomed to drop by to see what is going on with the Association.

The following are our February donors that have consented to be listed: Andrew & Diedre Ashmore, Nancy Cashion, Judy Heggem-Davis, Judith Hudson, Camille Kovarik, Claire Nisbet, S.G. & Kathy Olson, Virginia Peterson, Marion Phillips, estate of Joan Talbot, Edith Wilson, Hershel Zellman, William Zimmer, and one anonymous donor. Thank you for helping us reach our goals.

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