

# Pretty Ugly

Hating the beautiful hawkweed. BY RICK BASS



BY STEVE SHERMAN

**J**ULY: First baby robins on the porch, where they fledge each year, first Pacific tree frog in the garden, seeking each day now the watering can's moisture. First bellflower blooms, first twinflower, first monk's hood, a brighter purple than any king's robe. First wild strawberries—so much color!—and, unfortunately, but inescapably, the first blossoms of hawkweed, a noxious invasive weed that is infinitely more aggressive than even the nuclear waste of knapweed and thistle. The knapweed's bad, invading dry sites, and displacing native grass directly—nothing eats knapweed, and as it spreads, it chokes out the grasses that the elk herds rely on—but the hawkweed grows everywhere, dry or wet, shade or sun, and seems to know no limits. It displaces all of the complex and crafted native flowering plants—lupine, bellflower, kinnikinnick, paint-

brush, yarrow, Oregon grape, wild strawberry—and while it's bad enough, from a biological perspective, the colonization seems also to taunt a lover of wildness and diversity from an aesthetic standpoint, for the blossoms of the hawkweed, by itself, are so damn beautiful: a brilliant, almost hallucinogenic orange, the roadsides and old logging roads now ablaze, like fields of poppies.

(Though in these monochromatic sweeps of such rich, even luscious, orange, I think that even someone unfamiliar with the ecology of the region might sense the ominous danger beneath the beauty, might see the mosaic of diversity throughout the forest, and notice the homogeneous and wide blazes of orange as the anomaly, and the dis-uniter, and not possessing the cohesive cooperating, fitted spirit of the place, no matter how beautiful the orange might seem, in and by itself.)

So there is a sleepiness in July, a summer leisure—an in-betweenness—though there are also the beginnings, already, even in the midst of summer vacation, of a rising responsibility, for those weeds must be picked if they aren't sprayed. And for as long as we can combat them by hand, we will, for it seems that to bring spray and poison into our lives, and near the marsh, with its tender amphibians, and into our watershed, and our lives, would be to admit defeat—what good are the natives, if they possess poison in their veins?—and even if we did decide to try to poison the hawkweed and knapweed and dandelion and thistle, and this year, increasingly, the St. John's wort, the same

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poison that kills these broadleaf weeds would also kill the natives.

Instead, we pick. We get down on our hands and knees in the tall waving grasses of July, and pull up, by the matted, tuberous roots, the insidious runners of moisture-robbing hawkweed. Like hunters, we know where the weeds are likely to recur each year, and we keep pulling them, hoping to weaken and stress the invasive weeds so the natives can out-compete them. We remain vigilant for new outcrops, too. Our battle is just one tiny battle in the wilderness here at marsh's edge—we will change nothing, will at best only buy a little more time—but we have not yet reached a level of acceptance where doing nothing is tolerable, and so we pick, and pick, in July: kneeling in the mixture of tall grass and weeds, surrounded by mosquitoes, sweating, pulling, stuffing trash bags full of weeds. It is such a break-even battle—some years, our progress is visible, though each year we have to pull harder—and again, from the entire landscape's perspective, two million acres of national forest, so ultimately futile—that we realize early on our efforts are really like nothing else so much as prayer and penance to that landscape—a sort of Zen exercise, or tithing to the land, and to the marsh—though I can't help but wonder too, some years, if the truly Zen or prayerful thing to do would be to stop fighting loss and change, and to simply let the weeds of the world come rolling in.

Each year, however—each July—I pick each weed, every weed, that I see, on our property at least, as well as on my hikes through the woods; and I suspect that even when I am old, I will still be picking them, out of some deep and stubborn allegiance to my own perhaps arbitrary and singular concepts of integrity. And I think that it is not that I hate weeds so much as it is that I love this landscape, this incredible ecosystem, so deeply, just as it is—in the fullness of its incredibly unique diversity, ten thousand years in the making.

What I mean to say is, even the weed pulling in July is one of the ways I relate to this landscape now, is an aspect, a component, of that relationship, so that it is not even so much a matter of whether I “win” or “lose” (I'll lose, for sure; no one can defeat time), but rather that I continue on in that relationship, according to my beliefs and values, for as long as I am able—which, I like to imagine, is for as long as I am alive. 🐾