



A certain small but vocal number of my readers have been lobbying for a piece on rats. Against my better judgment and notions of decorum, I'll scratch off a few anecdotes and true life experiences, some "Rat Tales from Cannon Beach," if you will.

Amongst the general population, few creatures conjure the revulsion and disgust, the mythic and macabre loathing, generated by *Rattus rattus*, *Rattus norvegicus* and their whiskery, beady kin. Murnau's German vampire film "Nosferatu" links the appearance of plague rats with the vampire phenomenon in Europe, "Ratsy Rizzo" of "Midnight Cowboy," sinister animated characters in Walt Disney's movies, and Conan Doyle's "The Giant Rat of Sumatra," all play on a deep, Jungian archetypal squirm regarding rats that lurks in our collective psyches. The narrator in Gunter Grass's *The Rat* is, indeed, a rat. He catalogs the long history of rat persecution. Trapped, shot, poisoned, maligned in every conceivable manner, the rat considers his species' circumstance to be analagous to that of the Jews. Something etched and embedded in our being winces and shivers at ratness. Here, then, are a few tales from The Edge designed to promulgate that special rat queasiness and disgust we seem to crave and celebrate in movies, literature, and song.

My career in the trades has provided ample exposure to rats and rat ordure. Rip a ceiling down from some aged beach house and you'll confront a cascade of desiccated rat cack. We've coined the term "ratsulation" for the blend of house insulation and rat guano that plummets into your face when a ceiling is removed. Inevitable tangles with rats, rat spoor, mummified rat carcasses, and rat feces are the common lot of remodel carpenters. When we encountered the rat beasties face to face, we always called in their nemesis, "Doc Killzum," rat exterminator extraordinaire. Doc Killzum laid down his true word on rats one afternoon over the tailgate of a pick-up truck.

"See them rat bodies in the back of my truck. That small feller there is a common house rat. No sweat there. That big boy there with the hairy tail. That's your wood rat. You folks got them, you got a problem, sure as death. They'll chew the wood right up in your house and haul off things." The Doc, a puffy, stocky little man with a whiskered muzzle that quivered, looked to me like he identified with his quarry, maybe even knew them too well, if you catch my drift.

"I'll lay some bait out. They know me around here. Don't worry. They won't trouble you no more."

He scuttled around the job site for an hour or so and, sure enough, those rats vanished. His very presence cowed those rodents. I suspect he exuded some odor, some rat juju mojo that ran ice water through their veins and quailed their furtive hearts.

Oh, yes, I know your rat stories all right. This one's true, and I yard it out around beach fires once in awhile on a summer evening when a good dose of unseemliness catches my fancy. My friends, the Bees', rented a small house south of town for several years. In the kitchen, a low ceiling housed a veritable New York City of rats. They danced the schottische up there day and night, cavorted in a shameless bacchanal, chirped and sang in reckless abandon. One day a young woman dropped by for coffee. She noticed a wet spot on the ceiling.

"Laurie," she said to the lady of the house, rubbing the wet spot above her with a finger and licking the moistness with her tongue, "you've got oil leaking from your ceiling!"

"No," Laurie said quickly. "Rats!"

Brother Tim and I remodeled a home near Silver Point some time ago for a close friend who cultivated songbirds. Her house was immaculate and shipshape. Her largess toward the bird population included placement of 50 pounds of birdseed in feeders each week for feathered visitors. When we sawed into the walls surrounding her bath tub, she went into the screaming dithers. Hundreds of pounds of birdseed poured from the wall cavities, cached away by house rats. I believe she cancelled her membership to the Audubon Society the next day.

One of my close acquaintances, Ab Childress, has always displayed a certain puckish mischievousness. For years he's kept a mummified cat in a shoe box for those special occasions when ickyness is a high lark. Ab specialized in foundations under old houses. Twenty years ago, he scabbled around under a house in Cannon Beach's exclusive neighborhood, digging out a foundation at a remodel project for us.

"Boys," he told us one morning at coffee, "there's been an artist at work up there on the side of that house you've been building. You'd better take a look."

When we arrived for work that morning, we were confronted with a disturbing collage that quite unhinged the gentry living in that neighborhood. Ab had located a veritable ossuary of rat and cat creatures under the house foundation, D-Conned into eternity. He had affixed the dead to the wall of the building in a life-like posture, mummified cats chasing a fleeing gang of mummified rats. We've had no more work in that neighborhood.

I sometimes wonder why rats have historically been given such bad press. They're good parents and resourceful. They occupy the same houses and spaces we do. Maybe they just remind us of ourselves.



