

A balm in Gilead and other unexpected gifts in NW forests

When it comes to “reading” a forest, a lot of 21st century Northwesterners (including me) are as illiterate as an Amazonian tribesman might be in the aisles of Powell’s City of Books. At best, we can tell a cedar from a hemlock or an alder from a maple. They just form a visual backdrop, a stage set for our lives, potential lumber. This is like seeing a Gutenberg Bible but only being able to understand it might be good for kindling a fire.



Matt Winters

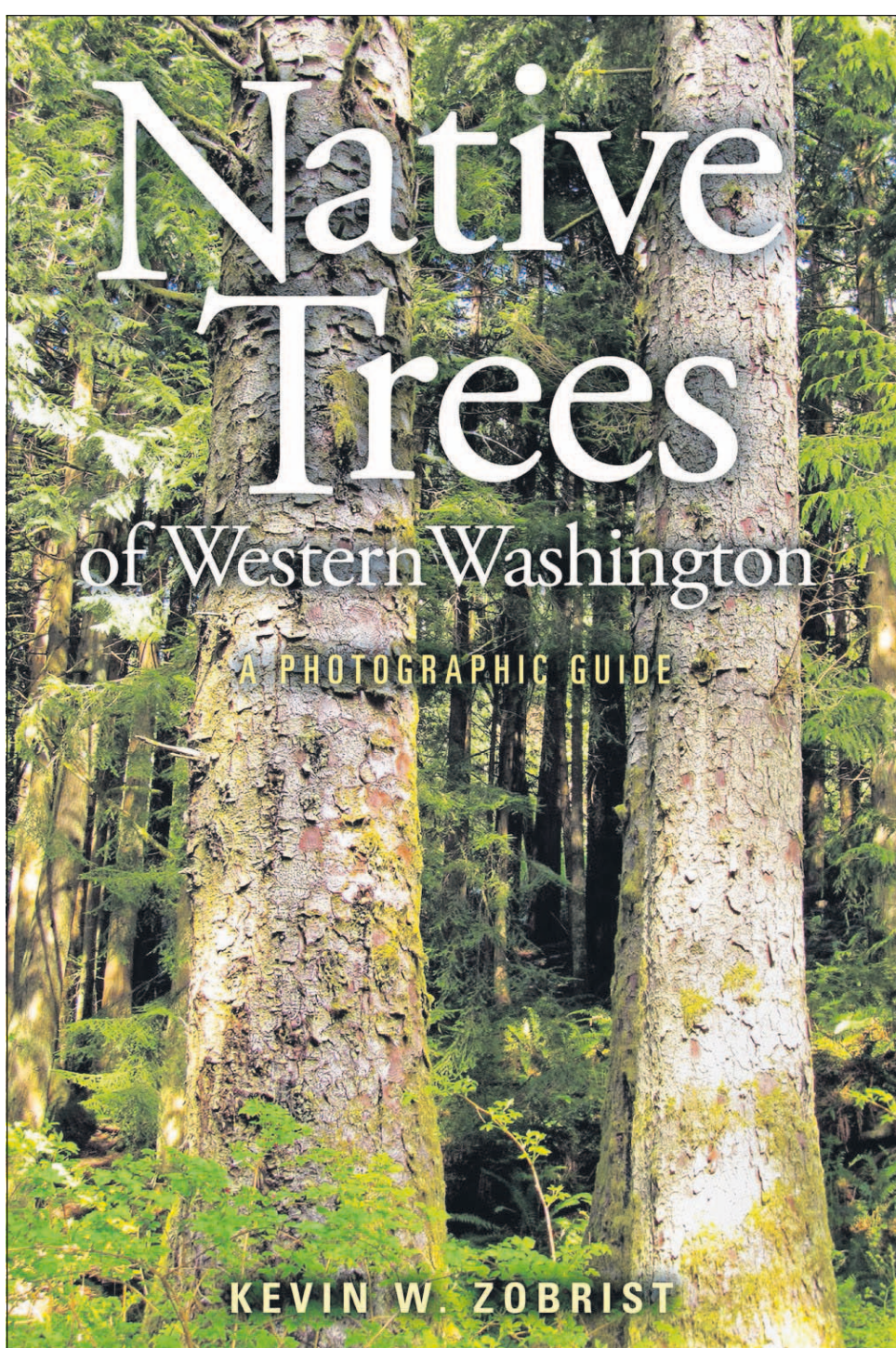
Native Trees of Western Washington, by Kevin W. Zobrist for WSU Press is a kind of phrasebook to begin deciphering the resplendent complexity around us. Even readers outside the book’s stated geographical scope will find its descriptions useful and its purpose inspirational. There’s a whole lot more to wet-side forests than Douglas firs. I’ll be taking it along on walks, putting names and traits to some of the anonymous forest citizens I’ve ignorantly gaped at or ignored over the years.

