

In search of the S U N

(Or: How I spent my winter vacation)

I have long been skeptical of snowbirds.

Mind you, not the actual feathered kind (which are, in every respect, quite fascinating); but rather, the bourgeois human version that packs up every year and skips town just when things are getting tough. You know the type: They bask in the beauty of late spring, then the long days of summer, extolling the pleasures of our oceanside paradise all through July and August; when the dry, crowdless days of September arrive, they practically swoon. October's okay — it still offers a clarity that keeps them content — but come November, there's a flurry of forwarding addresses and a brutal ousting of the houseplants, then it's ta-ta till tax-time, when they'll return audaciously, without apology, sporting sun-kissed faces and unnaturally high levels of serotonin.

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Of winter, they know nothing! Nothing of the real coastal rains; nothing of the soul-drenching sogginess that the rest of us embrace. Nothing of what it means to walk the dog in gale force winds through torturous torrents of precipitation (which is, as we all know, the truest road to Northwest virtue). At worst, their fair-weather lifestyle reveals a genuine

weakness of overall character; at best — at very best — it smacks of solid hedonism.

So naturally, the first time I had the chance, I immediately followed suit and headed south.

It's a mark of maturity to recognize when your own moral judgments are grounded in things like, you know, actual principles, rather than, as I'm ashamed to say is more often the case with me, a few of the more base human qualities, like jealousy, arrogance and vanity. For 15 winters I'd stayed the coastal course, sure in my wet and hearty superiority, romanced by the sense of coolness that we love to attach to our suffering.

But on the day I left the beach, it was 43 degrees outside and raining so hard, that from the middle of the Astoria-Megler Bridge, neither Washington nor Oregon was visible. By my calculations, it had been like this since long before Thanksgiving — three months at least — and I

was tired of getting my vitamin D from the drugstore. I drove through that watery no man's land and emerged, wanting, without shame, only this from the world: a little warmth to the wind, a soft touch of sun on my face.

I didn't have to wait long.

In no time, my small tribe and I were barreling down the interstate, zig-zagging our 21-foot motorhome (I know, I know, it's totally un-cool to have a motorhome) in and out of truck-stops like seasoned pros. When we reached the bottom of the Willamette Valley, the rain was mostly in our rear-view mirror; by just the other side of Mt. Shasta, we were sipping milkshakes outside a Burger-Barn, tugging off our sweatshirts and looking for our sunglasses. In Sacramento, California, I traded in my romeos for flip-flops, thinking to myself: You might not be cool anymore, but at least, for just a little while, you're going to be warm.

We were headed for the desert, but didn't make it that far. A false spring throughout the San Joaquin Valley saw steady temperatures in the low-to-mid 70s, which was just exactly hot enough for a couple of unacclimated Washingtonians. We quickly ditched the speed of the interstate for the backroads of Gold Country, where we flirted with the edges of the Sierra Nevada, dropping in on the wealth of campgrounds that surround the rivers and lakes that drain those great mountains. To our surprise, we even found another Columbia — with just as rich (though considerably less watery) a history as the one we'd left behind.

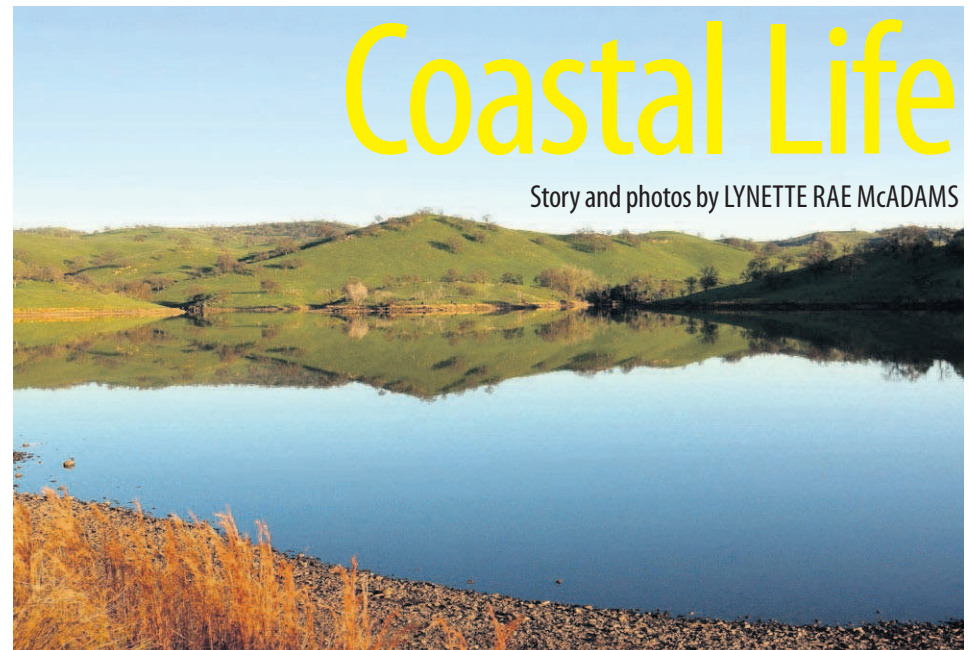
All in all, it was a marvelous trip, and I was happy.

