

# Summer Field Note...Montana's Wild Huckleberry

## Eye on the Environment

By Mo Hartmann  
(assisted by Susan Novosel)  
Northwest Connections



Community  
Conservation  
Education

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As a tribute to all of us who are walking around with blue tongues, and blue rimmed lips...and to the many bears and birds growing plumper by the day, we decided to dedicate this week's article to one of Montana's treasured shrubs: Montana's wild huckleberry.

#### Ecology:

Although many different species exist, the most prominent in our area of Northwest Montana is *Vaccinium Globulare*. The wild huck is a finicky plant, mysterious really. The berry crop can be very different from year to year. Their production (or lack thereof) depends on a blanket of environmental conditions. They do grow best in open areas, however, too much sunlight can hinder their growth. They need moist areas, but they don't like it too wet. As such, there needs to be a balancing act between sunlight and moisture. They are best found in elevations between 3500 to 7000 feet and prefer slopes about 25-30 degrees. From talking to folks, it seems like the best berry crops can be found on NE slopes if there is enough light or on SW slopes if there is enough moisture.

Forest fires can enhance huckleberry habitat by allowing more light onto the forest floor. Also, fires release more nutrients into the soil, producing ashy soils upon which huckleberries thrive. Huckleberry plants in turn help the ecosystem after a fire by helping to prevent erosion in recently burned areas.

Since they produce so many berries, one would expect their reproduction to be primarily from seeds. However, this shrubby plant reproduces almost exclusively from rhizominous roots. Another fact that makes this plant so unique to our area is its inability to be propagated. That is an anomaly in today's world, where much of what we ingest comes from domestically grown food.

Although many have tried to cultivate this species, the main inhibitors include a sparse root system that makes transplanting difficult, its inability to absorb nutrients very well, and their need for acidic well-drained soil, which typically are found at higher elevations in western Montana. Many believe that their inability to be domesticated adds to their uniqueness and to Montana's claim to 'huckleberry fame'.

#### Wildlife Use:

The huckleberry is a main food source for many species of wildlife including: deer, birds, rodents, insects and the most well-known...black and grizzly bears. Huckleberries are one of the grizzly bear's favorite foods, consisting of up to 1/3 of their sustenance. It is especially a critical food in the summer and early fall when they are bulking up for hibernation. Female bears rely on

this food source to attain the needed fat deposits necessary for survival through the denning period and for reproductive success. This is especially important for the grizzly bears that have low reproductive rates. Mid-July to mid-September are the height of bear foraging activities. It is important that they forage in areas with dense huckleberry patches, and that these patches are in easily accessible areas. This reduces the energy expended to secure a good 'bite', thus obtaining the sugars and fat needed for survival. Quite simply, huckleberries are to Northern Rocky bears, as salmon are to Alaskan bears.

In low berry crop years like 1998 and 2003, bears search for other sources of food to fatten up before hibernation. Unfortunately this often leads to heightened human/bear conflict as bears end up on roads, train tracks, and as we saw here in the Swan Valley, people's backyards. Furthermore, humans and bears often search out the most accessible areas to harvest the berries, thus leading to more human/bear conflicts.

Many bird species also rely on the huckleberry. I recently spoke with an ornithologist who remarked that when she was banding both the Swainson and Hermit Thrush they observed many with stained feathers around their beaks.... and found much of their scat to be blue!

#### Historical Human Use And Commercial Industry:

The huckleberry has been an important part of the cultural history and social atmosphere in this area. Both the Kootenai and Salish tribes celebrate the start of huckleberry season with ceremonies. They have traditionally dried the fruit for winter use, boiling the berry with porridge. Hucks were also a part of early white settlers' diets however; unlike the Native Americans they mostly canned them for winter use. In fact, rural families in the Swan River Valley relied on home canning as an important household survival strategy.

One resident recounts, "Mother would count on canning hundreds of quarts to have enough food to last over the winter", and everyone in the family helped! Between 1900-1925 families took working vacations where they traveled into the mountains to pick hucks for the winter. It became quite the social event too... "offering young people a legitimate courting opportunity!"

The huckleberry has been and still is an important part of NW Montana's economy. In 2003, huckleberry sales were an estimated \$1.2 million dollar industry. Today's crazed industry does not just include pies and jam, which began in 1949 in Big Fork with the opening of Eva Gates Homemade Preserves Store (the oldest huckleberry business in the State), but now soap, honey, chocolate, beer,

and even BBQ sauce are made from huckleberries. The Montana Business Bureau did an extensive study in 1996, and at that time 14 major commercial huckleberry product manufacturers existed. Both the uniqueness of this wild berry to our area and the “Made in Montana” sticker has played a major role to enhance sales.

Since this is a thriving industry in Western Montana there are a few issues that warrant consideration in order to ensure the vitality of this berry. Some commercial pickers and buyers have claimed that mechanical harvesting practices can damage the long-term sustainability of the berry bushes.

“Rakes” used to maximize the harvest can impact future berry production. They can remove foliage, resulting in 15-25 % reduction in starch storage in the plant. Huckleberry bushes need to maintain their leaves after the berry crop is over to store photosynthate for future energy demands. However, some involved with the industry do say that if the ‘rakes’ are used properly, few leaves will fall. To reduce damage to the crop, hand picking is the preferred method promoted by many land management agencies. For more information on restrictions, it is a good idea to check with your local Ranger District.

Huckleberries are a prized species for wildlife (especially bears) and for humans (both culturally and economically). Balancing ecological needs with human needs will be important, especially in years where the harvest is low. Educating pickers and buyers about wildlife needs will help to ensure this balance while also allowing the Forest Service to gain important local ecological knowledge about resource production and sustainability.

The huckleberry is a treasured part of Western Montana’s past, present, and (sure to be) future history. This little berry has aided in strengthening community ties in many ways, which is illustrated in the following excerpt from the *Seeley Swan Pathfinder*, October 3, 1996.

The infamous \$1000 huckleberry pie made by Evelyn Jette!

“Small town bake sales don’t usually get much attention. But when Evelyn Jette’s homemade huckleberry pie sold for \$1,000 at a recent auction, people sat up and took notice....When the price of the pie got to \$600, the bidders refused to continue until they could have a bite, to see how good it really was. A few munches later, and the pie sold for \$1,000....’It’s unbelievable...kind of crazy. It could only happen in the Swan Valley,’ the famous Swan Valley pie baker said.”

Although Evelyn is no longer with us, as a tribute, here is another of her prized huck recipes and a favorite amongst NwC staff.... enjoy!

#### HUCKLEBERRY CAKE

1/2 Cup butter

1 Cup sugar

3 eggs

2 Cups flour

1/2 tsp. salt

1 tsp. baking soda

1 tsp. cardamon

1 Cup sour cream

1 tsp. vanilla

2 Cups huckleberries

Cream butter and sugar. Add eggs, one at a time. Sift dry ingredients and add alternately with liquid. Stir in berries. Bake in 9x13” pan for 30 min. or until done, in 350 oven.