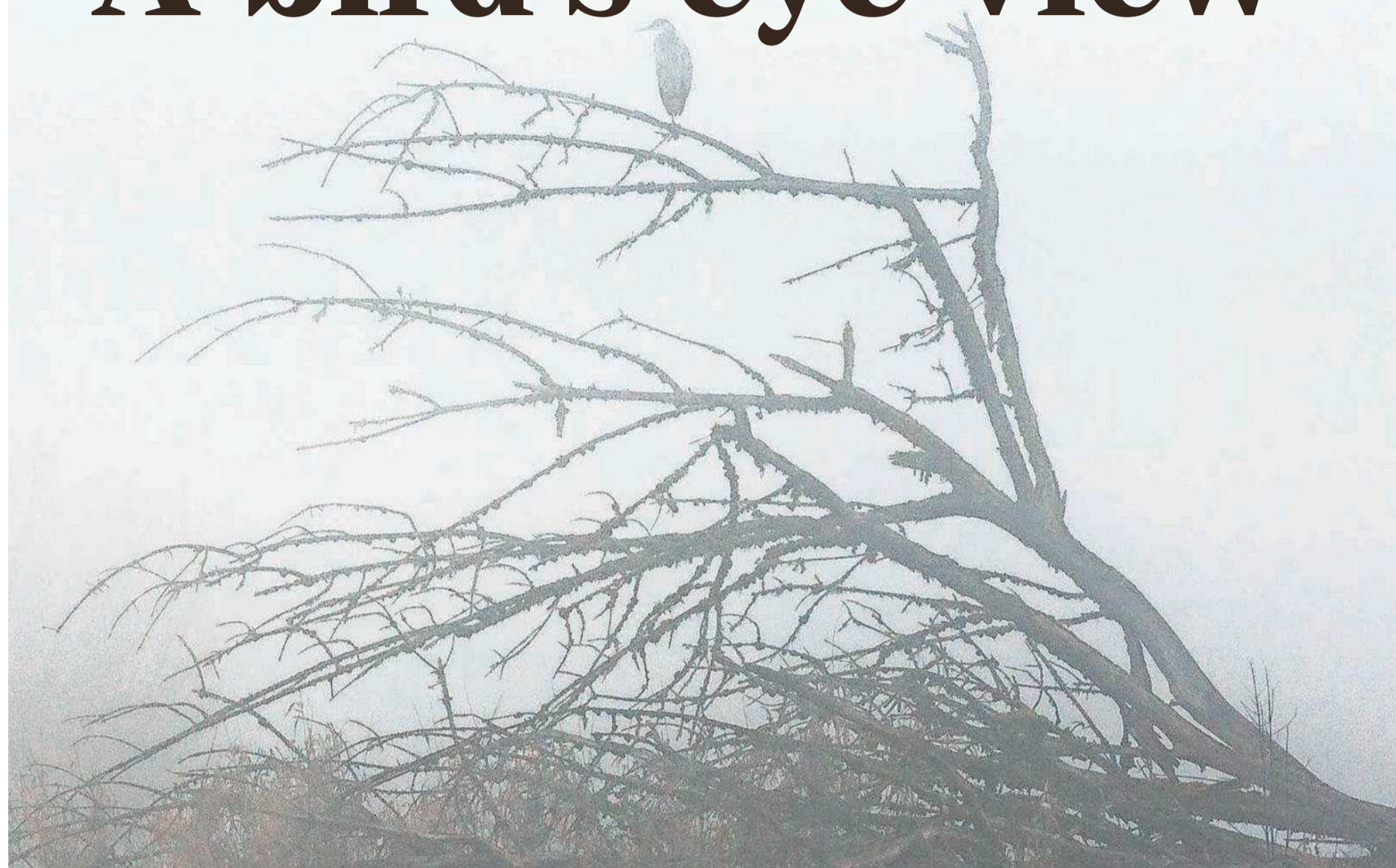


Life in the Valley

A bird's eye view



A heron perches on a branch as fog covers the Ankeny National Wildlife Refuge early on March 4. MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Ankeny Wildlife Refuge proves a hot spot for bird-watching

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Before bridges, Oregon travelers used to enjoy lots of ferry rides. Today you can pair a boat trip across the Willamette River at Buena Vista with an easy hike on a boardwalk through the adjacent, bird-rich wetlands of the Ankeny Bottom Wildlife Refuge.

