



Few-flowered shooting stars at Kingston Prairie. PHOTOS BY BOBBIE SNEAD/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL



Camas flowers.



Few-flowered shooting stars.

Prairie

Continued from Page 1B

Prior to Euro-American settlement, the Willamette Valley had experienced 3,000 years of careful management by humans. The Kalapuya people used fire to suppress the Douglas-fir and bigleaf maple trees. They lit low-intensity blazes each autumn to keep hunting grounds open and to encourage the growth of camas plants, an important food source. Mature Oregon white oaks resisted the flames and survived. Winter rains doused the annual burns; spring brought abundant new grass and herbaceous plants. Thus tended, the valley's biologically rich prairie grasslands covered over a million acres when white settlers arrived.

A soft breeze ripples the grass as I close the entrance gate and step into the preserve. There is no trail here; this is a place to wander rather than hike. I start my amble by heading to a shallow creek flowing over a rocky streambed. Bright wildflowers called few-flowered shooting stars punctuate the water's edge like neon-pink exclamation points. Each rocket-like blossom has five magenta petals streaming straight back from a yellow tube with a purplish-black tip. Favored by bumblebees, each flower's downward-facing tip will point up once these pollinating insects do their job and the seed capsule begins to form.

Moseying on, I spot sprays of common camas rising above the grass on foot-high stems. Bluish-purple blossoms present their six petals in star shapes as a rosette of narrow leaves anchors each plant to the prairie floor. Vast camas swales covered the Willamette Valley in pre-settlement times, and the sweet-tasting bulbs were a staple in the Kalapuya diet.

Picking my way through the prairie garden, I walk toward a solitary oak tree. A cascade of liquid notes flows from the tree in gentle, undulating waves. Lifting my binoculars to locate the source of this fluid melody, I find a Western Meadowlark on a high branch. I watch as it releases another musical stream from its gaping beak. The brown, robin-sized bird has a bright yellow breast with a black "V"-shaped necklace. Short, stiff wingbeats carry it away as I approach, and then it sings again from a small tree 50 yards away.

The meadowlark avoids shrubby areas and forested edges; it feels safest in the wide-open space of a prairie, where predators are always clearly vis-

If you go

Directions: From Salem, take Highway 22 east for 12.0 miles to Stayton. Drive south on First Avenue through Stayton. Just after crossing the North Santiam River, turn left on Kingston-Jordan Drive. Go 1.0 mile and turn left on Kingston-Lyons Drive and go 1.7 miles to a pullout on the left marked by a Kingston Prairie Preserve sign.

Best month: late April – early May, when wildflowers bloom and the seasonal creek flows.

Length: 1 mile round trip

Duration: 1.5 hours

Elevation gain: 0 feet

Age range: suitable for kids of all ages

ible. A ground nester, it chooses a depression in the soil, lines it with soft grass blades and covers it with a hood of sturdy stems anchored to surrounding vegetation. The meadowlark requires open singing perches; isolated trees, fence posts and large rocks serve as essential habitat elements from which to advertise for a mate or declare a nesting territory. Very common in the Willamette Valley until the 1950s, the Western Meadowlark is now as scarce as the prairie habitat that it calls home.

I leave the meadowlark to its singing and study patterns at my feet as I walk on. A series of neatly trimmed runways crisscrosses the ground. About the width of a garden hose, each route leads to a hole no wider than a golf ball. These narrow avenues are the work of gray-tailed voles, mouse-like creatures with gray fur, a blunt snout and tiny black eyes. They dash back and forth on their well-maintained paths looking for food. Should the shadow of a hunting raptor darken its runway, a vole will scurry to the nearest hole.

On hands and knees, I examine the vegetation that's been carefully clipped away in front of a hole. Nothing will impede this vole's dash to safety. Several yards away, a twisted rope of vole fur curls on the ground in a fresh deposit of coyote scat — evidence that not all voles escape predators. To survive as a species, the vole relies on prolific reproduction; a female can have up to 13 litters in a year. Vole populations are cyclic; as their numbers go, so go the numbers of their predators. When the vole population decreases, Red-tailed Hawks raise fewer chicks and coyotes have fewer surviving pups.

