

Discovering Renewal, Diversity, and Beauty in Burned Landscapes

By Cheryl Ames

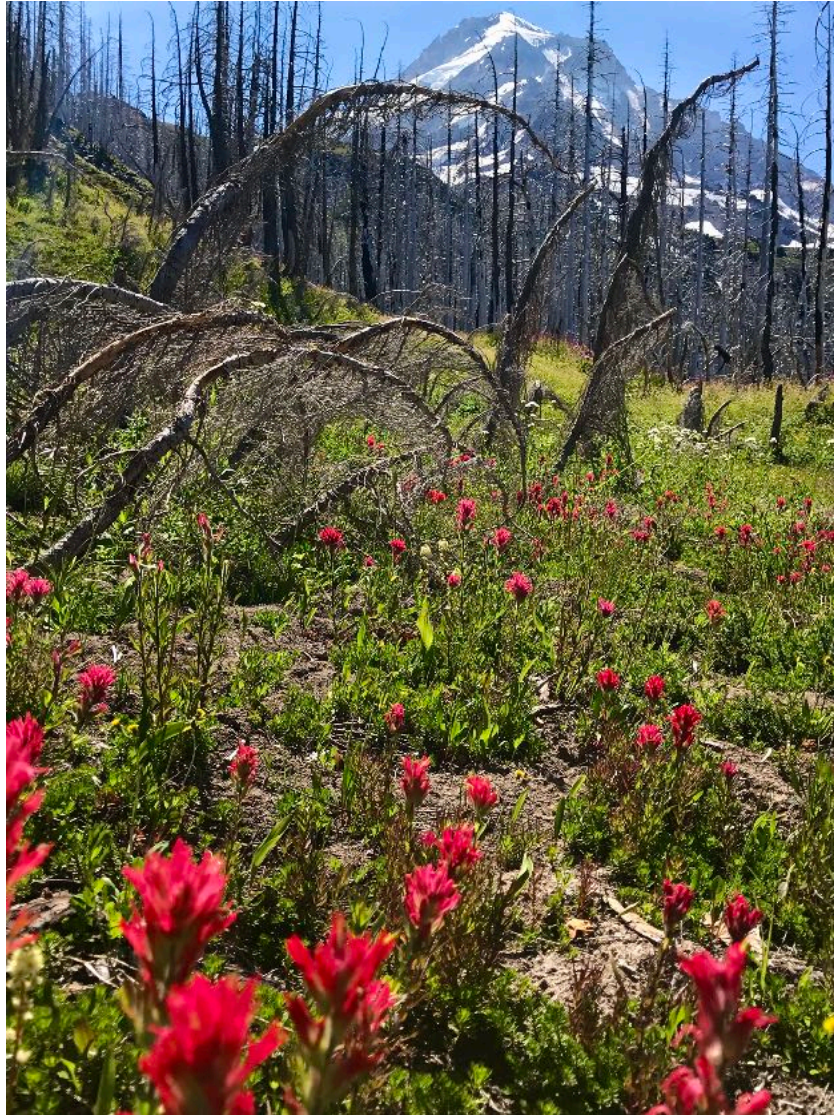


Photo: Cheryl Ames, Mount Hood area

For many years, I viewed burned forests with sadness and disappointment. When hiking, I preferred lush green landscapes and towering trees. If I came across a burned area, I often hurried through it. When taking photographs, I would try to avoid including blackened trunks and scorched hillsides in my images.

Over time, I also came to dread the arrival of summer. News reports of wildfires across Oregon and the West seemed to bring only stories of loss and destruction. Fire appeared to be an enemy of the forests I loved.



Photo: Cheryl Ames, Mount Hood area

Then I encountered the work of forest ecologist Richard Hutto and began learning about the remarkable role fire plays in western forests. What I discovered challenged many of my assumptions. While severe fires can be dramatic and sometimes devastating for people, they are also a natural and essential part of

many forest ecosystems. Far from creating biological wastelands, burned forests often become some of the most vibrant and diverse habitats in the landscape.

A New Way of Seeing

As I learned more about post-fire ecology, I found myself revisiting photographs I had taken over the years in burned areas. To my surprise, many of them were strikingly beautiful.



Photo: Cheryl Ames, northeast Oregon

The photos revealed something I had not fully recognized at the time. Dark, fire-scarred trunks stood against bright green hillsides and blue sky. Wildflowers filled openings where dense forests had once stood. Sunlight illuminated standing snags, creating dramatic patterns of light and shadow. Somehow, despite my belief that I disliked burned landscapes, I had repeatedly photographed them.

Perhaps I had already sensed their beauty without understanding their significance. Learning about the ecological importance of fire changed the way I interpreted what I was seeing. The beauty was no longer simply visual. It was also a story of renewal.