Just off Interstate 5 south of Salem, the refuge has nearly a mile of boardwalks that lead through jungly, marshy forests to bird-watching blinds where you can spot geese, herons, ducks, and an occasional bald eagle.

Ankeny Bottom was one of three large Willamette Valley tracts set aside in the 1960s to provide habitat for dusky Canada geese—a subspecies that nests in summer at Alaska's Copper River Delta and spends the winter in Oregon.

Birdwatching at the refuge peaks during the April and September migrations, but quite a variety of birds remain here through the winter. Pets and bicycles are not allowed on the trails.

To find the trailhead, drive Interstate 5 halfway between Salem and Albany to Talbot exit 242, head west on Talbot Road for 0.4 miles, turn right on Jorgensen Road for 0.5 miles, turn left on Wintel Road for 1.1 miles, and follow a "Rail Trail Boardwalk" sign left to a large gravel parking area.

The broad, graveled Rail Trail (named for a secretive marsh bird) sets off between hayfields and cottonwood fens. Listen for the melodious warble of redwing blackbirds and for the song sparrows that seem to be singing, "I am a SPARROW."

At a junction after 0.2 miles, turn right onto a boardwalk through an Oregon ash forest that would otherwise be impossible to traverse — submerged in winter and mucky in summer. Note the gray, 5-foot-long streamers of Methuselah's beard, an uncommon lichen that survives only in old, wet forests with very clean air.

After 0.4 miles along the boardwalk, a short spur to the right leads to a large hexagonal bird blind. Sliding wooden windows overlook Wood Duck Pond.

Birdsong is intense here, but you're actually more likely to see birds if you continue 0.2 mile to the



An American Coot takes off from a marsh at the Ankeny National Wildlife Refuge. MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL



A bird watching blind at the refuge. WILLIAM SULLIVAN/STATESMAN JOURNAL



One of the walkways at the refuge. MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

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end of the boardwalk. This final section explores creeks and marshy pond openings where ducklings paddle and great blue herons stalk.

Although red-legged frogs are native in these wetlands, the frog sound you're most likely to notice is the weird, deep thrumming of bullfrogs, non-native intruders.

This time of year you'll have to turn back at the end of the boardwalk, but from April through September you can continue on a loop through the geese's wintering grounds by turning left on a grassy dike road and keeping left at all junctions for a mile. This route circles a marshy field and returns to the junction where you started the boardwalk.

To see the area's other bird blind, return to your car, drive 0.4 mile further west on paved Wintel Road, and pull into a parking area on the right. Here a railed walkway leads 0.2 mile through marshy woods and across Bashaw Creek to its end at a bird blind overlooking Pintail and Egret Marshes. Bring binoculars to watch flocks of geese and shorebirds in the distance.

Round out the day with a visit to the osprey that hang out at the nearby Buena Vista Ferry landing on the Willamette River. To find the landing, drive west another 1.2 miles on Wintel Road and turn left on Liberty Road 2 miles.

The county-run Buena Vista Ferry, a four-car barge, operates 7am to 7pm every day except Christmas and Thanksgiving, but it also shuts down when the Willamette River level at Salem exceeds 15 feet. Levels that high are fairly common in winter, so you might check first at www.nwrfc.noaa.gov.

When the ferry's running, the fee is just \$3 per car, and pedestrians ride free.

The osprey at the ferry nest is on telephone poles beside the landing. These large, black-and-white fish hawks cruise above the Willamette River, then suddenly dive when they spot a fish.

When the ferry's open, you can cross the river to return on a loop via Independence or Albany. When the ferry's closed, return 0.2 mile on Liberty Road and turn right on Talbot Road, a pleasant rural lane that passes a Santiam River viewpoint on its way back to Interstate 5.