Idler's Rest
Trail Guide

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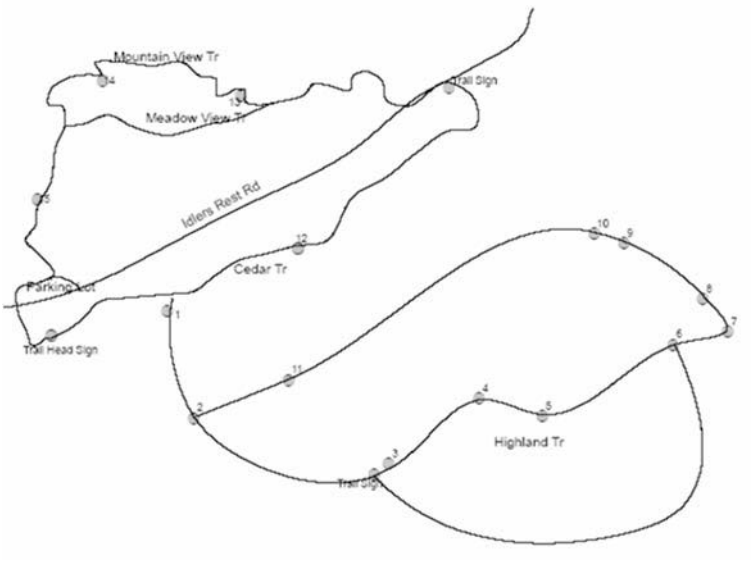


Illustrations by Jeanne R. Janish, from *Vascular Plants of the Pacific Northwest*, sixth edition, 1994, by C .L. Hitchcock, A. Cronquist, M. Ownbey, and J. W. Thompson, vols. 1, 2, 3, and 4, University of Washington Press, Seattle. Reprinted with permission.

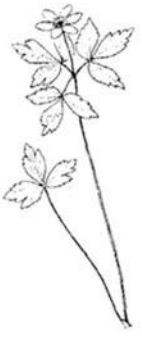
Changing times, changing place

The community of living things you see is constantly changing. The scene before you changes every second and over the minutes, days, seasons, years, decades, centuries, and millennia. Some changes are sudden, dramatic, and long-lasting; some are subtle. Some are brought about by people; others result from the activities of animals, the growth of plants and fungi, or the forces of wind and water. As you walk through the preserve, think about how it has changed and how it is likely to change in the future.

1. Cedar grove

Here you are in a grove of western redcedar trees. The wood of cedar trees is used for shingles and fence posts because it is resistant to rot. Indians used the fibrous bark to make rope, baskets, and fishing line.

Piper's anemone thrives in shaded areas with abundant soil moisture. The plants that live beneath the cedar trees don't require light: they can tolerate the shade in this grove.



Piper's anemone

This spot hasn't always been a cedar grove. At various times in the past logging operations and fires killed the dominant cedar trees and changed the cool, shady grove into a sunny clearing. For a few years wildflowers and shrubs would have thrived in the warm, dry conditions that resulted. Next ponderosa pines came in, followed by Douglas-firs. Eventually, after these drought-tolerant trees created a shady forest, grand firs and finally cedars would have been able to establish themselves on the site again.

2. Nature's recyclers

Note the fungi to your right on the logs at your feet. You may have to look carefully; some of these are nickel-sized shelves projecting from the bark. Shelf fungi belong to a group of fungi called polypores. As you continue along the trail, keep looking for shelf fungi. At Station #12, you may find a more brightly-colored example.

Even in the absence of large-scale disturbances like logging and burning, wood is continually being broken down. When a plant or animal dies, it is attacked by scavengers and decomposers. Mushrooms, shelf fungi, earthworms, ants, and even woodpeckers help in this process. The earth contains only a certain amount of nutrients and minerals, but living things need to use these nutrients. If the nutrients in plant and animal tissues were not recycled, the soil would run out of nutrients and the forest would become choked with dead organisms.

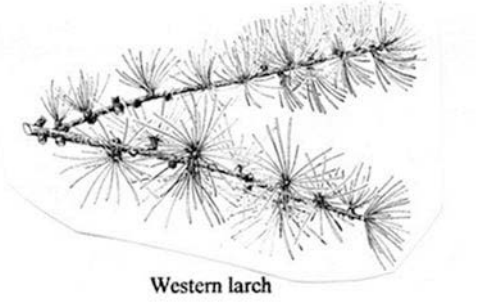
3. Evidence of erosion

Note the gully here. The soils of the Palouse Prairie are mostly fine, wind-blown silt. When plant cover is removed, the exposed soils can easily be washed or blown away. Cultivation of the sloping fields above this spot has exposed the topsoil. In winter and spring, there is no plant cover to retard the flow of rain and melting snow, so water runs off the slopes rapidly, cutting channels and washing away topsoil.

The forest vegetation helps to prevent erosion. Under the canopy of trees, the soil is protected from pounding raindrops, and the smaller plants help to keep soil from washing off the slope.

