

On the Path

The Life Force in Spring

By Keith Hammer

May 6, 2010, Lakeshore Country Journal

After months of winter snow, it is a joy to watch bits of green emerge in spring. There comes that magic few days when swollen buds begin to open and the latent life force literally springs forth. In our neck of the woods, there is special cause for celebration as the western larch trees begin to push out new needles to replace those dropped in the fall.

A wet snow storm in mid-April broke a number of larch branches from the trees in our yard and I brought a few of the smaller branches into the house so we could enjoy their quarter-inch, fresh green needles. I put them in a quart Mason jar with a little water to see if they'd stay fresh for a while. A couple hours later, we were amazed to find the needles had pushed out another quarter-inch and the small cones were dropping pollen on the dinner table!

It was a reminder of the irrepressible force of life that surrounds us every day, in this case highlighted by what we may regard as temporary "setbacks" of sleet and slush and snow. Indeed, robins continue to sing and mate and nest no matter how fowl the spring weather. The larch needles, grass and new leaves appear all the greener in contrast to the fresh snow and they seem to thrive all the more as the melting snow slakes their thirst.

As needles and leaves unfold further, they provide more surface area for heavy spring snows to cling to, resulting in more breakage to both limbs and whole trees during such storms. Indeed, a late-April snowstorm followed by rain brought a number of trees down near our home, and more limbs fell when one would think the supply already exhausted. But that is nature's way of thinning, and the life force finds its expression in increasingly robust trees and limbs that can now find more sunlight in their neighborhood!

It's easy to curse these late spring snowstorms as they trash our yards, plug our driveways, and perhaps flatten our early garden vegetables – but it is nonetheless moisture needed to nourish our forests and valleys. And it is needed to renew the mountain snow pack that feeds our water wells, streams and rivers throughout the year. With a Flathead River Basin winter snow pack only 63% of normal, we must be thankful for what we can get this spring and summer.

The snowstorm the last days of April dumped a reported 42" of snow containing 5" of water on Jewel Basin, as measured by the SNOTEL telemetry site above the parking lot in Noisy Basin! That should help improve the snow pack and make for some interesting snow avalanches as sunshine again finds its way to steep, south-facing slopes loaded with fresh snow atop the old, slick snow pack!

So we endure these springtime blessings-in-disguise as they make a mess of our yards, gardens and roadways - pressing on with life and accepting them as a natural part of it. We watch those stout, dead-looking larch come back to life with the most delicate of needles and cones and, as I write this, the evening grosbeaks and red

crossbills are at the feeder for the first time this season – in stark contrast to the 4” of slush still lying on our lawn and rooftops!

Which reminds me of a Native American story about why larch trees, one of only several cone-bearing tree species that are not also evergreens, lose their needles each fall. The story has it one winter the then-evergreen larch tree refused to provide shelter for the birds. This angered the Great Spirit, who then told the larch tree it would no longer be allowed to keep its needles during winter for its refusal to provide shelter with them.

So we are left with larch trees that turn golden in autumn as they prepare to drop their needles, consequently appear dead throughout the winter, yet provide some of the most delicate green in the forest come spring. They are of course but one expression of the irrepressible life force springing forth, but they are nonetheless among my favorites.

I must confess to cursing that late-April snowstorm as I shoveled several inches of slush off a sagging carport, shoverdl paths through a tangle of downed tree limbs, and had to resort to four-wheel-drive to get out of the driveway. But I’ll be giving thanks for it when I drink from a mountain stream while hiking this summer or choose to cool off with a swim in the Flathead River!

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Larch needles and buds. Keith Hammer photo.