

A Brief History of Camas Meadows, Chelan County

By Leslie Ann Kutz



Camas Meadows, or Camas Land as it is sometimes called, is a natural wet meadow sitting at roughly 3000'. It is located in the Wenatchee Mountains, a sub range of the of Central Cascades in Chelan County, Washington State.

It is a special place to me, it is my home. It turns from a brown mucky wetland in early spring with bits of new life shooting up through the muck, to a brilliant green with patches of blues, purples and yellows from wildflower blooms in the late spring. In summer it is a brilliant green-gold fading to golden brown with bright yellow-orange stands of Quaking Aspen. In winter it is a sparkling example of a winter wonderland. All, at least from my western vantage point, with the towering rugged Cascades in the backdrop.



Early Spring Melt



Blue Camas and Mules Ear Bloom in May



Creamcicle Summer Sunset



Fall Aspen



Winter Snow

Geology

The geology of Camas Meadows is unique to the Wenatchee Mountains. When the Chumstick Formation occurred, magma intruded between layers of sandstone and shale and a 500' thick horizontal sheet of rock formed called a basaltic rock sill. This sill, shaped like a shallow basin, is resistant to erosion and holds water.

In the winter the meadow fills with snow which melts in the spring and creates a seasonal wetland or marsh, the Wenatchi People described it as a lake, and it may have been much wetter in the past. Over the course of the summer the meadow dries out completely and this creates a unique habitat for flora and fauna too.

Indigenous History

For 100's, or maybe 1000's of years the meadow was managed by the local indigenous tribes, the Wenatchi People and their ancestors. They would clear the meadow using fire and other tools to increase the growth of important food and medicinal plants.

The Wenatchi were a nomadic people, and tribes or families would gather during the months of June and July for harvesting and socializing. Marriages would be arranged, gambling games would be played and they would hold competitive horse races. It is thought that horses were the first livestock animals to be brought into the meadow in the 1700's when the tribes first acquired horses.

Originally, tule matt lodges were created for their summer lodging, but around the time horses were introduced those gave way to buffalo skin teepees, which were eventually replaced by a lighter canvas teepee. The Wenatchi people gathered in the meadow into the 1930's. Their forced removal to the Yakima and Colville reservations probably made the gathering in large numbers too difficult.



Camas Meadows Encampment with Canvas Teepees (photographer unknown)

There are many edible and medicinal plants in and around Camas that were probably gathered by the tribes, but the two that were most important to them that grew in the meadow were Yampa or Wild Carrot and Common or Blue Camas.

Yampah *Perideridia gairdneri* also called wild carrot or wild caraway is part of the carrot family. It likes moist meadows or other open moist areas. Its leaves are thin and narrow, single or opposite along the stem, usually drying out before the the flowers are in bloom. The flowers are white, tiny and in clusters forming the carrot family's signature umble shape, blooming in late July or early August in the meadow.

It's roots were eaten raw, cooked or dried and often pounded into flour. The plant smells of caraway, and the seeds, which were often used as seasoning, taste of anise. The plant also is medicinal and was used to treat sore throats, coughs, digestive ailments and bruising.



Yampah in the Meadow



Yampah Flower Heads

Common Camas *Camassia quamash* also known as Blue Camas is now part of the asparagus family after being reclassified from the lily family. It likes wet meadows and open wet areas, often the leaves begin to emerge when there is still a lot of water in the meadow. It's leaves are basal, long and narrow. The flowers are usually a blue to bluish-purple, varying in value, some being almost white. Twelve or more flowers are clustered toward the top of the stem, blooming in late May through mid June around the meadow.

Camas root was second only to the salmon in importance in the Wenatchi Peoples diet. The bulbs were harvested shortly after flowering so as not to confuse them with the deadly Death Camas. Their bulbs were cooked in earth ovens for days to release their inulin and make them sweet and flavorful. The cooked bulbs could be eaten right away or sun dried for later use.



Blue Camas with The Brothers



Blue Camas Flower

Settler History

In the 1890's European settlers in the area brought sheep up into the meadow during the summer to graze. Eventually permanent homesteads were built and people tried various things to make a living in the meadow. There was a small dairy farm, a lumber mill and various crops were tried. The spring water was an issue, so to lower the water table, the natural streams throughout the meadow were deepened. Growing food was, no doubt a challenge as it often freezes at night well into June and again, starting in September.

