

On The Wild Side

By Deborah Greaves for the WW 30 August 2009

Miracles after fire

In 2004 I worked with a small non-profit organization based in Kelowna, Science Opportunities for Kids, a.k.a. SOKS. The Okanagan Mountain Park forest fire of 2003 scorched an entire mountainside, from Rattlesnake Island opposite Peachland right into Kelowna. SOKS program coordinator Jennifer French saw a rare opportunity to share something very special with Kelowna school children- the incredible surge of natural forest regeneration after a fire.

As it turned out, it was impossible to get permission to take the children into the burned BC forest. Before the public could legally be allowed into burned areas, thousands of dangerous trees had to be assessed, marked and removed. However, our team gained permission to enter the post-fire world. Wearing hard hats and safety vests, we also escorted a group of schoolteachers to see how the forest looked two seasons after the history-making environmental event.

From the west side of Lake Okanagan, the burned slopes of Okanagan Mountain Park looked bleak. Where we'd formerly looked onto the old rocky hills and thousands of dark green trees, Westsiders now gazed across the lake to tall black tree trunks poking like iron spikes out of bare, almost colourless slopes.

The spring and early summer of 2004 were seasons of healing. You had to get close to discover the power of nature making amends; you had to be intimate with this new and altered landscape to see what had happened, and what was coming next.

Some trees had been hit so hard by the fire's abnormally intense heat that they'd been vaporised. Yet, many left signatures of their existence: the so-called 'dragon footprints' that led deep into the earth. These were tunnels into the ground left by the now vanished roots of trees. The black impressions, seared into the soil, were remarkably like giant, birdlike tracks of a rampaging Tyrannosaurus.

We spotted and examined narrow watercourses that had been completely hidden before the fire. Little streams wandered through what had become an entirely different world, wide open, exposed to the sky and wind and rain, and visible to marauding humans who could now ride and tread easily over its slopes.

Rain poured down over all of the Okanagan Valley that spring and early summer. The rain caused trouble for people whose homes were in the path of the cascading runoff, but it nurtured a wild and abundant new crop where the thick forest had been. All over the scorched hillsides, on surfaces that from a distance still looked black and dead, millions of opportunistic weeds rose up.

By the time I visited Myra Bellevue Provincial Park in July of 2004 with the SOKS team, a new, very lacy forest had formed. The weeds were nearly two metres high in some places, and when they let go of their seeds and fluff, small birds often shot through shafts of filtered sunlight to snatch them. Invisible from the other side of Lake Okanagan, this world of tall, eccentric and thriving weeds was bright and aggressively green.

The amazingly fast takeover of burned forest by new vegetation and the altered hierarchy of animals are legacies of a forest or grass fire. Beneath the wildly partying new weeds, the sturdy natives work quietly to rise from the ashes, often restoring themselves from more than an arm's reach beneath the surface of the soil.

While gobbling up all the dead branches and other dry forest debris accumulated on the ground, the fires usually spare some healthy green trees. Later, those tree survivors often benefit- the canopy above has been opened to more light and precipitation, and since many competing trees are gone, there are more nutrients below. Mushrooms and wildflowers pop up, ground covers spread, and the soil is changed. When the grasses re-establish, grazing animals like deer, Bighorn sheep and elk, and horses and cattle have more to eat.

I was utterly engaged by the post-fire reincarnation of the noble but unsung indigenous plant, Bluebunch Wheatgrass. Right after a fire, you can see the small dead soldiers of this valuable native grass at a new post-fire site. In the wake of the Glenrosa fire of July 2009, those clumps were visible at the edge of Gellatly Road near Westbank's Gellatly Heritage Park.

After the tall, golden grass 'bunches' have burned, they're reduced to round black knobs, like fuzzy dark shoe brushes glued to the earth. The following spring, they work their magic: each black and bristly knob is still there, but a bright green ring of soft new grass appears around it. Sheltered by the tall post-fire weeds and nourished by its deep, fire-adapted roots, bunchgrass rallies on its own terms. By summer, each charcoal knob sports a silky new 'bunch' rising toward the sky, ready to do business again.

When a forest fire comes along, it's a terrifying invader. Yet, a fire always leaves gifts behind. I'd like to make a recommendation to those of you who were driven from your homes by the 2009 fires. Be careful to stay away from dangerous trees, but visit a fire site with your camera. Take a few photos every month or two for the next two years, and I promise you'll end up with an intriguing album, documenting Nature's apology for igniting our world: a series of subtle miracles.