

# Hiking for Huckleberries



# Palisades is the Place to Pick

The trees shimmer with the emerald green of late summer. The bushes sparkle with the ruby red of early fall. There are only a few days left in the sweetest season of the year and **Charles Cavanaugh** isn't going to waste them. He drives two hours from Idaho Falls into the heart of the Palisades Ranger District near the South Fork of the Snake River for the huckleberry harvest.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KRIS MILLGATE

## THE PATCH

Cavanaugh parks his wheels along the dirt road then heads out on foot with a backpack and an empty coffee can. At just under 100 years in age and just over 100 pounds in weight, he seems frail until you see him move with the grace of a heron on

the hillside. "I need my hands to grab the trees and bushes," says Cavanaugh. "Gosh, they're better walking sticks than holding one."

No walking stick. No rest. He climbs for almost an hour making sure the world

doesn't pass by without him taking notice. He comments on the changing leaves, the birds in the branches, the sign of a bear once busy with bathroom duties. He stops only once to point out his destination—the lone dead wood just below the ridge that crooks slightly to the left. His favorite huckleberry patch starts at the base of it. "This isn't my huckleberry patch," he says. "Everybody in the country can come up here. All they have to do is walk."

## A Local Favorite

"This morning I arose very early and as hungry as a wolf. I had eaten nothing yesterday except one scant meal of the flour and berries, except the dried cakes of berries, which did not appear to satisfy my appetite as they appeared to do those of my Indian friends. I found on inquire of McNeal that we had only about two pounds of flour remaining. This I directed him to divide into two equal parts and to cook the one half this morning in a kind of pudding with the berries as he had done yesterday, and reserve the balance for the evening. On this new-fashioned pudding four of us breakfasted, giving a pretty good allowance also to the chief, who declared it the best thing he had tasted for a long time. . ."

—Notation by **Captain Meriwether Lewis**  
on reaching the Shoshone Tribe in August of 1805

## THE PROBLEM

The problem is, many people don't walk. They ride and there isn't a legal motorized trail to the patch Cavanaugh is walking to. Riders can reach the patch, pick it clean and be gone before he gets there. Beyond riders in Cavanaugh's preferred area, several illegal off road routes cut through the ranger district. "Some people don't realize it, but the South Fork corridor was identified in 1980 by the Fish and Wildlife service as the single most important wildlife habitat in Idaho," says Bud Alford, US Forest Service Wildlife Biologist. "It's really



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—*Charles Cavanaugh, age 91*

a shame to let a minority of people destroy that corridor.”

The Forest Service closes illegal routes every summer and Cavanaugh hopes its diligence will protect the patch he’s crouched in. He tucks a green MJB coffee can between his knees so he can gather hucks with both hands. His fingers are painted purple in seconds. “The people who wear gloves to pick huckleberries haven’t got a brain in their head,” he says.

## THE PRIZE

It takes 200 huckleberries to cover the bottom of a coffee can. It takes two hours to fill a can. That amounts to about 40,000 berries during just one afternoon collection. The work is hard on his back, but easy on his belly. He says, “They’re real super sweet and very nutritious.”

With a full belly and a full can, he heads

down the hill with a crop he’ll divide into freezer bags and feast on until next year when the berries will be ready for the picking once again. Charles makes this pilgrimage a few times a year between July and September and as he finishes his last trip

of the year, he’s already looking forward to next year. “It’s pleasure walking up the hill. It’s nothing but pleasure,” he says. “Look at this. Look at the surroundings. You can’t beat this. I can live forever in this environment.” [IF](#)

## Huckleberry FYI

Evidence has been found that the huckleberry actually got its name from a simple mistake. Early American colonists, upon encountering the native American berry, misidentified it as the European blueberry known as the “hurtleberry.” Around 1670, it was corrupted to become know as the “huckleberry.”

The expression “I’m your Huckleberry” means just the right person for a given job, and it also means a mark of affection or comradeship to one’s partner or sidekick.

Later, the term came to mean somebody inconsequential. Mark Twain borrowed aspects of this meaning to name his famous character, Huckleberry Finn. His idea, as he told an interviewer in 1895, was to establish that he was a boy “of lower extraction or degree” than Tom Sawyer. **SOURCE:** WHATSCOOKINGAMERICA.NET