In spite of the struggles, people loved the meadow and persisted, both indigenous and immigrant. Wenatchi tribe members still occasionally can be found here harvesting, people still live or have cabins along the meadow, and a bible camp on the southern end of the meadow that began in 1973 is still going strong. However, settlement has taken its toll on the natural meadow, the deepened stream beds lowered the water table creating space for plants that are not so water loving to creep in, non-native plants were introduced, especially grazing grasses which can be found in large swatches of the meadow, and harm from tractors to snowmobiles can be found throughout the meadow.



The Snode Ranch Circa. 1945
(photographer unknown)



The Snode Ranch in the Snow
Circa. 1960's (photographer unknown)

Washington State Department of Natural Resources or DNR and Natural Area Preserves or NAP's

In 1970 it was discovered that two rare wildflowers grew in the meadow almost exclusively, the Wenatchee Larkspur and the Wenatchee Checkermallow.

The Wenatchee Larkspur *Delphinium viridescens* is a native perennial in the buttercup family that likes boggy meadowlands. The leaves are broad with three lobes which are deeply dissected. The flowers are small green to yellow with a purple tinge on the inner petals, and are located along the top portion of the stem. The Wenatchee Larkspur typically blooms in July in and around the meadow.

The Wenatchee Checkermallow *Sidalcea oregano var. calve* in the mallow family, is also a native perennial that also thrives in moist meadows. The lower brand basal leaves are shallowly lobed, where the upper leaves on the stem are deeply divided. The flowers are a deep pink and cluster in groups on the tops of the stems.



Wenatchee
Checkermallow



Wenatchee
Checkermallow
Flower Detail



Wenatchee
Larkspur



Wenatchee
Larkspur
Flower Detail

Around the same time that the two rare flowers were found in the meadow, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources or DNR, was creating these new entities called Natural Area Preserves or NAP's. NAP's are areas preserved to protect "the best remaining examples of many ecological communities including rare plant and animal habitat."

The DNR was very interested in acquiring the meadow for a NAP, and drew a boundary line around the area that they wanted to acquire. At that time however, all of the meadowland was under private ownership. They caught a break in 1989 when a local landowner, Lily Snode, bequeathed 175 acres to the Nature Conservancy which, in turn, gave it to the DNR for management. Thus the Camas Meadow Natural Area Preserve was born.

Today the NAP has grown to about 2018 acres, most of the meadow. The DNR is actively working in the meadow to create a habitat which is favorable to the Checkermallow and the Larkspur, and in doing so, are creating an ecology not unlike the one left by the Wenatchi.

The meadow is frequently burned in the late fall to promote growth of native plants and grasses, selective herbicides are used to inhibit invasive species, and human made "beaver dams" have been created in the stream beds to distribute water to areas that have been dried out due to the deepening of streams. Next fall the DNR is raising the culvert that runs under the road in hopes of raising the water table. It will be fascinating to see the changes that brings.

Today

Most of the meadow is now part of the NAP, but there is still some private property around the meadow, roughly 75 acres of actual meadowland are in private hands. Landowners support the goals of the NAP and work with them in their efforts.

The surrounding land is forested with a mix of mostly Douglas Fir and Ponderosa Pine, with Grand Firs here and there, and some Western Larch on the slopes to the west. That land is a mix of private owners, DNR, National Forest Land, BLM and old Weyerhaeuser land which has been acquired by an LLC with the goal of selling it as public land.

The DNR discourages people from walking in the meadow, but there are lots of old roads and trails on public land to explore around the meadow. You can get up onto the ridges surrounding the meadow for some spectacular views of both the meadow and the mountains, and foothills surrounding.

Wildlife

Much wildlife can be found in the meadow from large populations of Yellow Pine Chipmunks and Coyotes, to a rarer moose or wolf passing through. Many birds can be found in the summer months and well as the resident Ravens, Junco's and Stella's Jays. The biggest draw, however, is the elk herd, around 80 individuals currently, which reside here from mid-April through rut in October, by the first snows they have all headed down the mountain.



Camas Elk Rut



Camas Coyote in a Snowstorm

References and Resources

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Yampah:

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Common Camas:

- Pojar and McKinnon (1994) Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast - Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and Alaska

Larkspur:

- https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp_nh_devi2.pdf

Checkermallow:

- https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/amp_nh_siorc2.pdf
- https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/Rare_Plants/conservation/success/checkermallow_recovery.shtml

* Unless otherwise specified photos are my own.