

On the Path

Hounding Huckleberries!

By Keith Hammer

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I'm hearing mixed reports on this summer's huckleberry "crop" in the Swan Range. We're seeing very few huckleberries on our Saturday Swan Ranger outings, which are typically along the Swan Crest or along its western slopes.

We did forage in a nice patch along the "back door" from Wolf Creek into Crater Lake recently, however. Yes, I've told you where they are and even included a photo - because anyone who scrambles up that "back door" game trail deserves a few huckleberries!

On the other hand, I ran into a local family at the Mountain Brook Homestead Foundation's Pie Social that had recently picked twelve gallons on the east side near Hungry Horse Reservoir. They didn't say exactly where, of course, which is fine by me. I'd rather know which evening this winter it might be best to happen by their house for a piece of huckleberry pie!

Indeed, huckleberry picking and huckleberry eating are favored activities by bears and people alike, although I think bears less seldom separate the two. Fish, Wildlife and Parks' Diane Tipton reports that bears can eat up to 30,000 huckleberries a day while laying on the fat necessary for a long, foodless winter in the den - a gorging phase called "hyperphagia." She reports that huckleberries can make up 80% of a grizzly bear's diet during July and August, which leads to her sage advice to best not get between a bear and its berries!

Huckleberries are so important to bears that a good or bad huckleberry season generally determines how many bears end up getting into trouble raiding garbage and fruit trees near homes along the foothills. During a good season, bears tend to move further up the mountains as they follow the ripening of the berries. During a season with few berries, the bear's urge to put on fat can override the bear's preference to steer clear of people as it takes advantage of unpicked orchards, bird feeders and improperly stored garbage, pet food and livestock feed near homes.

Those are the bears we most often read about in the newspaper as they are often trapped, relocated or shot. We seldom read about the grizzly bear napping on a full tummy in the shade near a good huckleberry patch!

So, for our sake and the sake of the bear, we yearly pray for a good spring that allows huckleberry flowers to survive any late-season frosts so they set lots of fruit. And we later pray that we find at least some of those berries before the bears do, although they are a luxury for us compared to a necessity for the bears. In many respects, it is both berries and bears that spice up hiking in the Swan Range.

On our recent hike to Crater Lake, a newcomer to the Swan Rangers innocently baited our conversation about the wisdom of carrying pepper spray or wearing "bear bells" while hiking in grizzly bear habitat. After passing several piles of bear scat, she later asked how to best tell grizzly bear scat from black bear scat. One of our elder

hikers could not help but respond with a learned smirk and “Both black and grizzly poop has berries in it, but the grizzly poop also contains little bells and red pepper!”

After a rarified moment of silence, the laughter broke out and, by day’s end the newcomer said she’d be back for more such hikes. So, carry a wide-mouth bottle of water when you hike (so you can dump out the water and fill it with huckleberries) as well as a canister of bear spray on your hip. Keep you eyes and ears open, don’t get between a bear and its berries, and be sure to leave enough berries for the bears!

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Plump huckleberries along the “back door” trail to Crater Lake. Keith Hammer photo.