Seeley Swan PATHFINDER

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Eye on the Environment

Natives are food and shelter for wildlife

By Anne Dahl

When I think about native plants I see diversity—an interdependent mix of grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees—making up a forest and supporting a rich assortment of native wildlife.

The hot August days and cool early September nights have turned the grasses and flower stalks brown. Seeds of all kinds are in the air and stuck in our socks. Before too long the larch needles will paint the mountainsides gold. Yet, fresh in mind are June, July and much of August, which were awash with greens and floral color, unmatched in recent years, thanks to late spring moisture.

We are blessed with several kinds of penstemon that thrive in the Swan Valley, from a tiny three-inch high variety to those with stalks three-feet tall.

The most notable this summer were the showy blue penstemon blanketing the banks of the dry roadsides and trails. The blooms were a brilliant, pleasing mix of violet and azure. They kept the hummingbirds busy and brightened our early summer hikes.

The redstem ceanothus shrubs were especially shiny and green this year in the Crazy Horse burn and on open hillsides of the Swan Range. The leaves and the puffy snowball blossoms gave off a distinctive tobacco scent. This evergreen shrub will hold its color but lose some of its shine as winter moves in. Ceanothus is palatable to deer and elk that browse on the shrub year round, especially in late winter and early spring.

Moving up to the alpine areas, stunning swaths of yellow glacier lilies and tiny white spring beauties covered the mossy rock slabs in late July and early August as the snow finally began to melt.

The bulbs of these ankle-high plants are rich sources of food for grizzly bears, whose long front claws resemble handheld garden tools, according to Missoula's preeminent bear biologist Dr. Chuck Jonkel. Chuck was at the Bear Fair this August demonstrating how bear claws resemble the claw-cultivators we use to loosen garden soil.

Bears, we know, are omnivorous. They consume far more plants than animals. Bears like to eat cow parsnip, found in cool shady forests and streamsides. Cow parsnip was especially lush in August.

The plant has huge green, maple-leaf shaped leaves and four-to-eight-foot tall stalks. The blossom umbrels were as big as cream pies. People can peel the stalks of cow parsnip and eat them like celery (be sure you positively identify this plant; one member of the parsnip family is deadly).

On the high slopes, the reddish purple sweetvetch livening the alpine meadows in early August was food for rodents and mountain goats that consume the pea-like seeds.

Mountain ash is a favorite shrub this time of year for hikers who love to see the brilliant clusters of red-orange berries—and their glossy, compound leaves that turn from bright green to orange-gold in the fall. Bears, cedar waxwings, grouse and grosbeaks are happy to find the berries as they ripen. Moose eat the twigs in winter.

I don't think it's possible to find native vegetation that doesn't provide food or shelter for some species of wildlife, not counting its use by insects. But I get a kick out of the paintbrushes, which take advantage of other plants by penetrating their roots and stealing part of their food. Paintbrushes are so dependent on other vegetation for survival they can barely make it on their own.

Shelter is a primary role of evergreen trees in the complex world of forests. But the trees can be forage as well.

White-tailed deer browse on Douglas-fir saplings and the lower branches of the larger pole-size trees. Pine squirrels thrive on cone seeds, while flying squirrels eat lichens, fungi, fruit, buds and sap, as well as small birds, and eggs—another omnivorous species.

Snags of all kinds continue providing shelter for many birds—from nuthatches to kestrels to flickers—well beyond their lifespan. Notable are the fire-scarred larch that can stand for centuries after death, preserved by the hardened pitch.

When I think of noxious weeds, I see mono-cultures. Except for bees and perhaps a few other pollinators, a field of knapweed has little value for wildlife. As we all know, it's not just that the plants aren't palatable, they crowd out plant communities.

The yellow and orange hawkweeds that only five years ago were considered new invaders are now common in the Swan Valley. Once they get a foothold, their connected fuzzy rosette leaves will completely cover the ground, leaving no room for other species. At this time of year, the hawkweed flowers have gone to seed, yet the pale green leaves remain in blankets across the soil.

To prove a point, I measured a 20-foot diameter circle of understory in a Douglas-fir, lodgepole and ponderosa forest. In it I found a plant community of Oregon grape, kinnikinnick, spirea, violet, dwarf huckleberry, northern bedstraw, strawberry, pine grass, common juniper, stonecrop, yarrow, wild rose, elk sedge, snowberry, and bunchberry dogwood—all of which are native species.

A short list of native animals that benefit from the plants in this diverse understory include grizzly bears, black bears, white-tailed deer, elk, ruffed grouse, red backed voles, snowshoe hare, ermine, and deer mice. Predators that eat one or more of these animals include cougars, bobcats, coyotes, both bear species, wolves and humans, not to mention our raptors—the owls, hawks and eagles.

Noxious weeds have an advantage over natives when the soil has been compacted. They are much better competitors in disturbed and hardened soils. But this forest stand had been moderately opened during winter about five years ago to reduce fire risk. The winter logging protected the soil and prevented an incursion of weeds.

A 20-foot diameter circle of understory along a streamside in the Swan Valley might contain red osier dogwood, alder, cottonwood saplings, wild rose, one or more species of willow, violets and groundsel.

An alpine meadow of similar size could be bright with a dazzling array of gentian, columbine, paintbrush, buttercup, forget-me-not, biscuitroot, valerian, pussy toes, and alpine sage—while a wetland meadow on the valley floor might consist of various sedges, rushes and herbaceous species like yellow monkey flower, water parsnip, veronica, hooded skullcap, bladderwort and a lot of other strange-named plants, several of which are rare, except in the Swan Valley.

By now, our native plants are preparing for the cold months by drawing their resources into their roots, ensuring their growth and abundance next summer. Fewer of our native flowers are still in bloom. Yet, their lush growth and colorful displays will feed our memories long into the winter—and feed a host of wild animals when the snow melts next spring.