Our Medieval ancestors believed spring began on Feb. 7 or 22. That’s looking close to right this year.

Every living twig is a sophisticated sensor, measuring when best to venture into leaf. They don’t always get it right — here on the North Pacific above the 46th latitude, Arctic cold can invade as late as March and assassinate tender new growth. Even though we are still early in 2015, last summer seems to be lapping itself with hardly a pause, deciduous trees getting right back to showing off like vain models hurriedly emerging from the changing room after casting off last year’s fashions.

By Christmas, some species surrounding Beards Hollow overlook in Cape Disappointment State Park were displaying plump and green buds, just a really warm day or two away from unfurling. Two weeks later, aided by the ability to self-generate internal heat, 2015’s first skunk cabbages burst through the swampy loam in the park’s lowlands, each a coursing geyser of nostril-curling aroma and eye-popping chlorophyll. Elderberry bushes also are getting frisky, shaking vividly green little pompoms at the kickoff of this annual game of life.

These first signs that winter will not go on forever have always been celebrated by people and wild animals, all craving something fresh after the growing



Washington State University Press
“Native Trees of Western Washington” is a valuable primer on the intricate variety of forest species on the wet side of the Cascades.

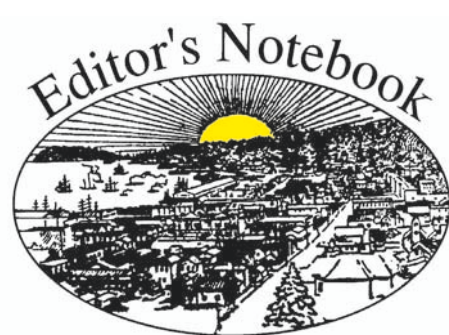
season’s long recess. At the same time, plants play chemical games to discourage us from eating them or to gain some other advantage; these strategies are especially obvious now when the annual race for survival is just getting underway.

Traditionally, anything capable of enthusiastically springing back to life was also worth investigating for medicinal — or even magical — qualities. Two familiar local trees often viewed as little better than weeds are among the foremost stars in the folkloric pharmaceutical inventory.

Red alders are much more interesting than we realize. For example, in partnership with a bacteria they host, alders deposit a vast amount of nitrogen in Northwest soils — about 285 pounds per acre per year. Nitrogen is a vital plant nutrient that is otherwise often in short supply in local forests. Another alder partner, whitish patches of lichen

embedded in its bark, is a natural indicator of excellent air quality. And from a pragmatic human perspective, in her Radical Botany blog, Ellen O’Shea observes, “As a healer of humans its bark is used to sooth the acid stomach and gallbladder, clean the lymph glands and bowels, entice the poisons from the skin and open up the lungs. A poultice of the bark will bring forth the inner poison.”

Red alder bark and black cottonwood buds share a key medicinal benefit — each contain the anti-inflammatory compound salicin that our bodies metabolize into salicylic acid, a potent ingredient of aspirin. Along with the storied biblical godsend of myrrh, cottonwood buds can be processed into the balm of Gilead, a medicine of mystical significance. The resinous essence the balm is made from is what keeps buds from freezing or rotting on the tree. Ryan Drum of Island Herbs in Waldron, Wash., notes coastal tribes used cottonwood bud tea



Elderberry bushes also are getting frisky, shaking vividly green little pompoms.

“to calm the bereaved ... (and) to make salve for sunburn, sores, and as a topical for rheumatism and body pains, and as a hair and scalp tonic.”

For a primer on harvesting buds and making the balm, see <http://bit.ly/186xmFU> or <http://bit.ly/1xFk7BW>. I also notice, however, that it appears you can buy concentrated poplar oil (cottonwoods are a kind of poplar) for \$48 a pint at tinyurl.com/pogh18n. Might want to be cautious around ponds after applying it: “Poplar Bud Oil creates a strong poplar odor that is highly attractive to beaver. Especially effective during spring beaver season. Also good for (attracting) raccoon and muskrat.”

