

Splash of autumn color shines throughout Lake Tahoe Basin

By Kathryn Reed

SPOONER SUMMIT – Autumn has such a distinct scent. You know it when you smell it.

All along the trail to Marlette Lake on Saturday I kept taking deep breaths. While it is really death that is in the air, the power of it gives me energy.

Perhaps it's the power of nature to cycle through life and death with such relative ease that makes me jealous. We humans have such a difficult time with such monumental things like life and death.

But nature, well, she seems to embrace each season.



Fall is in bloom throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Aspens really do seem to quake in the gentle breeze. Shimmering in the vibrant sun on this rather warm fall day, it's hard to know if the leaves are hanging on for dear life or trying to shake free to move on.

It's like a painter's palette – all these shades of green, yellow and orange decorating the landscape.

A woman on the trail says she was out three days earlier and notes how much more color there is Oct. 13. She's what a New Englander would call a "leaf peeper" – because of her ardent interest in the fall colors and desire to see them at different stages.

The abundance of green proves the peek is still to come. Maybe this week. Temperatures, wind and moisture play a role in this leaf changing business.

It's such a ritual on the East Coast that foliage is tracked for when best to see it. Even the National Weather Service has a color meter.

Mostly it's aspens along the route to Marlette Lake, though this is not the only flora turning color.

So many people are out – and many with their dogs – that it feels a bit like hiking to Winnemucca Lake during the height of wildflower season. But we don't mind. Everyone is so friendly. Those of us with cameras seem to play a game of leapfrog with each other as we keep passing one another.

Instead of taking the North Canyon Trail, we take the Marlette Trail. It's narrower and is not open to mountain bikers. While we didn't see any horses along the way, we saw plenty of evidence they had been out that afternoon.

We aren't sure how far we went. The sign at the trail on the Spooner side says it's 3.75 miles to Marlette Lake. The sign at Marlette says it's 4.5 miles to Spooner.

Along the way we saw people with shirts that said "Hike for Beer" and finally asked about it. There was beer for sale at the lake. We saw people walking back with cups of beer.

Then we were told the amber ale was gone. Yet visions of

aspens seemed to remind me of my thirst that could not be quenched until I got home. Oh, the punishment for getting a late start.

Still, this was an excursion about foliage. And we were not disappointed.

Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe, take Highway 50 east.

Either turn left onto Highway 28 and then park at Lake Tahoe State Park on the right for a fee; or pass that turn and at the true summit park for free on the left.

(That lot can get full and the state park can use your money.)

Note: For a less ambitious hike, but still one full of color, consider the 2.1-mile loop around Spooner Summit. This would be suitable for most ages and abilities.

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