Life Returns Quickly



Photo: Cheryl Ames, Columbia River Gorge

One of the most surprising lessons for me was how quickly life responds after a fire. Within months, wildflowers can blanket the forest floor. Fireweed, lupine, and other flowering plants often flourish in newly opened spaces. Nutrients released by fire help fuel new growth, and sunlight reaches areas that may have been shaded for decades. Not only is there an abundance of new growth, but individual plants can stunningly flourish, such as fireweed which can tower over my head, or Columbia lilies with an astounding number of blooms, like the one below.



Photo: Cheryl Ames, Columbia River Gorge

The changes are not limited to plants. Burned forests attract a remarkable variety of wildlife. Beetles colonize fire-killed trees, creating an abundant food source for birds. Woodpeckers arrive to feed and nest in standing snags. Species such as the black-backed woodpecker are so closely tied to burned forests that they depend on

these habitats for their survival. What may appear lifeless from a distance is often bustling with activity.

Forest Diversity in Action

Fire also creates diversity across the landscape. Instead of a forest being the same age and structure everywhere, fire produces a mosaic of conditions. Some areas remain largely untouched, while others experience moderate or high levels of change.



Photo: Cheryl Ames, Mount Hood area

This variety creates opportunities for many different species. Young forests, mature forests, open meadows, shrublands, and snag-rich habitats can all exist side by side. The result is a more diverse and resilient ecosystem.

What I once saw as destruction, I now understand as part of a dynamic process that has shaped western forests for thousands of years.

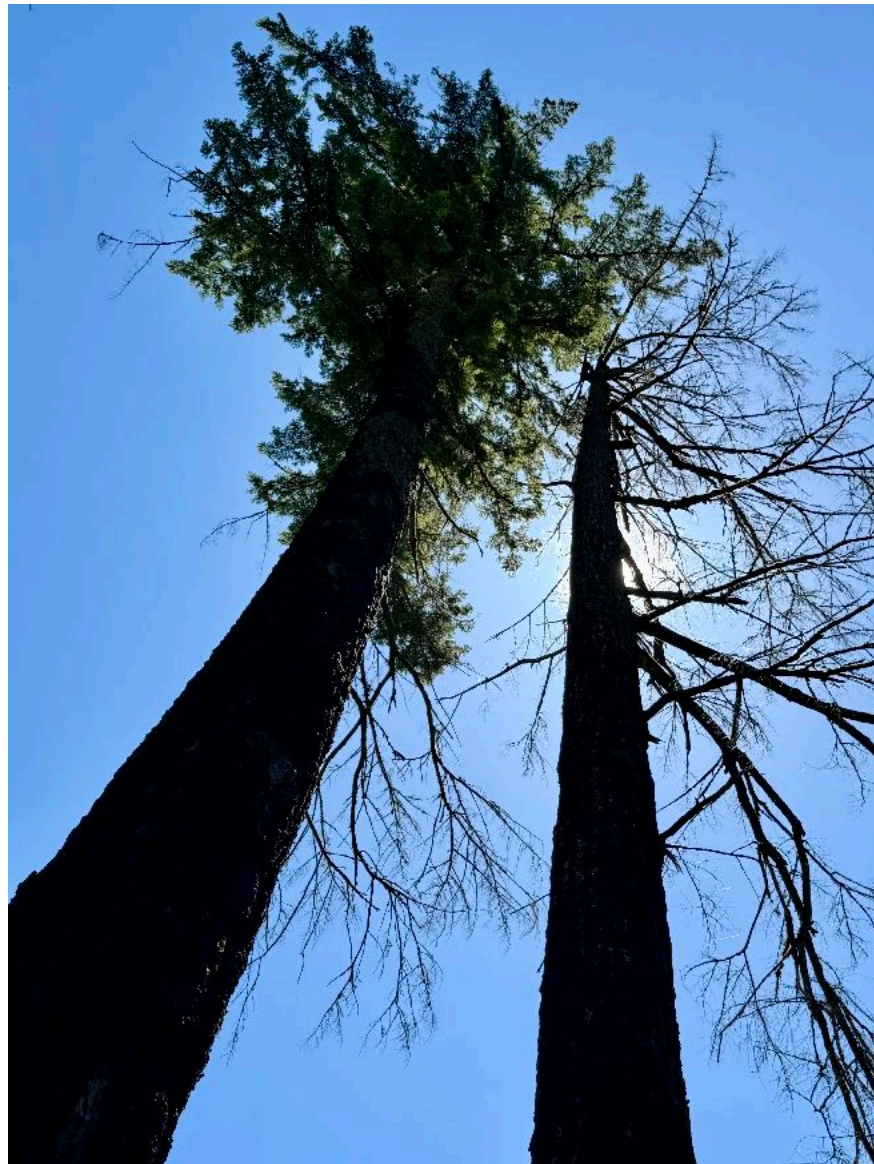


Photo: Cheryl Ames, Columbia River Gorge, two burned trees, one alive, one not

Finding Beauty in Contrast

Today, I find myself appreciating burned landscapes in ways I never expected. There is beauty in the contrast between blackened trunks and bright new growth, between trees that survived fire and those which did not. There is beauty in the resilience of wildflowers emerging from ash-covered soil. There is beauty in hearing woodpeckers tapping on snags or watching birds forage among standing dead trees.