4. Western Larch

The large tree near marker #4 is a grand fir. Grand firs are prized as Christmas trees. About 10 feet off the trail and behind the trail marker is a large tree with many dead branches projecting from the lower portion of its trunk. (The lowest needle-bearing branches are about 50 feet off the ground.) This tree is a western larch. This species is unusual for a conifer, because it sheds its needles in the fall. (In other words, it is deciduous.) In autumn, one can easily spot the golden foliage of this tree. In winter it can be identified by the little knobs on its twigs, which will become whorls of new needles.



Western larch

The seeds of western larch, or tamarack, can only get established in sunny clearings. What does that tell you about the history of this spot? What kinds of things might have caused this site to be sunny at some time in the past?

Note that you have been climbing uphill, and that the forest is more open at this higher elevation.

5. Douglas-fir/ninebark community

Douglas-fir is perhaps the Northwest's most famous tree. It was named for David Douglas, a botanical explorer for the Royal Horticultural Society of England in the 1820s. The name is misleading because it is not a true fir. In fact, its scientific name, *Pseudotsuga*, means "false hemlock." Its cones possess a unique feature: they have tiny, three-pronged "pitchforks" between their scales.

Douglas-fir

Douglas-fir is prized for construction as well as exterior and interior finishing.

The tall shrub that forms dense thickets here is mallow ninebark. It is commonly found growing beneath a canopy of Douglas-fir in sites that are too dry to support western redcedar. In September the foliage of mallow ninebark turns a bright russet red.

Two other important shrubs that form thickets here are ocean spray and snowberry.

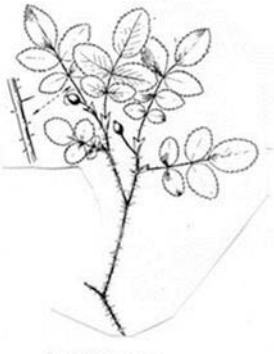
6. Snowberry and rose

You can see two very common and ecologically important shrubs here: common snowberry and baldhip rose. Both are common beneath Douglas-firs.

Snowberry has opposite leaves and white, berry-like fruits. The species of rose found here has weak prickles and slender, bright red fruits termed "hips." The hips of roses are very high in Vitamin C and are sometimes used to make tea.

You will see even more baldhip rose at the next trail station.

Common snowberry

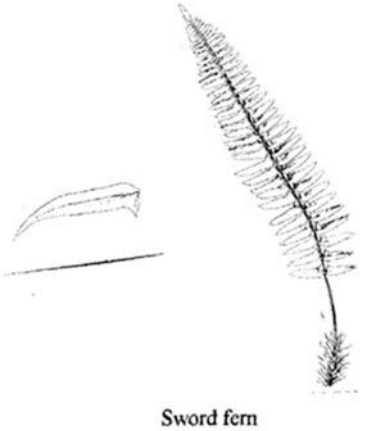


Baldhip rose

7. Seep

Straight ahead of you is a spot where water seeps out of the ground and runs downhill in a moist depression that parallels the trail for several yards.

Notice that the vegetation here is different from the vegetation just a short distance away. The extra moisture allows plants to grow here that can't grow in drier spots. For instance, we find several species of sedges and ferns here, but just a few yards away it is too dry for them. Can you find an example of a sword fern? (Look near the decomposing log at the downhill portion of the moist area.) By looking at the picture below, can you guess how this fern got its name?



Sword fern

What other wild flowers or other plants do you see here and not in drier places?

8. Signs of red squirrel activity

Notice the pine cone scales scattered on the ground at this spot. You are looking at a red squirrel's garbage heap. The red squirrel eats the seeds out of cones and discards the scales. Pick up some of these and look at them closely. If you look around you may find the central axis of a cone, which the squirrel also discards. These resemble miniature corn cobs. Sometimes the squirrel's refuse piles form large mounds, called middens. Look for these as you continue along the trail.

The red squirrel is one of the noisiest and most common animals of the Douglas-fir forest. Even when the squirrels are not chattering, their presence can be detected by these piles of refuse.

In this area, Douglas-fir cones are the red squirrel's main source of food. Squirrels harvest the cones while they are still green. They also eat mushrooms, herbs, and insects.

Note that because the living organisms of the forest are always changing, you may not find a midden here when you visit this spot, even though there was one when this trail guide was written. So be sure to look for them throughout your walk.

9. Ocean spray

Here is another thicket of ocean spray, a shrub that is abundant in dry forests. In summer you will notice the creamy flowers that give this plant its name. Even when the plant is not in bloom, you will still be able to see drooping clusters of dried husks. You should also be able to find snowberry at this spot.

Notice you are starting to descend from a dry ridge. Do you see any cedars here? How is this habitat different from station #1?

Ocean spray

10. Dead trees

There are several dead trees at this station. Some logs are on the ground, while others remain as upright snags. The drought we have had in recent years has allowed a fungus to attack the roots of Douglas-firs. When wind storms occur, these trees come crashing to the ground. The dead wood provides important resources for many animals, including woodpeckers and other hole-nesting birds as well as insects and bats.

Notice that although many of the older Douglas-fir trees are dying, they aren't being replaced by young individuals.

11.Rotting stump

One especially huge tree came crashing to earth here recently. Notice the corkscrew-like twists in the wood. Can you imagine how much pressure it must have taken to crack open such a structure?

