

RECREATION  
REPORTVISITOR USE  
SURVEYS ON  
BLUE MOUNTAINS  
FORESTS

JOHN DAY — College undergraduate and graduate students from West Virginia University who are completing a field practicum as part of their course work will be collecting voluntary recreational visitor user surveys this fall for the National Visitor Use Monitoring Program on the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests.

The Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service has partnered for 20 years with the University of West Virginia and Robert Burns, professor and director of the Division of Forestry and Natural Resources, to offer this outdoor classroom experience with hands-on learning.

Each student is provided a list of sites to survey, forest maps, district maps, radios, and guidelines. The sites are broken down into four types: developed day use sites, overnight-use developed sites, general forest areas, and wilderness areas. The students are stationed at exit points and high traffic locations to try and capture the most visitors who volunteer for the survey.

The National Visitor Use Monitoring Program also relies on 24-hour traffic counters. The students leave these counters on the road after their shift and then later return to pick them up. The counter captures the number of cars that cross over it during that time period. The information received from these counters captures the total number of vehicles, not specifically recreational visitors.

The National Visitor Use Monitoring Program has two primary goals. First, the program aims to provide the Forest Service and Congress estimates of the volume of recreation visitation to National Forests and Grasslands. Second, the program produces descriptive information about that visitation, including activity participation, demographics, visit duration, measures of satisfaction, and trip spending connected to the visit. The National Visitor Use Monitoring Program was initiated in 1998 as a pilot project and is now conducted every five years on all national forests.

Additional information about the National Visitor Use Monitoring Program can be found at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/>.

## THE INIMITABLE TAMARACK

# A FALL FAVORITE

■ Every autumn the region's only conifer tree that sheds its needles puts on a colorful show in the mountains

The tamarack is the great ambassador of Northeastern Oregon's forests, the tree that makes me feel welcome.

I was walking not long ago in the woods near Baker City and although the day was fair, as most days have been the past couple weeks, my route was beside a stream and the defile was deep in shade.

The air had a slight chill that was pure autumn.

But just as I came around a corner I saw the lone tamarack on the ridge above, its yellow needles so bright in a shaft of sunlight that I had to squint.

I felt at that moment as I sometimes feel when I'm walking in town, along about dusk on one of those clear winter evenings when the temperature is plunging toward zero, and I see a single lamp burning in the window of a home.

This singular sight conveys a rich smorgasbord of senses — the soft steady ticking of a mechanical clock, the whisper of a book page being turned, the scents of woodsmoke and fresh bread and hot tea.

Above all there is the reminder of how truly wonderful it is to step into a warm room when outside everything is freezing.

Seeing a tamarack, a beacon against the dark green backdrop of the forest, affects me in much the same way.

There can be no dispute, at any rate, that our mountains would be duller places if not for the tamarack.

Botanists and others of a more scientific bent might note that "tamarack" is a colloquialism, and that the tree is more properly known as the western larch.

(Or, if you have an affinity for Latin, *Larix occidentalis*.)

Whatever you call it, though, this tree is unique in that it refuses to make the usual choice between deciduous and coniferous.

The tamarack is decidedly the latter, as it bears its seeds in cones, just like firs and pines and spruces (indeed, the tamarack is part of the pine family).

Except each autumn the tamaracks act as though they were common maples or oaks. Unlike other conifers that hold onto their needles year round — hence, "evergreen" trees — tamaracks discard their needles in late fall, leaving the ground looking rather like the floor beneath a barber's chair.

This is a neat trick, to be sure.

But not the neatest one in the tamaracks' repertoire.

Before those needles tumble down they swap their summer green for a shade of yellow, sometimes with a bit of orange, that transforms the autumn forest.



## ON THE TRAIL

JAYSON JACOBY



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Tamarack trees in their autumn splendor are especially colorful when they're growing among evergreens — in the above photo, ponderosa pines near Phillips Reservoir southwest of Baker City.

Rating fall foliage is a matter as subjective as a person's favorite songs, of course, but to my eyes a forest with a smattering of tamaracks is as comely as a Vermont hillside or a riot of aspens on Steens Mountain.

The difference is the backdrop.

In New England the deciduous groves tend to dominate the landscape, and it is much the same with aspens.

But tamaracks almost always grow among other conifers, and often they are outnumbered by their evergreen neighbors.

This juxtaposition accentuates the tamaracks' color, just as the darkness of a window adds texture to a lone light.

My yard is more than 10 miles from the east slopes of the Elkhorns, yet even with the naked eye it's easy by mid October most years to distinguish the tamarack groves by the splotches and streaks of yellow.

At closer range the difference between needles and leaves is also a factor in the tamaracks' unique appearance. Tamarack needles are shorter and finer than most other conifer needles, and they don't completely block the sun.

I find few scenes as fetching as the brilliant yellow of a tamarack against a backdrop of blue sky.

Its conspicuous coloring aside, there are a couple of attributes that can help you find tamaracks.

The trees prefer cool and wet forests, which in this region generally means slopes that face to the north or east. Although tamaracks can grow at elevations as low as 2,000 feet, in Northeastern Oregon they're most common in the range between about 4,000 and 6,500 feet.

Tamaracks are common across the Blue Mountains and all its subranges, including the Strawberrys, Greenhorns and Elkhorns, as well as the Wallowa Mountains (see "Tops for Tamaracks" above, at right).

The tamarack is the only larch species native to Oregon, according to the Oregon Department of Forestry.

The trees can live up to 800 years and grow more than 150 feet tall.

## Tops For Tamaracks

They're common across the Blue and Wallowa mountains, but here are a few suggestions on where to sample their splendor before winter arrives and the needles drop.

**BAKER/GRANT COUNTIES**

- Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway
- Black Mountain Road, No. 1145 (turn off Highway 7 between Mileposts 35 and 34, about 15 miles from Baker City; the road crosses Mason Dam)
- Eagle Creek, north of Richland

**UNION COUNTY**

- Moss Springs area, including Upper Little Minam and Lodgepole trails
- Mount Emily
- Ukiah/Starkey Highway 244

**WALLOWA COUNTY**

- Wallowa Lake Lodge deck
- Wallowa County park at the foot of Wallowa Lake
- Wallowa Mountain Loop Road, No. 39, to Salt Creek and the 100 Road to Tenderfoot Trail