Most of all, there is beauty in understanding that what appears to be an ending is the beginning of something new, the spectacular process of nature.

Fires will always be challenging, especially when they threaten homes and communities and make our air unhealthy to breathe. Yet learning about the ecological role of fire has helped me see burned forests differently. Instead of viewing them only through the lens of destruction and loss, I now see them as places of renewal, diversity, and extraordinary life. And as a photographer, I also now see them as places of unique beauty.

The next time I walk through a burned landscape, I suspect I will slow down rather than hurry through. I will look more carefully at the wildflowers, the birds, the insects, and the young trees beginning their journey. And I will remember that forests have long been shaped by fire—and that some of nature's most remarkable stories unfold in its aftermath.

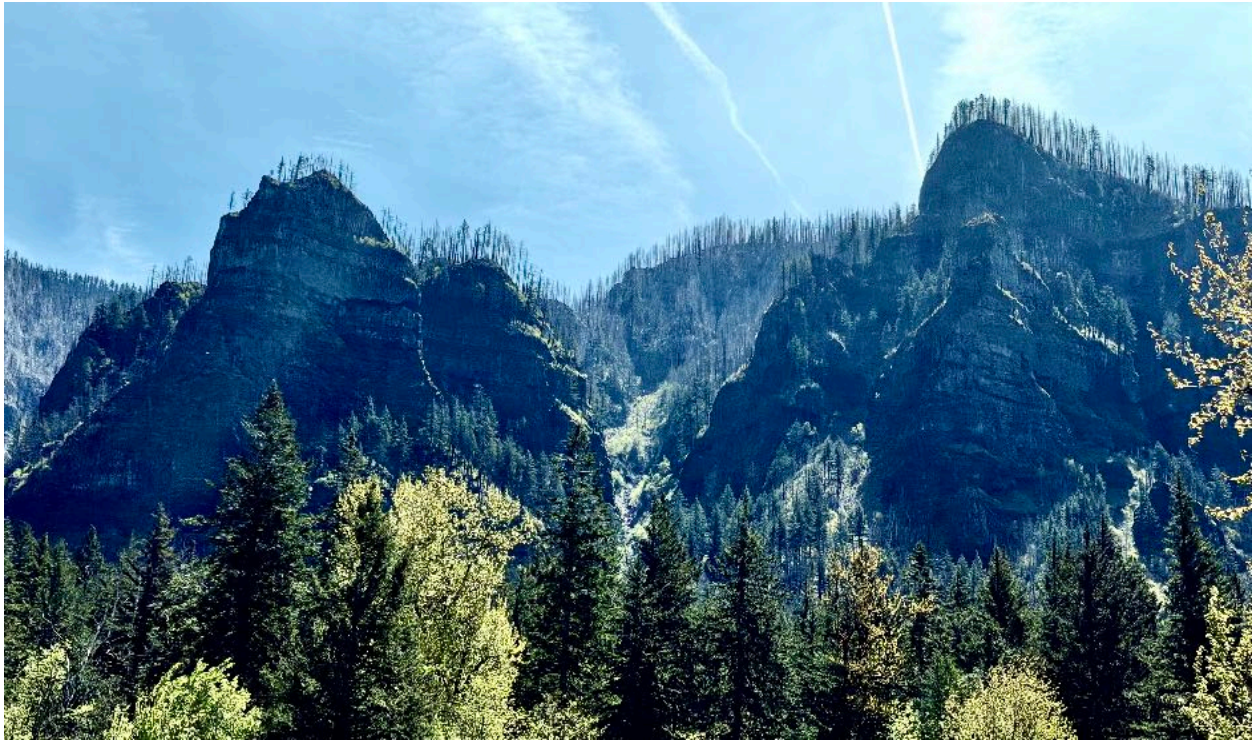


Photo: Cheryl Ames, Columbia River Gorge

Resources and Further Reading

Richard Hutto, *A Beautifully Burned Forest*, Springer Press, 2025.

Rachel Monaghan, *The Best Hikes in Oregon to See Wildfire Scars (and Recovery)*, City Cast Portland, September 30, 2025, portland.citycast.fm.

Matt Wastradowski, *Why You Should Visit an Oregon Wildfire-Burned Forest this Summer*, Portland Monthly—Travel and Outdoors, May 25, 2023, pdxmonthly.com.