

OUTDOORS

OHA tour of the woods highlights useful plants

BY KATIE TEACHOUT

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Twenty participants enjoyed the Lost Lake Forest Trek: A hike-and-learn day trip led by local botanist and retired schoolteacher George Thornton Saturday, July 18.

The hike was part of Okanogan Highlands Alliance's (OHA) Highland Wonders educational series, and began at Lost Lake; a 46-acre lake at 3,800 foot elevation located four miles north of Bonaparte Lake. The trek wound through the forest at the south end of the lake, climbing to 4,244 feet before circling around and dropping down to OHA's Lost Lake Wetland and Wildlife Preserve.

The wildlife preserve is 40 acres of wetland and 25 acres of adjacent forestland, purchased in 2010 by OHA with the goal of maintaining and enhancing forest health, habitat and diversity while reducing weeds and fire danger.

"The point of the educational series is to get people to know what they've got, and to get out and experience it," said Thornton. "They can't value something if they don't know they've got it."

The trek took a leisurely pace, stopping often to identify plants or geological features; and pausing quietly to listen for and identify birds in the area. Todd Thorn, a Watershed Program Manager for the Colville Tribes by trade and birder by hobby, helped to identify a Ruby Crown Kinglet, Redtail Hawk, Osprey, Mountain Chickadee, Hairy Woodpecker, Townsend Solitaire and an Olive-Sided Fly Catcher.

"The best way to identify the

Olive-Sided Fly Catcher is by learning their calls and knowing what kind of habitat they favor, which is coniferous forests at elevations of four thousand feet or higher," said Thorn.

"All the songbirds play a tremendous role in keeping the forest healthy," Thornton said.

Plants identified included an orchid called the Mountain Lady Slipper. "There are few

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George Thornton,
local botanist and educator

places where these grow," said Thornton. Another orchid found in the area, *Platanthera obtusata*, or the little northern bog orchid, is currently being researched at the University of Washington.

"They are pollinated by mosquitoes, so researchers from the UW were here trying to determine what scent was attracting the mosquitoes and what the specific pollinators are," Thornton said.

"Don't pick them; plucking the flower will kill the plant," said hiker and Rocket Mass Heater Researcher Ernie Wisner. "Deer will eat them, but when they defecate, the seeds drop and will repopulate the area."

According to the Washington Native Orchid Society, the plant can take up to fifteen years to bloom and live to be eighty years old.

Another plant pointed out was Pearly Everlasting. Common uses for this plant among Native Americans, according to the USFS website, include poultices for treatment of sores, boiling in tea or a steam bath for rheumatism, smoked to treat colds and used as a tobacco substitute.

Another plant the group observed was yarrow, or *Achillea millefolium*, which, like Pearly Everlasting, also has clusters of small white flowers and long, slender leaves.

"The leaves of yarrow make an antiseptic and also a coagulant," said OHA Conservation Coordinator Julie Ashmore. "It's one of my favorite plants to use when my daughter hurts herself. It stops the bleeding and cleans the wound, all in one."

Growing side by side were *Fragaria vesca* (Woodland Strawberry) and *Fragaria virginiana* (Wild Strawberry). The wild strawberries, with the sweeter taste are identified by their smooth, darker green leaf; while the woodland strawberries have a lighter green leaf with prominent veins.

The strawberries and pearly everlasting were bordering an area described as good Great Grey Owl habitat; consisting of mature trees with good views.

Another plant of interest to the group was a lichen system called *Letharia vulpina*, commonly known as 'Wolf Lichen' for its historical use as a poison to ward off wolves and foxes.



Katie Teachout/staff photo

Local botanist George Thornton examines a branch covered in *Letharia vulpina*, known as 'Wolf Lichen', discussing its historical use as a poison for wolves and foxes. Pictured left to right are Melanie Thornton, Erica Wisner and Julie Ashmore. In the background are Todd Thorn and Ernie Wisner.

"When used by Scandinavians, it was mixed with Caribou fat and ground glass," said Science and Art Educator Erica Wisner.

Thornton said USFS employees denied a request from someone wanting to collect a pickup truck load of the lichen for art projects. They were turned down, as the volume they wanted to gather would have caused too much damage to the forest's ecosystem.

According to Lichens of North America, wolf lichen was the most commonly used dye lichen for indigenous peoples in western North America. It's sufficiently poisonous that the Achomawi in

Northern California used it to make poison arrowheads; but the Okanogan-Colville made a weak tea of it to treat internal problems, and the Blackfoot made a remedy of it for stomach disorders.

Looking at the bigger picture, Thornton pointed to both sides of a forest service road that highlighted changes in forest practices. On one side, the forest was left unpruned with lots of underbrush underfoot. On the other side of the road, the underbrush and ladder fuels had been cleared out to prevent the spread of wildfire, leaving just the larger trees.

"However, with less under-

brush, it dries the soil out quicker. So it's a give and take," said Thornton. "We're learning more and doing different things all the time. But sometimes we're not learning about the trade-off until it is too late or too expensive to go back and fix it."

The next outdoor event of the OHA Highland Wonders series is a hike with Methow Valley Naturalist Dana Visalli on Sunday, August 16. Interested community members can email julie@okanoganhighlands.org for more information, or visit www.okanoganhighlands.org/education/hw. Preregistration is required.



Hikers check out maps and information at the Lost Lake Wetland & Wildlife Preserve trailhead. Okanogan Highlands Alliance purchased the 40 acres of wetland and 25 acres of adjacent forest that make up the Preserve at the south end of Lost Lake in January of 2010.

Photos by Katie Teachout



Lee Miller, Ernie Wisner and Julie Ashmore examine a nest found on the ground and thought to belong to a Kinglet when a field book described their nests as being made of lichens and mosses with a feather-lined cap.



Hanna Kliegman of OHA stands by a sign designating the Upland Loop Trail which travels through the upland portion of the Lost Lake Wetland and Wildlife Preserve.



The group heads back down toward Lost Lake after making a 5.6 mile through the forest surrounding the southern end of the lake.