



WEXATION OF THE SPIRIT

Politics and Precipitation in the Coast Range STORY & PHOTOS BY JAMES JOHNSTON

I grew up in the Coast Range, and I rarely go back. I have written 61 outdoor columns for *Eugene Weekly* since 2002, featuring hikes from all over the state. Just two of those hikes were located in the Coast Range.

The Oregon Coast Range is the most heavily logged ecosystem in the world. Logging is the only thing that has ever paid. The soils are too thin for farming. There is no mineral wealth. The terrain is ridiculously rugged, too steep for decent roads to bring raw materials to industry and deliver finished products to market.

Millions of people have driven from their homes in the Willamette Valley to the coast, barely noticing the Coast Range. The highways aim for the low bumps between mountains and wind down the big river valleys. You cannot go anywhere else in the Coast Range without tremendous effort, without negotiating miles and miles of gravel logging roads, hundreds of hairpin turns. James Kim is just the most recent tenderfoot to enter the maze and not return.

The state of Oregon spends millions trying to keep the highways open, but the terrain frequently gets the better of technology. Highway 101 was closed for three months in 2000 by a slide that transportation officials said could not be moved until the rains let up.

The fate of the Coast Range is sealed by location: Halfway between the North Pole and the equator and right next to the Pacific Ocean, which sends rain clouds in huge numbers ashore each winter. The moist, temperate climate has birthed the world's

greatest forest, home to the oldest, largest trees on Earth, with more biomass per acre than any other terrestrial ecosystem.

The first trees felled were shipped to the gold fields of California to shore up mine shafts. The massive Sitka spruce that hugged the foggy coastline were made into thousands of fighter planes for the first big war.

After the second big war, the Coast Range was the breadbasket of the baby boomer building binge. In its heyday, the Coast Range supplied almost a quarter of all the dimension lumber consumed in the entire United States.

When I was a kid, we fed chicken guts to a small brown owl in the evening underneath the towering trees up the hill from our house. One adult called it a “wood owl.” Another called it a “pootie owl.” The final, definitive, opinion was “spotted owl.”

I was fascinated by the utterly alien features of the bird, the enormous, chocolate eyes, delicate plumage, turret head and vicious looking talons that whisked the slimy guts out of my hands without touching me, soundlessly.

I've heard people say that the northern spotted owl has been acclimated to humans by hordes of biologists bearing lab mice as bait. It isn't true. That owl was completely unafraid of humans long before it got famous. No one ever goes to the Coast Range forest. In millions of years of evolu-

tion, the owl has never needed to fear humans because we've never lived in the lightless, rain-drenched, impenetrable jungle it calls home.

My parents still live in the same house, but there are no spotted owls anywhere within 20 miles. Every single bit of old growth has been converted to forestry's version of the cornfield, the ubiquitous Coast Range tree farm.

Just about every thing I remember about the Coast Range is gone. Not a single forest I remember, not one, is still standing. The steelhead pooled up above Siletz Falls are gone. Every single *thing* in that valley is gone. Even the town that was there is gone.

Here's the story of Valsetz, the boomtown of the Coast Range: It set records for rain (50 inches in one month) and for logging (all of it). The land beneath the town, the town itself, and all the land everywhere around belonged to Boise Cascade. When

Boise was done with the timber, it was done with the town. Everyone had a month to get out, and then the school, the post office, the stores and everyone's home got just like the slash after a big logging show: Bulldozed, piled and burned.

Many of my childhood friends were refugees from Valsetz. Drug abuse, domestic violence, poverty, unemployment: That's why we've got to log the Coast Range, the timber industry tells us. To fund social services.

The timber industry isn't going to solve the problem. They caused the problem, long before anyone had ever heard of the spotted owl.

Boise didn't burn out the town from sheer heartlessness. No, the town had to go because Boise needed to bury a bunch of industrial waste left over from the mill and didn't want people around drinking the water.

