

The Seeley Larch Legacy

By Scott Tomson

In my mind, the Clearwater Valley and western larch are inextricably linked. Kind of like ice cream and apple pie or peanut butter and jelly. It's hard to think of one without thinking of the other. This relationship is most clearly illustrated during the fall when the brilliant yellow larch trees paint the hillsides and the falling needles carpet our forest floors. However, the spring season is also a time when the larch make themselves known, with newly sprouted bright green needles standing out amidst their duller conifer neighbors.

Since these trees are such a prominent feature of our landscape here in the Seeley Swan, it seems appropriate to dedicate a little time to them in this weekly column.

Larch are members of the pine family but unlike most other members of this family, larch are deciduous rather than evergreen conifers. There are 14 species of larch (aka tamaracks) worldwide, with 3 species occurring in North America. In the Rocky Mountain west we have 2 species; western larch (*Larix occidentalis*) and subalpine larch (*Larix lyalii*). Here in the Clearwater scattered subalpine larch occur at high elevations on the Swan face but these trees are uncommon. Due to their preference for cold sites at high elevations, they do not typically grow very large and are not considered a commercial species.

Unlike its high elevation counterpart, the western larch is widely distributed in our valley and is an important species for a variety of reasons. Aside from their scenic value, western larch are an important commercial timber species. This species makes excellent dimensional lumber, quality house logs and is a preferred choice for folks gathering firewood due to its high BTU potential.

Mature larch trees provide nesting habitat for a variety of wildlife species including bald eagles, ospreys and goshawks. Because larch grow large and can stand for many years as snags, especially if they have been fire scarred, they are important to a variety of cavity nesting species such as the pileated woodpecker. For this reason we try to discourage folks from taking out larch snags greater than 20" diameter for firewood or during timber operations. Besides, throwing those big rounds in the pickup is hard on the back.

Low elevation larch forests were targeted in the early days of the timber boom in this region due to the quality of the wood and the proximity of these stands to waterways. In fact, the first federal timber sale was conducted in 1908 on the east side of Seeley Lake. It's my understanding that larch were the primary species harvested in this sale and that these trees were floated from Seeley Lake down the Clearwater and Blackfoot rivers to the Big Blackfoot Milling Company in Bonner. There is detailed information on this sale at the historical museum in "The Barn" so check that out if you get a chance.

Just as our community has a tie to larch for its commercial timber value, there is also a long history of conservation associated with this species. Early on, foresters and others recognized the importance of old growth western larch stands from an ecological and aesthetic standpoint. One such stand is the renowned Girard Grove, located on the west side of Seeley Lake along Boy Scout road.

According the famous Forest Service forester and author Elers Koch, Girard Grove is, "the finest stand of western larch in the Northwest – in the world, one might say, since the range of this larch is confined to

the Northwestern United States and British Columbia.” This historic stand is about 200 acres in size and is dominated by large larch trees, many of which are over 5 feet in diameter and are greater than 600 years old.

One exceptionally large larch in this stand holds the state record based on height and diameter. This tree is tied for the world record with a western larch from Washington State. Our record holding larch is 264 inches in circumference (more than 7 feet in diameter) and stands 153 feet tall excluding the 10 foot dead top. Estimated timber volume of this tree is 13,000 board feet – enough to build an average sized house plus a garage. Age estimates made by Helen Smith from the Rocky Mountain Research Station (and the one who “discovered” this record breaking tree) indicate that the tree is approximately 1,000 years old. Extensive fire scarring is evident at the tree’s base which tells us that this old giant has seen and survived numerous fires in that 1,000 year period.

Due to the fact that larch stands of this age are very uncommon, Girard Grove has been studied extensively by forest researchers. Steve Arno, a retired research forester, has probably spent the most time studying and writing about western larch here in Seeley Lake. Steve’s research shows that Girard and other such stands experienced fire on roughly 25 year intervals. Some of these fires were naturally occurring but many were ignited by Native Americans to improve big game forage and open forest understories. Due to their very thick bark, mature larch are extremely fire resistant and were able to survive these relatively low intensity fires.

This cycle of relatively frequent fire changed as Seeley became more “settled” and agencies, such as the Forest Service, began aggressively suppressing wildfires. Over time, elimination of fire allowed more shade tolerant tree species to grow in the understories of the giant larch. This accumulation of ladder fuels increased over time and some began to worry that a careless campfire or dry lightning storm would provide the catalyst by which one or more of these old larch stands was lost to a catastrophic fire.

Enter again the conservation mindset. Concerned people from the Forest Service, community and other agencies decided to undertake fuels thinning under projects such as Chain of Lakes to reduce fuels and also to protect these legacy larch stands from stand replacing fire. With efforts starting in the late 1990s, stands such as Girard Grove have been commercially thinned to remove smaller trees from the understory and protect and enhance the old larch overstory trees. In addition, prescribed fire is being used after timber harvest so new larch, which need soil disturbance to regenerate, may begin growing and someday replace the giants we so much appreciate today.

So the story of Seeley Lake, its western larch and history of forestry and conservation continues. Seems to me that this is just another example of what an exceptional place we live in and something for us all to be proud of.

If you want to learn more about western larch, please visit the Seeley Lake Ranger Station or take a hike on the Seth Diamond Trail which is just across Boy Scout Road from the Seeley Lake Campground.

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