

Outdoors

FLOCKING TOGETHER



An Oregon white oak, probably about 400 years old, stands guard at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. PHOTOS BY BOBBIE SNEAD/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Pacific Flyway unites several types of migratory birds in refuge

Bobbie Snead
Special to the Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Pacific Flyway is a migration route that stretches ten thousand miles from the Arctic tundra to the wind whipped Patagonia steppe in Argentina. Birds use all or part of this route for their seasonal journeys. It is an avian sky-stream that flows south in the fall and north in the spring. One of the travelers along this flyway is the sandhill crane, a tall elegant bird with a soul-stirring call. A good place to watch for sandhill cranes and other migratory birds is at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge along the Columbia River near Ridgefield, Washington.

The late autumn light paints the sky a brilliant blue above brown fields and bare trees and I set out on the trail. A curving metal footbridge arches over the gap between the parking lot and the refuge. Once across the span, I immedi-



A great blue heron stands in a waterway at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. BOBBIE SNEAD / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

ately hear the faraway calls of tundra swans. They sound like impatient drivers honking their horns in a distant traffic jam. The swans have traveled from their Arctic nesting grounds to escape the bitter cold. They congregate on secluded waterways in large flocks and wait for nature to summon them north in the spring.

The trail follows the shore of shallow Duck Lake. On the far side a solitary great blue heron stands like a lawn ornament, stoically waiting for aquatic prey. The feathers of its black head crest

If you go

Directions: From Vancouver, Washington drive north on I-5 for 14 miles and take the Ridgefield exit. Turn left on Pioneer St. and drive 3 miles to Ridgefield. Turn right on Main Avenue and drive 1 mile to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge on the left.

Length: 1.7 miles round trip

Duration: 2 hours

Elevation gain: 20 feet

Age range: suitable for all ages

are slicked down against the back of its long neck. Its gunmetal gray wings match the murky water. Long shaggy white feathers hang from its chest. I watch as it rubs its formidable beak against its belly and then preens its wings and back. The great blue heron's stomach is covered with small crushable feathers called powder down. They crumble into a fine dust which absorbs mud and slime. The heron methodically spreads this powder over its feathers and then brushes off the gooey clumps to clean itself. The grooming session ends and the heron returns to its motionless pose. I move on.

Massive Oregon white oaks stand on

either side of the trail. The fissured gray bark and stout mossy branches provide food and shelter for a multitude of small creatures. These trees have witnessed the seasonal bird migrations for centuries. The largest oak is more than four hundred years old. This ancient one stood in the background as generations of the Chinook people gathered food from camas fields and wapato patches on this floodplain.

Looking down, I notice a speckled brown ball in the leaf litter. It's a hollow sphere called an oak gall. This strange growth forms after a gnat-like gall wasp lays her eggs on the underside of an oak leaf. When the larvae hatch from their microscopic eggs they release a chemical, which irritates cells in the leaf's tissue. A round tumor grows, encasing the young in a protective shell. When the adults are ready for freedom, they chew a hole in the gall and take flight. Come spring, migrating songbirds will eat some of the newly emerged gall wasps. Tree, insect and bird are joined in the intricate nexus of life along the Pacific Flyway. I gently place the gall at the foot of the oak and hike on.

The trail meanders its way to Boot Lake. The lake bears the evidence of a dry November. An empty grassland

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Get lost in the woods without trying



Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

You might say that every outing is a journey of discovery.

Take a recent speaking engagement at a lunch meeting of the Creekside Rotary at Creekside Golf Club.

Internet directions from my house put it at about two and a half miles and were pretty straightforward: Left on Creekside Drive after 1.9 miles, right on Clubhouse Road for .2 miles.

I've actually been there a couple of times and even golfed there in a charity tournament. But I'd always come from the Commercial Street side.

I figured it was a lot quicker going in the back way from home.

Estimated drive time (light traffic) was 11 minutes, pretty much dead on.

Return time was about 27 minutes.

The discrepancy was because instead of reversing the directions going back, I took a couple of wrong turns and for the next 10 or 12 minutes marveled about how much the scenery had changed during the one-hour meeting.

Being navigationally challenged seems to be a singularly male Miller disability.

Neither of my sisters, Michelle nor



The actual turn to Elk Lake above Detroit, which is about as poorly marked as the Interstate 5 Bridge over the Columbia River in Portland. HENRY MILLER/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Sonya, seems to be similarly afflicted.

My dad used to tell a story about how he and his new bride were heading out for their car-camping honeymoon around the Midwest.

While en route to Chain O'Lakes State Park campground in mom's home state of Illinois, he got caught in a snakes nest of left-turn-only and right-turn-only lanes and ended up in the underground parking garage of the Edgewater Beach Hotel on the Chicago lakefront.

Which is kind of ironic when you think about it, because my father used

in the Army Air Corps during World War II on a B-24 bomber ... as a navigator.

Maybe it's a good thing Japan surrendered while he was wrapping up his training at San Antonio.

I digress.

Anyway, I've gotten lost on at least a dozen Forest Service and logging roads in Oregon that started out looking like the well-traveled routes that I recalled from previous outings.

Most of the time those either petered out to goat trails, ended in log/rock barriers, or had become so overgrown by years of disuse as to be impassable.

Any time you hear me say "I think this road is it, but it seemed more developed the last time I was here," it isn't, and it was.

Case in point was an outing about a decade ago, after a years-long hiatus, to Elk Lake off of Breitenbush Road above Detroit.

As memory miss-served, I turned left uphill about a mile south of the well-marked, smoothly graveled correct route to the lake, and ended up a half-hour later at a boulder barrier.

But not until after I had crawled up a rapidly deteriorating former logging road that because of occasional sloughs and collapses looked like the setting for a harrowing chase scene in an Indiana Jones cinematic epic.

I knew pretty early that I'd missed

the turn. But it was just so, ahem, interesting.

Which is to say that not every such back road adventure has made me want to remember to wax paper my shorts before starting down the unbeaten track.

In fact, I've discovered some dandy little lakes and ponds with lots of trout and very few anglers in both the Coast Range and Cascades.

Which leads to the other problem with venturing where no other sane person would dare to go.

It makes for a great story, but I probably never am going to be able to find it again.

Some people have a laser-like sense of direction.

My navigational acuity is more like a dime-store flashlight with dying batteries.

So as a trusty backup I cheat and pull out the backpacker-model Garmin just to be sure.

As the old adage says, good judgment comes with experience.

And experience?

That comes from bad judgment.

To which I would add Henry's corollary: You're never really lost if you don't care where you're going.

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