**WHAT IS IN A NAME?** More to the point, what is up with this column's name: "Ecola lahee?"

Let me explain. I took this column name with just a little reluctance - it is a term out of a language which is, for all practical purposes, dead. Words out of dead languages, like Latin or Ancient Greek, hang in suspended animation outside of everyday discourse. This suspension can be useful, allowing linguistic precision: for example, we might hope that, if a surgeon must repair nerves at the base of our skull where the spinal chord enters, she might ask her assistant to make an incision leading to the "foramen magnum," and wouldn't casually slip into the here-and-now ambiguities of English, asking instead for an incision leading to our "big hole."

However, words from dead languages also serve as the everyday instruments of pompous pedants and showy charlatans, precision tools for intimidating the uninitiated. And this, even the hint of this, seemed just a bit out of line with the egalitarian ideals and progressive predisposition of the Upper Left Edge. As longtime readers will attest, we are not in the befuddlement or bedazzlement business.

So prepare to be initiated. Ecola lahee: when, in January of 1806, William Clark (of Lewis & Clark fame) ventured into the vicinity of Cannon Beach, he sought to obtain blubber stripped from a whale beached a short distance south of the mouth of what we today call "Ecola Creek." While Clark and his crew were here, local villages buzzed with talk of the beached whale, and Clark heard incessant references to "ecola" the term for "whale" in Chinook Jargon (the inter-tribal trade language of the north coast, which as I have said, is essentially dead, despite some limited use in remote coastlines of B.C. and Alaska).

Clark, not familiar with indigenous names for the creek, recorded its name as "Ecola," a term which was quickly forgotten for this Creek, traditionally named for elk and edible shoreline plants. But the name "Ecola" took on a life of its own. Elk Creek was renamed "Ecola Creek" in commemoration of Clark's visit with the locals, and Ecola State Park was a commemorative name, too. More recently, local business, organizations, and even people have been named Ecola, invoking both whales and the places named after them. Ecola lahee, then, translates literally as "place of whales" in Chinook Jargon but, as a matter of convention, refers to this particular portion of the northern Oregon coast in which we dwell. The name is a direct inheritance from distant times. It invokes this column's concern with north coast flora, fauna, landforms, environmental issues, and the people who lived in this place for thousands of years before being annihilated to make the land safe for espresso bars and tee-shirt shops. People liked the column label, among them our own Reverend Editor, and it stuck.

But what about whales? There are many whales still swimming beyond the surf. Grays and humpbacks and blues. On rare occasion, there are fin, beaked, sperm, sei, or minke whales, too. Now and then, if you watch close, you might also see porpoises, dolphins, or orcas. It is hard to find someone who is not, on some level, tickled by the presence of nearby whales. They are huge, mysterious, and yet we view them with an empathy reserved for fellow mammals. Warm-blooded creatures that at some point returned to the sea: social and communicative, big-brained and intelligent.

The Pacific coast of North America is one of the few places in the world where one might see large numbers of whales from land. Most of these are gray whales, passing in the course of annual, 6000-mile migrations. In the winter, grays breed and give birth in the warm Mexican waters of Baja, while feeding in Alaska's Bering Sea during the summer, rooting about in seafloor sediments and filtering out small crustaceans in their baleen. Grays seldom stray into deep waters - migration routes bring whales close to shore, particularly as they round the headlands. And March is one of the best months to see gray whales rounding headlands as they trek northward. (A smaller number of

whales, mostly new calves and their mothers, will pass through in May.)

Often, on clear days, you can see misty spouts of water as grays rise to exhale, and to inhale once again in preparation for the next dive. Occasionally, you can see a fluke rise above the water's surface or see a gray whale breach. From the cliffs of Neakahnie Mountain and Ecola State Park, you can look down on their barnacled forms (their skins crawling with crab-like "whale lice") and see their crisp outlines from head to tail. (The Oregon coast, of course, does have one captive whale which can be viewed regardless of season or weather. This celebrated orca-in-a-box needs no additional publicity and we won't give it any here. It is telling and potentially demoralizing to realize that we live in a part of the world where the most celebrated individual is a cetacean - indeed, a cetacean with flaccid fins and a deep fear of minnows. Amidst much wailing and tooth-grashing by central coast Chambers of Commerce, this particular whale soon may be set adrift to fend for himself on the high seas.)

