DANCE OF THE DEAD BRANCHES

One of the treats of living in a winter-wet, summer-dry climate such as we
have here in western Oregon is observing how different organisms respond
to the change from the wet season to the dry season and back again. Most
of us have noticed how licorice fern fronds unfurl after the first fall
rains, stay green all winter, then go dormant as the summer drought
begins. Most other plants—for example, all broadleaf, deciduous trees—
leaf out in early spring, then go dormant in fall.

It's the same with animals. Some, such as the rough-skinned newt, we see
mostly during the wet season. But most neo-tropical songbirds are around
only during the summer, and then migrate back to the tropics to spend the
winter.

There's nothing new about all this. Seasonal changes in the natural world
are part of life, especially in the middle latitudes or temperate zone.
But what is interesting is that some dead things, too, move with the
seasons! You've probably noticed how Douglas-fir cones close during wet
weather, then reopen when it's dry. They can do this again and again:
That's certainly fascinating to observe, but my personal favorite is what
I call the Dance of the Dead Branches.

Most conifers native to western Oregon have a single trunk with lateral
branches that extend more or less horizontally from the trunk. As long
as the lateral branches remain alive, they don't change position much from
one season to the next. But in most forest settings, the lower branches
of conifers die from being shaded out by the developing upper canopy. Over
time, they break off or rot away, leaving the long, branch-free conifer
trunks we associate with forests here. But just because they're dead does
not mean that they're immobile.

On the unmaintained or "animal" trails in the West Cascades that I frequent
year-round on a weekly basis, the movement is very obvious. During the
winter, I pass unhindered along my favorite trails. But with the arrival
of summer, I find dead branches getting in my face where, only a few weeks
before, there were none! As summer progresses, the "problem" intensifies.
I used to snap these relatively small branches off, only to find more in
my face a week or two later.

But every year, after the arrival of the fall rains, the branches magically
lift themselves back up out of my way—and out of the way of the deer and
elk, especially those with antlers, who share these trails with me. And
we all smile and say, "Yay!" because for the next six months or so, we'll
be able to proceed unhindered along these trails until the branches come
down again the following summer.
The movement of the dead branches is not by any means crude. They don't stick exactly straight out in winter, then straight down in summer. On the contrary, the dance of the dead branches is an elegant one: In winter, they curve down slightly, and in summer they curve down dramatically, not unlike the arms of a ballerina gracefully jumping up and down on stage.

![Winter and Summer Branches](image)

This marvelous seasonal phenomenon can be observed anywhere in Oregon. But it's most dramatic on younger conifers in forest undercanopies or in plantations. So keep your eyes open—and your hands up, to protect your face!

Whitey Lueck
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**Note:** Because we are products of the Age of Rationalism—where everything that happens has a reason that can be explained—you're probably wondering what the physiological basis is for this branch movement. In Whitey's World, however, not everything needs to be explained! As John Lennon said about people who spent their time trying to analyze what the Beatles' music "meant": If you worry about the meaning of the music, you don't enjoy it as much.

So don't worry about why the branches move like this. Just enjoy watching the movement and marveling at the wonder of it!