



September 23, 2004

Here's the Fall Color Hotline report for the Northern Region of the USDA Forest Service for September 23, 2004. The Northern Region includes national forests and national grasslands in the states of Montana, northern Idaho, western North Dakota, and northwestern South Dakota. This part of the country boasts spectacular landscapes, which are even more picturesque when dressed in fall colors. The show usually starts in the highest country, so we suggest southern Montana for early colors. Western Montana and northern Idaho tend to show color a few weeks later.

The appearance of fall foliage depends on when we get our first frost. By the second week of October, fall color should be at its peak.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (southwest Montana)

It's prime time in southwest Montana. Aspen and willow are changing in many areas. Drive between Anaconda and Wise River on the Mill Creek Road. Drive the Blacktail Road southeast of Dillon or in Madison County, drive the 50 mile Gravelly Range Road.

Around Butte on Interstates 15 and 90, you can see yellow on the hills below the Lady of the Rockies statue and in Elk Park, north of Butte on I-15.

Color along the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway, between Wise River and the Grasshopper Valley, has just passed its peak.

Clearwater National Forest (northern Idaho)

A recent spate of unseasonably cool weather has brought an early autumn to the high country, and summer's earthy shades of green are hastily making room for fall's carnival of color.

Forest Service Road 250, from Bungalow to the Kelly Forks campground, affords travelers an impressive panorama of tamarack (larch) on the south side of the North Fork Clearwater River. These large deciduous trees, with a conical crown of horizontal branches, are light green in the spring and summer, but turn brilliant yellow with the onset of frost and cooler weather. In the Kelly Creek vicinity, leaf peepers will delight in

vibrant stands of bright gold aspens, huckleberry brush and hillsides spattered with yellow dogbane and crimson-colored sumac.

Autumn sight-seers traveling along the Mush Saddle Road #711 will enjoy broad stands of Quaking Aspen, also known as Trembling or Golden Aspen, in the vicinity of Moscow Bar, approximately 5 miles west of Cold Springs Peak. The Aspen's thin, abruptly short-pointed leaves, which are usually a shiny green above and a dull green beneath, turn an eye-catching golden-yellow when late September's chill winds begin to blow.

Abandoned timber harvest units in the vicinity of Lost Hat Saddle, Forest Roads 5147 and 5173, five miles southeast of Pierce, Idaho, are currently bursting with fall color. Rocky Mountain Maples are ablaze in shades of crimson, while deep-purple clusters of huckleberry brush dot the surrounding landscape. Mountain ash and serviceberry are also turning, and nearby tamarack and cottonwood add a spectacular touch of gold. Travelers can expect heavy hunting traffic.

Gallatin National Forest (south central Montana)

The colors on the Gallatin Forest are emerging quickly. In the Main Boulder Creek drainage leaves are quickly coloring the hillside with vibrant hues of orange, yellow, and red. Driving the Gallatin Canyon offers a spectacle of fall colors. The Taylor Fork Road offers sightseers a great photography opportunity. Hurry though - the colors are turning quickly and will probably not last too long if the cold weather continues.

Helena National Forest (west central Montana)

Take the 12-mile drive along Blackfoot River Canyon west of Lincoln, MT (Highway 200). You'll see touches of gold from the cottonwood trees along the river bottom and from larch and aspen scattered on the slopes above the river.

Lewis and Clark National Forest (central Montana)

We have color! Here are some suggested locations to tour:

Rocky Mountain Ranger District

Take the Teton Canyon Rd, 25 miles northwest of Choteau. This road is paved for the most part to Forest Service boundary, and then gravel. You'll spot the yellow of cottonwoods and aspen and the red and orange in ground cover.

In Sun Canyon, 18 miles northwest of Augusta, there is a gravel road (which can be sloppy when it rains) that's showing some yellows and ambers.

In Benchmark, 25 miles west of Augusta, there's a gravel road, (again, sloppy when it rains) where yellows and reds are starting to show. There's been snow, so colors will be coming on fast next week.

Belt Creek Ranger District

Take Hwy 89 (Kings Hill Scenic Byway) to view the yellow of cottonwoods and aspen.

Judith Ranger District

In the South Fork area past Utica, you can't miss the gold and yellow.

Musselshell Ranger District

Leaves are starting to turn yellow at Spring Creek in the Little Belts and up in the Castle Mountains and Big and Little Snowy Mountains.

White Sulphur Springs Ranger District

The best roads to see aspen's yellow colors are the Sheep Creek Road (#119) and the road through Belt Park (#6511). As a general rule, the higher elevations are in full color, but just beginning to change as you drop in elevation to 5000 feet

Nez Perce National Forest (northern Idaho)

The fall colors are just now starting to turn in the high country near Iron Mountain on the Moose Creek Ranger District. You can see shades of yellows and reds among the varieties of brush (thimbleberry, huckleberry, and alder). The mountain maple and western larch are also just beginning to show their yellow hues, and the mountain ash is adding a little red to the landscape palate. In two weeks colors should be at their peak in this area.