

Outdoors

Prehistoric fish makes a comeback



Kelly Dirksen sticks his arm deep into the water to grab lamprey as a team of four harvest the fish from Willamette Falls on July 9, in Oregon City. Dirksen is the fish and wildlife program manager for The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, which operates one of the region’s largest lamprey restoration projects. PHOTOS BY MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Scientists aim to help restore Oregon’s Pacific lamprey population

Tracy Loew Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Kelly Dirksen dives into a hole at the bottom of Willamette Falls, under the shadow of abandoned industrial buildings on the Willamette River just outside Portland.

Within seconds he re-emerges, with a slimy, writhing prehistoric creature in each hand. One uses its jawless, tooth-filled sucker mouth to clamp onto his arm. He shakes it off.

More of the snake-like creatures shoot from their nest in panic. Dirksen and his team of biologists grab them mid-air. Within minutes, they’ve filled a mesh bag, which now looks like Medusa’s head.

It’s a scene that’s been played out for centuries, first by Native American tribes seeking food, and now by scientists trying to restore the ecologically important species, called the Pacific lamprey.

For hundreds of years, lamprey were a plentiful, culturally significant species for tribes from southern California to Alaska.

Often called eels, lamprey actually are fish, although they have no jaws

or fins. They’re the oldest fish alive today, dating back around 450 million years.

But over the past century, they’ve been nearly wiped out by dams, dredging, declining water quality, changing ocean conditions and more. Until recently, they were considered a nuisance and a trash fish.

Now, Willamette Falls is one of the last remaining spots where lamprey can be easily caught, drawing tribes from all over the state for the annual harvest.

“This is a fishery that’s extremely important to native people,” said Jack Giffen, Jr., Tribal Elder for The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. “Lamprey is a first food. It was a seasonal staple. And there are certain ceremonies we use the eels for.”

The site also is where The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is operating one of the region’s largest lamprey restoration projects, headed up by Dirksen, the tribes’ fish and wildlife program manager.

“Back in the 1960s, when all the dams were being finished, it cut off a lot of habitat for Pacific lamprey,” project biologist Torey Wakeland



Brandon Weems holds a lamprey harvested from Willamette Falls. Lamprey are the oldest fish alive today, dating back to around 450 million years.

said. “Some of these dams have since been retrofitted with fish passages for salmon. What we’re looking to do is re-establish lamprey populations above those.”

But restoring lamprey populations is much harder than restoring salmon runs, Wakeland explained. That’s because the weird fish have an even weirder life cycle.

Lamprey hatch from eggs as larva,

called ammocoetes. For the next three to seven years, they live burrowed in the muck on river and stream bottoms, filter feeding.

Then, over a summer, they develop eyes and a mouth, becoming juveniles, or macrophthalmia.

“That literally just means big eyes,” Wakeland said.

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Learning to live with new memories of dad

Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. - Thanks to my dad, Bill, I’ve come to see a metaphor for human memories as a collection of sequentially numbered, elaborately decorated plates that are lovingly collected over a lifetime.

Each of the unique designs encapsulates an event or an experience.

Somewhere around the time that he was in his late 80s, the stack of plates in my dad’s head dropped and broke into large shards.

At first he could reassemble most of the pieces and come up with coherent narratives of past experiences, such as road trips, camping, fishing, hiking with mom, the kids and Louie, a mahogany-colored miniature wiener dog.

Dates were fuzzy, and the time sequences of events often didn’t match up with the reality of the experiences.

He’s 94 now, and over time, something in his mind put the large pieces of the plates into a bag and hit it like a pi-

ñata.

Repeatedly, and over time.

The fragments now are so small that any hope of gluing them back together is gone.

During a recent visit, he recognized me, and recalled Kay with a little prompting.

But when I told him that we had just driven down from Salem to visit him, some of the fragments came together like mismatched puzzle pieces.

“I’m going on a trip myself,” dad said matter-of-factly. “I’m going to be going to Missouri, where I’ll be teaching high school.”

That was his first job out of college at the University of Missouri at Columbia more than a half-century ago.

I wasn’t born yet.

Another time he asked “are we in Arizona?”

That was after Missouri when he taught at a private school on a ranch about 60 miles from Phoenix.

So you patiently say, “no, dad. We’re in Santa Barbara. Kay and I drove down from Salem, Oregon, to visit you. This is where you live now that you’re retired

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Meghan, dad and Henry “make a movie” in the memory-care unit where dad lives in Santa Barbara, Calif. HENRY MILLER/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL