

As the boat nudged up to the massive boulders at the falls a Tribal Member and the tribal biologist jumped out, lashing the boat to the rocks and running a line up to help navigate the slippery terrain. A crew of tribal harvesters worked their way up to the plunge pools below the falls. As the first pool was being checked a gloved hand felt the tell-tale movement of an eel. The hand slid up the eel, clamped down, heaved it from the water and shoved it into a burlap sack. So began the Siletz Area eel harvest of 2025!

Pacific Lamprey or eels, as more commonly called across tribal communities, are a 400 million year old jawless fish and are technically not an eel at all. Eels are an anadromous fish, meaning they spend their early life in freshwater, travel to the ocean as an adult and then return to their home river to reproduce. Eels typically return to freshwater in the late spring and early summer when water temperature are between 50 and 60 degrees. Sharp declines in the local Siletz River eel populations in the 1980's has forced tribal members to shift eel harvesting to an out of Basin River. The Willamette River and tributaries still produce harvestable number of eels and the Willamette Falls provides an ideal spot to harvest.

Lamprey, or Skwakol in Chinook Jargon, has been a vital source of food for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians and many other Pacific Northwest tribes since time immemorial. Traditionally lamprey is served at feasts or celebrations, the rich and fatty meat continues to be a valued nutritional staple today. Following the forced relocation of dozens of Native Bands to the Siletz Reservation in the 1850's, lamprey harvest became

a crucial form of sustenance amidst the challenges and hunger that came with reservation living.

Seasonal lamprey runs, when the lamprey returned to freshwater to spawn, helped maintain traditions of harvest, ecological care and community sharing. Families preserved lamprey primarily through smoking, and sometimes through combinations such as smoking then canning, or smoking followed by baking to complete the cooking process. These cultural practices continued well into the 20th century, with Siletz elders recalling smoked lamprey as a daily lunch staple.

Eel harvesting is open seven days a week for tribal members at Willamette Falls. There is no limit on eels but many tribal members discuss harvesting only what can be reasonably consumed over the course of a year. Due to the distance from Siletz and access to harvesting sites requiring a boat, the Natural Resource Department sponsors a yearly trip to the falls as a harvesting and educational opportunity.

This year the Natural Resource Department, the Healthy Traditions Department and the Portland Area Office partnered and held two eel harvesting events at the falls. The events were held on Wednesday June 4, and Saturday June 14, 2025. The events also featured an eel processing demonstration from Tribal Members Todd Logan and Greg Goodell.

Information for this article was provided by personal communication with Siletz Tribal Members, Tribal Biologists and the study: SKWAKOL: The Decline of the Siletz Lamprey Eel Population During the 20th Century.



Courtesy photo by Natural Resources

Left to right: Katherine Hatch, Zena Green, Jae Viles, Jaden Watson, and Nathaniel Ventura.



Courtesy photos by Nick Dugan

Above: Back row - Stan van de Wetering, Keith Hatch, Harmony Stout, Danikah Washington, Gary Butler, Dylan Gorman.
Front row - Zena Green, Priscilla Gomez, Kat Hudson, Eleeziaa Howard

Middle right: Harmony Stout and Danikah Washington cleaning out the eels

Bottom right: Eel cleaning instructions and demonstration