The balm of Gilead is only one of a constellation of gifts scattered through the forest for those with eyes to see. It was, in part, an awareness of this natural generosity that inspired religious feelings in humankind. The deepest healing doesn’t come out of a prescription bottle, but from knowing we are integral elements in a world that is woven together with infinite and harmonious subtlety.

A once-popular gospel song speaks to us across time (listen to it performed by Mahalia Jackson at tinyurl.com/ovg8uk5):

*There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my work’s in vain
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again*

A little more of this sense of appreciative awe would not be remiss in the modern world.

—MSW

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*. He lives in Ilwaco with his wife and daughter.

Open forum

Do justice

I am troubled by the coverage in the *Daily A* and the *Seaside Signal* about the effort to recall Mayor Dianne Widdop of Gearhart. Headlines have been misleading and more attention-grabbing than necessary to describe the workings of the Gearhart City Council and Mayor Widdop’s role.

Coverage has been fairly factual but, to me at least, slanted to give the impression that Mayor Widdop, a longtime Gearhart resident and a member of the Gearhart city government for many years, has made unforgivable mistakes. The truth is she

has done nothing illegal, unethical or immoral in this instance. She has acknowledged her mistakes and has apologized sincerely.

It’s not easy to be a public figure. When one takes on this role, one learns quickly that one has multiple constituents and can’t please them all. It’s an impossible scenario and all one can do is act in the best interest of the agency to which one is responsible. One must have a very thick skin to be a public figure.

What troubles me most, particularly after I attended the recent Wellness kickoff in which we discussed how to

improve the health of our community, is that city and county governments are often painful places to work and serve because of the injured feelings of those who don’t get their own way and decide to make the lives miserable of those who serve. The health of our larger community is damaged because of the behavior of small groups who attack committed individuals who serve the community.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister for many years, I have experienced the misery of being attacked by a small group because I made mistakes occasionally. It grinds down one’s re-

silience and causes unnecessary pain to a person who is only trying to do a job they care about. It is particularly troubling to me that a person with Mayor Widdop’s history of fine performance is being treated cruelly for no good reason.

I’m reminded of the ancient and universal wisdom of representatives of many religions and humanitarian agencies: Do justice, be kind, be humble. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbor.

REV. KIT KETCHAM
Gearhart resident

Where to write

• **U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (D):** 2338 Rayburn HOB, Washington, D.C., 20515. Phone: 202- 225-0855. Fax 202-225-9497. District office: 12725 SW Millikan Way, Suite 220, Beaverton, OR 97005. Phone: 503-326-2901. Fax 503-326-5066. Web: bonamici.house.gov/

• **U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D):** 313 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Phone: 202-224-3753. Web: www.merkley.senate.gov

• **State Rep. Brad Witt (D):** State Capitol, 900 Court Street N.E., H-373, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1431. Web: www.leg.state.or.us/witt/

Email: rep.bradwitt@state.or.us

• **State Rep. Deborah Boone (D):** 900 Court St. N.E., H-375, Salem, OR 97301. Phone: 503-986-1432. Email: rep.deborah_boone@state.or.us District office: P.O. Box 637, Cannon Beach, OR 97110. Phone: 503-986-1432. Web: www.leg.state.or.us/boone/

IN GRATITUDE

Christmas smiles

Toys for Tots would like to take this opportunity to thank the donors of toys and monetary value in this last collection campaign, and the toys drop places. We raised \$1,250 to purchase toys and books. We put smiles on the faces of a large number of children this past Christmas. The toys, books and games given out not only to children, but also to senior adults, total 20,871 distributed items.

Remember Toys for Tots here on the North Coast covers Clatsop County only. We do not distribute gifts, we collect and give them to the area food basket program, Wishing Tree program and Giving Tree program.

The area coordinators, William and Pat Kankkonen, Tim Flynn, Beverly Neubecker, Curtis and Florence Peugh, Tanya Wammack, Tricia L. Lichtenfels, Kimberly Wright and the Coast Guard Cutter Alert and I want to say thanks to all of you.

LOU NEUBECKER
Toys for Tots county coordinator
Seaside



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