Crossing the county road that bisects

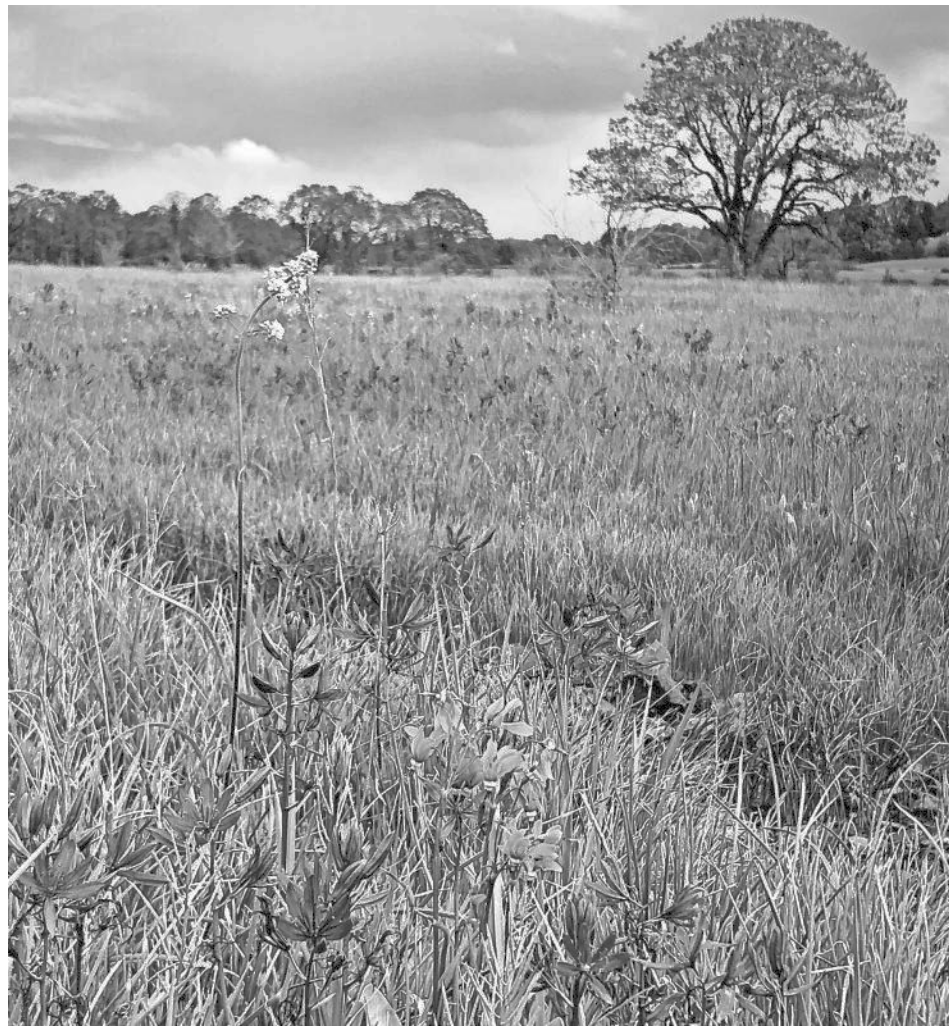
the preserve, I explore the other half of the 152-acre property. A grove of Oregon white oaks stands near the western boundary. With their round crowns and thick trunks, the oaks remind me of giant bunches of broccoli crowded together. As I get closer, I hear the raucous laughter of an Acorn Woodpecker family: waka – waka – waka, drrrritt, drrrritt. Their calls bounce between the trees, but I don't see the birds. A jerky flutter finally reveals the black-and-white face, red cap and white eyes of an adult woodpecker. It's joined by four others; they tumble from limb to limb like clowns falling out of a circus car. Soon, two more join them.

These comical birds have a complex social structure of cooperative breeders. Multiple males and females live together, breed and lay eggs in the same nest. Offspring stay with the family into adulthood and help raise the newly hatched young. Males are all related to each other: father, brothers, sons. They mate with females who are all related: mother, sisters, daughters. This com-

munal lifestyle is necessary for survival. As their name implies, Acorn Woodpeckers eat acorns. They drill thousands of small holes in a storage tree called a granary and stuff them with the nutritious nuts. An extended family can work together to save an enormous number of acorns. In the fall and winter, when there are no insects to eat, the clan lives off the stored food in their closely guarded larder.

Slowly circling one oak after another, I search for this family's granary. Finding nothing, I leave the oak grove and walk back across the prairie with the woodpeckers' noisy chatter fading behind me. Just before getting in the car I lean against a fencepost, feeling like a disciple who has just visited a sacred remnant of the ecological past: the rich composition of plants and animals in the Willamette Valley's nearly vanished native prairie community.

Bobbie Snead is a local naturalist and nature educator. She can be reached at naturalist.column@gmail.com.



Kingston Prairie, a preserve that retains the biological diversity of the Willamette Valley as it was, before settlers arrived.



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Continued from Page 1B

The plan is to cull information about current and upcoming opportunities.

Drop me a line if you like it, or loathe it for that matter.

Let's get started.

This week's highlights

Item 1: According to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's 2021 rainbow trout-stocking schedule, the following waters close to Salem are scheduled to be stocked the week of April 19:

- Foster Reservoir east of Sweet Home off of Highway 20 with 3,300 keeper-size (8 inches).
- Detroit Lake on Highway 22 east of Salem with 4,200 keepers.
- Walling Pond, 16th and McGilchrist streets in Salem with parking off 16th, 400 keepers and 50 larger trout.

Note that trout plants are dependent on trout and stocking-truck availability, weather and water conditions. For the complete statewide schedule online for the rest of 2021, go to Weekly trout

stocking schedule | Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife (myodfw.com)

Item 2: A reminder that the bait ban comes off for anglers April 22 through Oct. 31 on the main Santiam River as well as the North Santiam up to Minto Dam and the South Santiam up to Foster Dam.

The bait prohibition requiring artificial flies and lures that is now a permanent rule in effect from Nov. 1 through April 21 was approved to avoid deep-hooking protected native, non-hatchery winter steelhead. For more information online about the rule change, go to Artificial flies and lures only on Santiam River until April 22 (state.or.us)

Item 3: While opening day is still about a month away, reservations are filling for the spring all-depth halibut season, which opens May 13 through 15 off the central Oregon coast between Cape Falcon, near Manzanita, south to Humbug Mountain near Brookings.

For a PDF of season dates and a map of fishing zones along the Oregon coast, go online to 2021_hbt_map.pdf (state.or.us)

Thought for the week: Old doesn't improve ugly – Henry looking in the mirror after emerging from the shower.

HenryMillerSJ@gmail.com