

Great Balls of...Larch?

You can't eat larch balls, and they're hopeless for a game of baseball—they're just a coffee table oddity.

The round balls form after western larch (aka tamarack) trees, the only deciduous conifers in Montana, drop their yellow needles into the shallow water of lakes. The churning wave action molds the needles into a compact sphere that commonly grows to the size of a baseball.

Longtime Seeley Lake Ranger District employee Kay McCoy has received reports of the balls in Holland Lake to the north, and in several lakes in Glacier Park. One larch ball that the painter retrieved from McDonald Lake graces the mantle of Charlie Russell's Great Falls home.

Seeley Lake, however, proudly claims the yellow orbs as their own. The phenomenon is not Seeley Lake's only claim to fame. The town also boasts the nation's largest western larch tree. Surviving countless forest fires and the hungry teeth of a chainsaw, this magnificent giant measures nearly twenty-three feet in circumference and towers 160 feet high. The venerable ancient lives surrounded by its descendants in the Jim Girard Memorial Grove three miles west of town.

The community celebrates the advent of fall with its Tamarack Festival when the larch begin turning brilliant yellow, transforming the Clearwater Valley into a photographer's paradise.

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