And then, as is the way of all good things, it was suddenly over, time to turn around.

In the end, that's just as well. As it happens, the best lesson of my short stint at snow-birding came entirely at the end. Crossing back over the river that defines this region I so dearly love, I saw with fresh eyes all that I had wearied of — the rain-drenched hills, the swollen streams, yet another storm passing onto land — my beautiful life, super-saturated. And I realized, it's only in leaving that we give any meaning to the coming home, and to my surprise, in that moment, I found myself wanting only this from the world: a clean chill from an ocean breeze, the rain falling softly on my face.

Coastal Life

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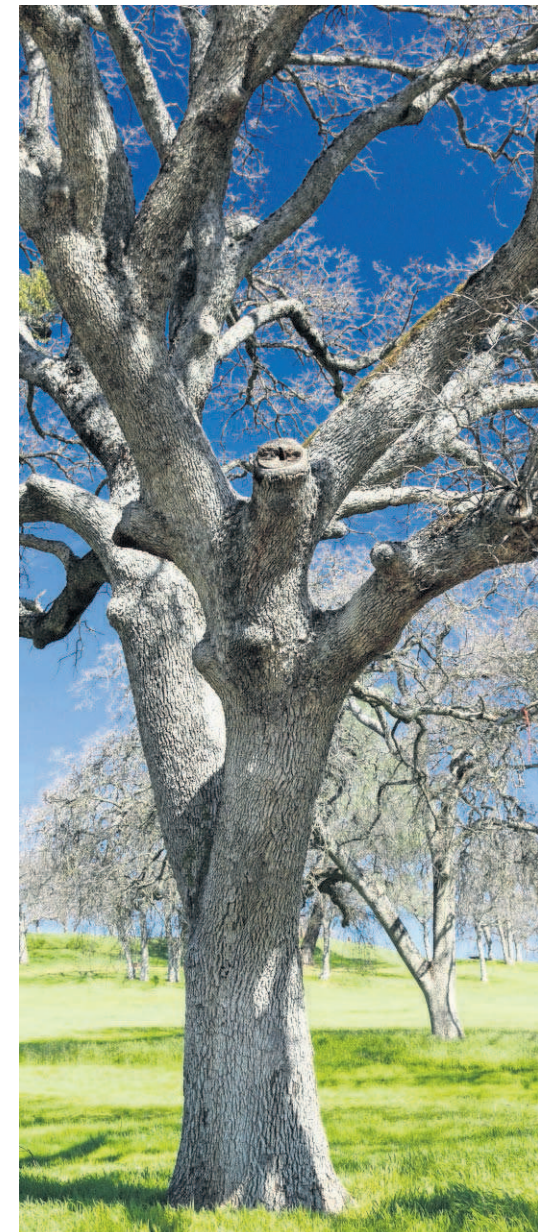
The warm shores of Lake McSwain, in Mariposa County, California.



A ghost building from 1850 stands on the outskirts of town in Columbia, California — the “gem of the southern mines” — located in the Gold Country foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.



Setting up “camp” at New Melones Lake in Tuolumne County, California.



A field of oaks near New Melones Lake in Tuolumne County, California.