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Eye on the Environment

Frühjahrsmüdigkeit Happens

By Dave Morris, Northwest Connections

Cold rain is draining through the old snow outside my window, forming a slushy mud that makes it tough to get around for work or outdoor exercise. This is the season for hunkering down in Western Montana – time for coffee by the fire and making lofty plans for summer projects and adventures.

Hold on – now the clouds have lifted and bright sunshine is flooding down, spotlighting green blades rising through last year's thatch. I hear birds, and the creek is getting rowdy. Time to get outside and taste the bursting new life of the year. Where's my bike?

The world is schizophrenic in spring. So much changes from moment to moment outside our houses and inside our heads that we may feel dizzy. Germanic people call this "Frühjahrsmüdigkeit," or spring fever. This contradictory state – one source describes it as "a feeling of restlessness, excitement, or laziness brought on by the coming of spring" – seems to infect both human and wild communities.

Around the Northwest Connections facility there is a lot happening. Squirrels are fighting for territory or love, and footloose young skunks are risking death on the highway. Wolves seem ready for digging new dens, while

skinny bears are just emerging from theirs. Hardy moths and flies are winging over snowdrifts – which are melting back and revealing snaky dirt "gopher cores" made by industrious rodents during the long winter.

Various owls are cleaning up their nests while varied thrushes voice their ethereal songs. Kids are getting itchy for summer vacation while their parents debate the proper moment for taking off the snow tires. I have no idea what clothes to choose when heading outside – so I bring them all.

While spring can feel like total chaos, there are patterns well worth noticing. As widely predicted, this "La Nina" winter brought heavy snowfalls that have lingered on the ground longer than last year. Northwest Connections staff have noticed most of the springtime events mentioned above happening later than in recent years.

That means this year is running counter to the trend toward less snow and earlier runoff over the last 50 years. According to Fish Wildlife and Parks (2009), "April 1 snowpack in western Montana has declined 30 to 40 percent and peak river runoff arrives on average ten days earlier."

These conditions are conducive to more and bigger forest fires, stressed-out late summer streams, and bark beetle outbreaks. Some forest ecologists forecast that if these trends continue unabated, Montana may end up looking a lot more like Utah by the end of the century.

Those predictions and observations are made over wide areas, combining lots of “noisy” data into neat numbers and orderly graphs. Those are useful tools for some questions, but on the ground we know that what happens in any one natural place in any given spring depends on a swirling host of local factors; from particular blizzards, to how certain stands of trees catch the wind, down to the quirks of individual bears and birds and bugs.

Guidebooks and distant experts can only tell you so much – and accepted truths are sometimes based on musty folklore or remote sensing. In some realms of natural history and science there is no substitute for boots on the ground.

Keen and consistent observations of local patterns are important for understanding larger-scale changes. Scientific researchers and land managers of many sorts are paying more attention to how global trends play out in particular places, and how local observations can illuminate larger processes. Meshing these levels of knowledge is a big challenge. But it is worth doing – our society needs a working understanding of both the continental and the local scales to avoid being blindsided by an increasingly dynamic natural world.

Gathering that local natural history is also one of the real joys of living in a wild place like the Seeley-Swan. Observing nature is arguably the most basic of human activities - hunting and gathering societies have depended on the ability to decipher patterns in animals and plants for millenia. Many psychologists believe that a pervasive lack of contact with the natural world is a significant factor in many modern depressions and mental illnesses.

It seems clear to me that reconnecting with the human aptitude for exploring nature is crucial to our individual and collective well-being. And it can be a pretty good time. Over a decade of Northwest Connections field courses we have watched a wide variety of college students fall in love with the Swan Valley. Just two months of paying close attention to the rhythms of this valley and its community can be a transformative experience for people who have not had that sort of opportunity. “Nature deficit disorder” is definitely not only a disease of young children.

To do a small part to combat that epidemic, Northwest Connections is going to assault some unsuspecting students with the wildness of a Montana spring on a new program called “Wildlife in the West.” On that course we will investigate the ecological and community issues around bears, wolves, lynx, and native fish with the hope of contributing a bit to our shared understanding of these critters.

Students will travel the valley with longtime local observers; loggers, hunting guides, land managers, trappers, ranchers, and conservation scientists – all of whom have spent years engaged in wildlife issues. We will preserve the observations students make for local reference and scientific research. Students will also share their learning in community discussions and in essays available on our website.

If you are around the Swan and Clearwater drainages this May, keep an eye out for our crew. Stop by and let us know what you have been learning about this place on earth during this crazy spring.

It’s snowing again.