

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.

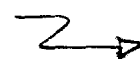
It's the same with animals. Some, such as the rough-skinned newt, we see mostly during the wet season. But most neo-tropical songbirds are around only during the summer, and then migrate back to the tropics to spend the winter.

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 reöpen 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.

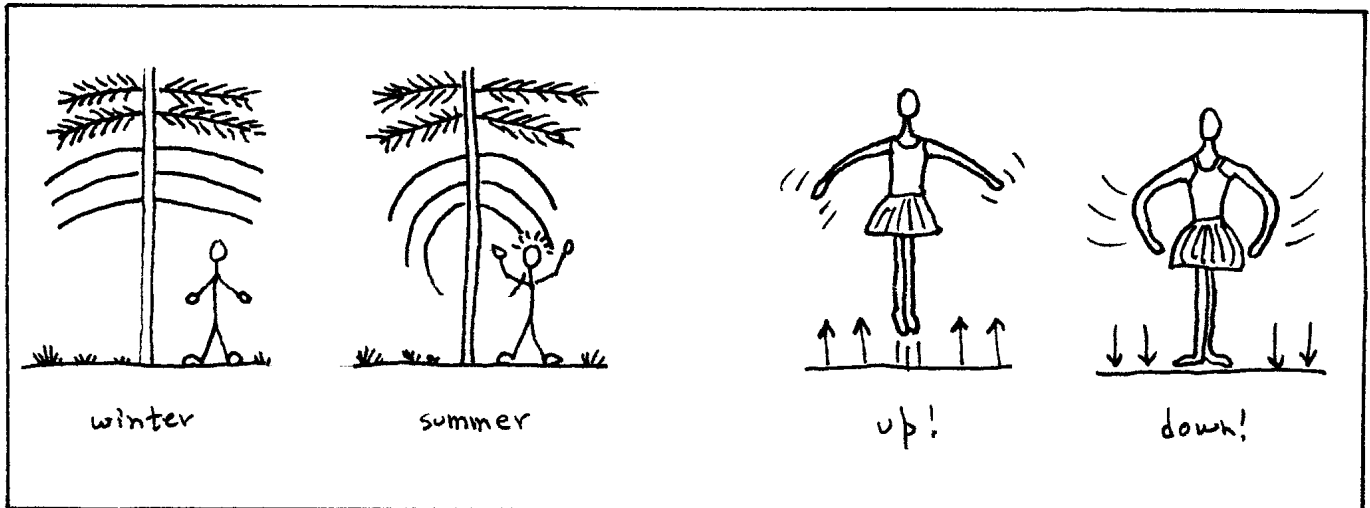
Most conifers native to western Oregon have a single trunk with lateral branches that extend more or less horizontally from the trunk. As long as the lateral branches remain alive, they don't change position much from one season to the next. But in most forest settings, the lower branches of conifers 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.



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
8 August 2006

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!