The California grays were hunted to precariously low levels during a brief and intense period of industrial whaling in the late-19th century. East coast money turned perfectly good whales into oils and cosmetics for east coast markets. By the 1880s, only 2000 grays remained. Their populations now rebound, aided by moratoria on North American whaling established in the early 1970s.

Today, there are roughly 22,000 grays swimming laps along the Pacific coast - up to 5000 official whale sightings have been recorded along the Oregon coast in a single week. Two other populations of gray whales, the Atlantic and the East Asian Pacific grays, were not so fortunate: both now appear to be extinct. Closer to home, some whales of our area - blues, fins, and humpbacks - are in very bad shape, decimated by North American whaling during the turn-of-the-century and continued industrial whaling by Japanese and Russian ships into the late 20th.

When Clark stumbled onto the beach near Chapman Point, whaling was a long-established practice on this coast, but was carried out at such low levels that it didn't make a dent in the overall population of whales: at this level, whaling was "sustainable." While the tribes of the northern Oregon coast reported hunting whales, their efforts may have been restricted to injuring whales at sea in places with predictable currents. These currents carried injured whales ashore, where they were butchered for meat and oil. An intricate etiquette surrounded the division of a beached whale. Every beach had different rules - locals usually received the choicest pieces, but nearby villages might hold rights to a section, a tail or a certain flank. The numerous people Clark encountered near Ecola Creek may have included several visitors from other villages, gathered to claim their appropriate share of the whale (and in turn, this division of the

whale between several different peoples may explain in part why Clark found so little whale meat available for trade, despite the beached whale's great size).

The Makah of the northwestern Olympic Peninsula were more accomplished whalers, pursuing whales with dugout canoes and wooden harpoons with stone points. Harpoon heads were tied to lines of floats made of inverted, waterproof sealskins - once harpooned, the string of sealskin floats would keep whales from submerging, so that they could be dispatched and dragged to shore with relative ease. The most skilled Makah whalers were tribal elites, and tools and ceremonial goods associated with whaling have been found archaeologically, in the wealthiest Makah households.

In the mid-19th century, U.S. negotiators signed a treaty with the Makah, confirming their right to hunt whales in their traditional waters for all time. The treaty, however, did not anticipate the near extinction of Pacific whales by the end of that century, and was challenged by later, international treaties banning all Pacific coast whaling. The Makah viewed the whaling ban (and the industrial depletion of whales which precipitated this ban) as impositions from the white world, entirely out of their control and to their distinct disadvantage.

Now, more than other whaling tribes of the Northwest coast, the Makah view whaling as an essential, symbolically-charged component of their struggles for cultural persistence. Thunderbird, by the legends of the Makah (and most other coastal peoples) was huge and powerful, an adept whaler who devoured whales like a normal human would eat salmon; today, the thunderbird takes on renewed significance among the Makah, and their homes, public buildings, and tribal cemetery bristle with small, totemic carvings of thunderbirds. Citing chronic economic and social troubles following the whaling ban, the Makah recently requested an exemption from international whaling treaties so that they might hunt whales once again. (Immediately thereafter, while I was visiting the Makah, tribal boats tangled a gray whale in their nets. "Accidentally" I was told with ambiguous smiles. The whale was hauled to an inaccessible offshore islet and butchered - by the time authorities arrived on the scene, the whale's meat and blubber were jammed into freezers throughout the Reservation.) The Makah have just secured this exemption, and this spring will be the first season in 70 years that the Makah have [legally] hunted whales. Taking four whales a year, they will join a small number of other indigenous peoples of the northern seas who are allowed exemptions from international treaties for subsistence whaling.

In the past, environmentalists, animal rights activists and tribal rights activists have been allies, sharing their concern with the objectification and despoliation of living things which is currently so fashionable among the world's industrialized peoples. Now they butt heads over the issue of Makah whaling, and lawyers descend on the scene like locusts.

In regional environmental issues, as in life generally, there are no easy answers.

For more information about local whales, visit one of the many Oregon State University sponsored whale watching viewpoints. These viewpoints will be marked with "Whale Watching Spoken Here" signs in late March, and will be staffed by trained volunteers with free OSU publications on Northwestern whales.

**Websites for Whale Watchers:**  
"Whale Watching Spoken Here"  
<http://www.hmcs.orst.edu/education/whalewatch.shtml>

Whales on the Net  
<http://whales.magna.com.au/WATCH/index.html>

Whale Watching with Oregon Online Highways  
<http://www.ohwy.com/or/w/whalewat.htm>

Whale Museum, San Juan Island  
<http://www.whale-museum.org/links.html>

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