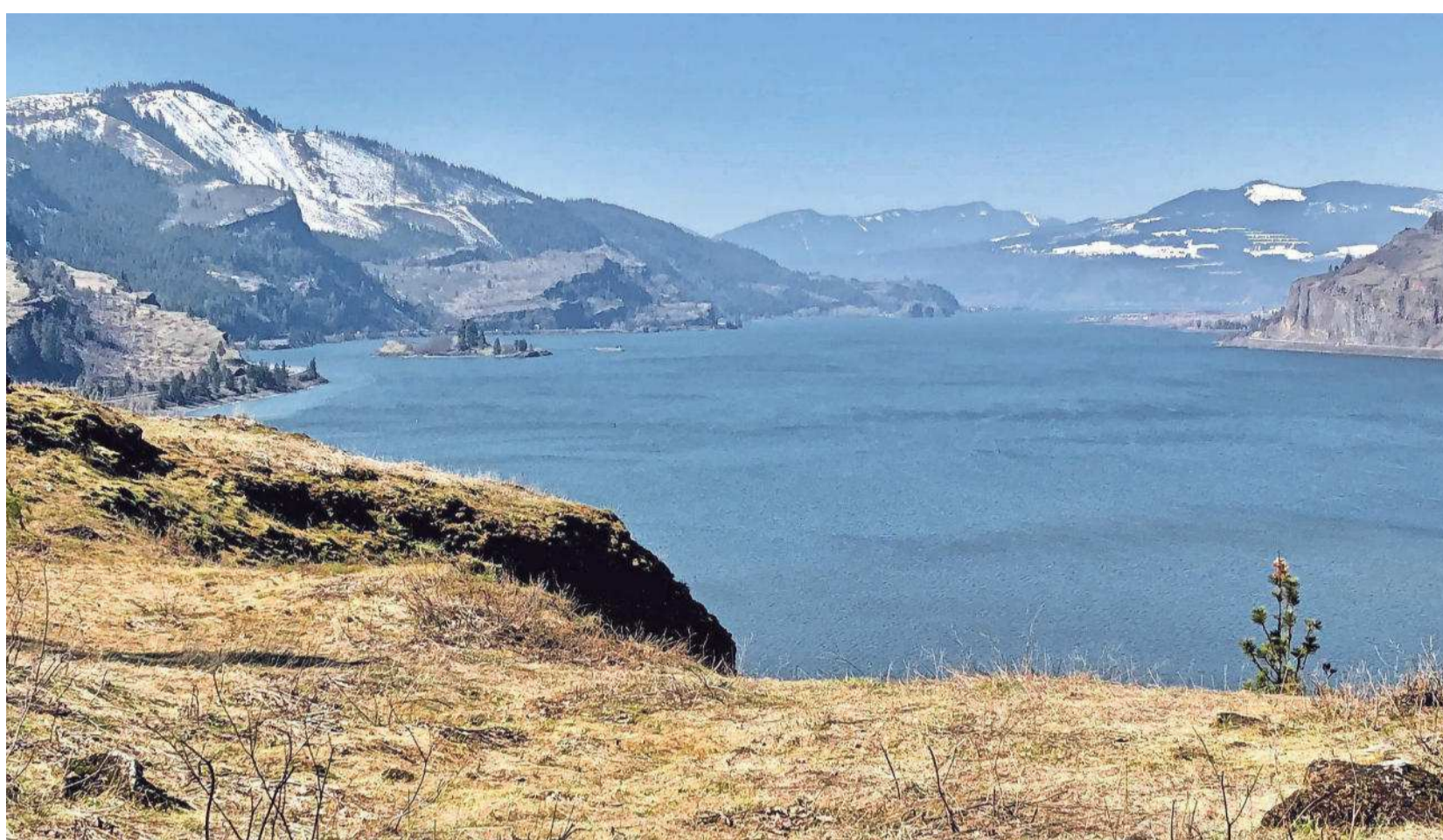


Sports

Early bloomers



Columbia River, viewed from the Mosier Plateau. PHOTOS BY BOBBIE SNEAD / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Mosier Plateau wildflower hike offers insight into the essence of nature

Bobbie Snead Special to Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Wildflowers bring such joy. They grow where they need to be. Their gentle beauty and feral ways are captivating. Every hiker I know has his or her own version of the same cherished flower story. It invariably features a sun-drenched meadow blanketed with the storyteller's favorite wildflowers. These tales are always told with the same kind of wistful nostalgia that comes with remembering a first kiss.