When a big tree like this dies, it leaves a gap where sunlight can penetrate the forest canopy. Sun-loving plants germinate and grow in this clearing. By creating a habitat for shade- intolerant species, the death of a forest giant contributes to the overall biological diversity of the forest

12. Old cabin site

At this spot the forest opens onto a level clearing. As you approach the clearing, look on a dead tree stump alongside the trail for a large shelf fungus that is shiny orange above and yellow below. This is called a sulfur fungus.

There used to be some cabins in this clearing. Gold miners walked this trail over a century ago. At that time the trail was known as the "Rag Road." Strips of cloth from young ladies' petticoats marked the path through the forest to the mines higher up on Moscow Mountain.

To find the rest of the trail markers, go back to where the trail began, cross the road, and follow the trail uphill.

13. Pines, snowberry, and grasses

The spot where you are standing was once a ponderosa pine grove with an understory of snowberry. The forest was cleared at some time in the past, but you can see that young pines are coming back.

The cycle of forest destruction and renewal is an old one. But in the last century and a half there have been some changes. Do you think the forest you are looking at looks different from the forest that the first white settlers found?

In what other ways do you think the forest has changed since the late 19th century?

Look at the coarse grasses at your feet and alongside the trail. These are introduced species called orchard grass and smooth brome. They are not native to the Northwest, and since their introduction they have spread vigorously. In their wake the native plants that used to grow beneath the pines have disappeared. As you follow the trail up the slope, you will see dense patches of another introduced grass known as tall oatgrass. It can also be seen along many roadsides. In native grasslands of the Palouse Region, tall oatgrass is a serious problem because it aggressively displaces native grasses and wildflowers.

14. Old orchard

Here you can see evidence of past settlements. This site was used as an orchard, as you can see by the regularly spaced fruit trees.

The forest is regenerating here. Notice how many small pine saplings are crowded close together. When settlers first came to this part of Idaho, they found large, old, widely spaced pines growing above an understory of native bunchgrasses. What do you think brought about the change?

Before the settlers arrived, low-intensity fires swept through the pine forests every 10 to 15 years. Some of these fires were ignited by lightning; some were set by Indians to clear out dead wood and brush. After settlement, farmers put out wildfires, and Indian burning stopped. Cattle grazed and trampled the native bunchgrasses that once grew beneath the pines. Without burning and competition from the native grasses, many young trees were able to start growing. Dense thickets of pine saplings developed and the open, park-like pine forests became a thing of the past.

15. Old pine trees

Here you can see larger, more widely spaced pines with an understory of snowberry. Once again, orchard grass is abundant.

What does the future hold?

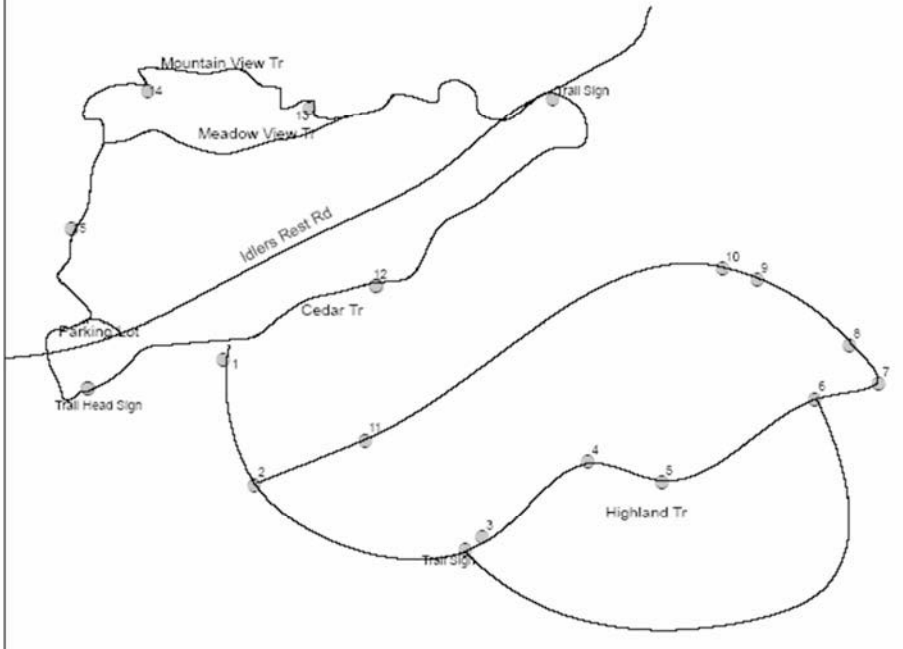
On your hike you've found evidence of many changes. Some last only a short time; others may last for centuries, or even longer.

In addition to the agents of change that you've seen at work here, other, less noticeable forces come into play. Although you can't see them, long-term geological changes and changes in climate are influencing the site.

What do you think this forest will look like 100 years from now? Can you imagine what it might look like in 500 years?

As you leave, think about the ways the ways the people have affected the forest in the past and how people are affecting the forest today.

Idlers Rest Trail Map



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