



Olympic Olympians

This winter, the global community will focus on Vancouver, British Columbia for the winter Olympic Games. While just over 100 miles away, another community of plants and animals goes about daily life in the sanctuary of Olympic National Park. Over 2,700 years after athletes competed in the original Olympic Games in ancient Greece, English explorer Captain John Meares was sailing off the west coast of North America. In 1788 he sighted the glacier-clad high point of a coastal mountain range and named it Mount Olympus, after the mythical home of the Greek gods. This moniker was later applied to the whole range, the peninsula, a national park, national forest and countless regional businesses, schools and products.

But more than labels and geography tie the winter games to the Olympic Mountains. Just as the games test the endurance, precision, strength and grace of the world's elite athletes, the diverse species in Olympic National Park are tested and shaped by heavy rain, howling winds, pounding surf, avalanching snow, and the voracious mouths of hungry animals. Just as the competition and team cooperation of the games reflect years of training, the biological world reflects millennia of competition, cooperation and shaping by natural forces. But unlike Olympic competitors, many of the Olympic Peninsula's native resident "athletes" compete in both winter and summer games. To win a medal in the natural world is to survive and perpetuate your species.

Citius, altius, fortius

The Olympic motto, which translates to swifter, higher, stronger, could also be the maxim for species in Olympic National Park. To survive—to win their medal—prey need to either outwit or outpace their predators as well as adapt to their environment.

Swifter

For a salmon that means avoiding an orca that can swim over 30 miles per hour. The swiftest human swimmers would be left in the wake of that chase, even at the world record pace of just over 5 mph.

Though the majority of a bear's diet is plants, they can sprint to 35 mph to test the fitness of a black-tail deer. Both species would leave Olympic sprinters—who can reach 22 mph—in the dust, though speed skaters, at 33 mph, might keep up.

Higher

Higher, for a tree, means racing their competitors to the sun to avoid being left in the shadows. Though growth rates slow with age, with enough time a conifer can reach world-record size. In the protected old-growth forests of Olympic National Park, some specimens reach over 200 feet tall and 40 to 50 feet of furrowed girth.

For a cougar higher means being able to bound over 16 feet straight up, much higher than the 7.7-foot leap of the best human high jumper. Snow fleas are even more impressive. Despite its name, this is a tiny springtail that feeds on pollen and other tidbits deposited on the snow surface.



Using a lever-like tail appendage, they catapult themselves to safety, springing an inch or more into the air, a dizzying height for something smaller than a pinhead.

Stronger

What competitor could best an ant for strength? We've all heard of their prodigious feats, how tiny ants can lift 20 or more times their weight as they forage in the old growth forest, while weightlifters struggle to lift four times their weight. But this comparison is unfair to those grimacing human contenders, some of whom manage to hoist nearly 1,000 pounds. The geometry of being small gives ants a natural advantage—physics.

Whether it's a sprinting elk or a limpet clinging to surf-pounded rocks with untiring strength, the rich communities in Olympic National Park ecosystems protect myriad natural athletes. As we gather around televisions this winter to admire the grace and skill of competitors from around the world, perhaps we can also appreciate the other Olympics going on in our back yard every day.