Wildflowers touch us deeply. Every year as winter loosens its grip, I go to the Columbia Gorge to search for the firsts-of-spring. An easy place to do this is the Mosier Plateau Trail just east of Hood River.

The air holds the morning chill as I step from the historic Columbia Gorge Highway and start up the winding rocky trail. Almost immediately my companion spies a splotch of color in the bent brown grass. Soon we spot another and still another. Delighted with our luck, I drop to my knees for a face-to-flower inspection. Grass widows, as these flowers are commonly called, are among the earliest to bloom in the Columbia Gorge. It only takes two or three days of vernal warmth to coax them from their winter slumber. Six purple satin petals surround three gold stamens in a bell-shaped blossom that nods above long thin leaves. They are simply exquisite. We take several photos and then move on, leaving the grass widows to dance on the breeze.

The trail crests a knoll above Mosier Creek

and we find ourselves in a small pioneer cemetery. A cluster of headstones marks the final resting place for the Mosier family who settled here in 1854. One grave marker is decorated with sheaves of wheat etched in stone relief. A child's small tombstone is engraved with a lamb, the symbol of innocence. Nearby an old oak snag stands vigil over the graveyard, one pioneer honoring others. This patch of earth holds a palpable sense of history.

We hike above a darkened slot canyon enfolding the creek. This cleft is so deep and narrow it allows no spring sunlight to reach its floor. By July the high summer sun will illuminate the canyon and reveal its secrets. Mosier Falls plunges over two tiers at the canyon's head. Sheer cliffs of basalt bedrock stand exposed on each side. This volcanic rock was laid bare by Ice Age floodwaters that raged down the Columbia River multiple times. Biblical in proportion, these deluges scoured the hillsides and steepened the walls of the Columbia Gorge and its tributary canyons. The thin soil that exists here today took 12,000 years to accumulate.

Well-graded switchbacks on the trail take us uphill through a savanna with widely spaced oak trees and ponderosa pines. Last autumn's brown leaves cling stubbornly to oak branches overhead. At the foot of a scrubby Oregon white oak I find another first-of-spring. A clump of Columbia desert parsley emerges from the meager soil. Its tiny pink flowers grow in a flat cluster. The shape of each silver-gray leaf brings to mind a parsley garnish on a dinner plate. The path pulls us on.

Two sets of trail stairs finally bring us to the top of the plateau where hundreds of grass widows welcome us. We stick to the trail to avoid

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Columbia desert parsley is found on the Mosier Plateau.



Grass widow is found on the Mosier Plateau.

When the fish aren't biting, set your sights on mice



Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

I was going to do a column about trout fishing at Detroit Lake, which usually is quite productive during the winter low water.

This was about two weeks ago.

Henry being Henry, though, and the water being frigid and cloudy, I caught bupkis from the bank.

Normally I like to hit Detroit in the off season because the carryover trout from the past summer's stockings are larger, more firm and tasty.

Things should be much improved now, though.

The first stocking of the year was scheduled this week, with 3,333 larger rainbows scheduled to be delivered.

Because of the trout rot, though, this week's offering is a fall-back rodent redux column.

Remember the lament in a past scribble about squirrels eating the suet in our bird feeders and my major fail at a DIY solution involving habanero peppers, a backpack stove, boiling water and eye, ear and throat irritation?



There's still an occasional reminder that the rodents are warm to a night under the hood of Kay's car. HENRY MILLER/STATESMAN JOURNAL

On second thought, let's not go there. Suffice it to say that a pepper-laced version of said suet bricks solved that problem.

But as the Portuguese say, "a luta continua," the struggle continues, at least when it comes to rodents.

A strip from a roll of similarly fiery

capsaicin-laced MouseBlocker Anti-Rodent Repair Tape strategically placed over the foam grip on the hood support rod on Kay's Honda finally stopped the critters from snacking on the handle.

But it didn't keep the wily vermin from snuggling up and warming themselves on the engine during frigid nights.

The evidence being the occasional "presents" left in the spark plug wells and the top of the engine that had to be blown out with that canned air you use to blow dust out of your computer.

Note to self: Next time turn your head and stretch your arm as far away from your body as you can when blasting to avoid a rodent-turd facial.

Most winter nights are a nocturnal version of "Wild Kingdom" under the hood when temperatures dropped into the 30s to low-40s.

The internet, invaluable for ordering items such as \$29.95-a-roll anti-rodent tape, also serves as a conduit for information, misinformation, folk wisdom and bald-faced lies about sure-fire and misfire rodent repellents.

One disproven theory in the Henry-thinks-cheap series (see habanero et al.

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