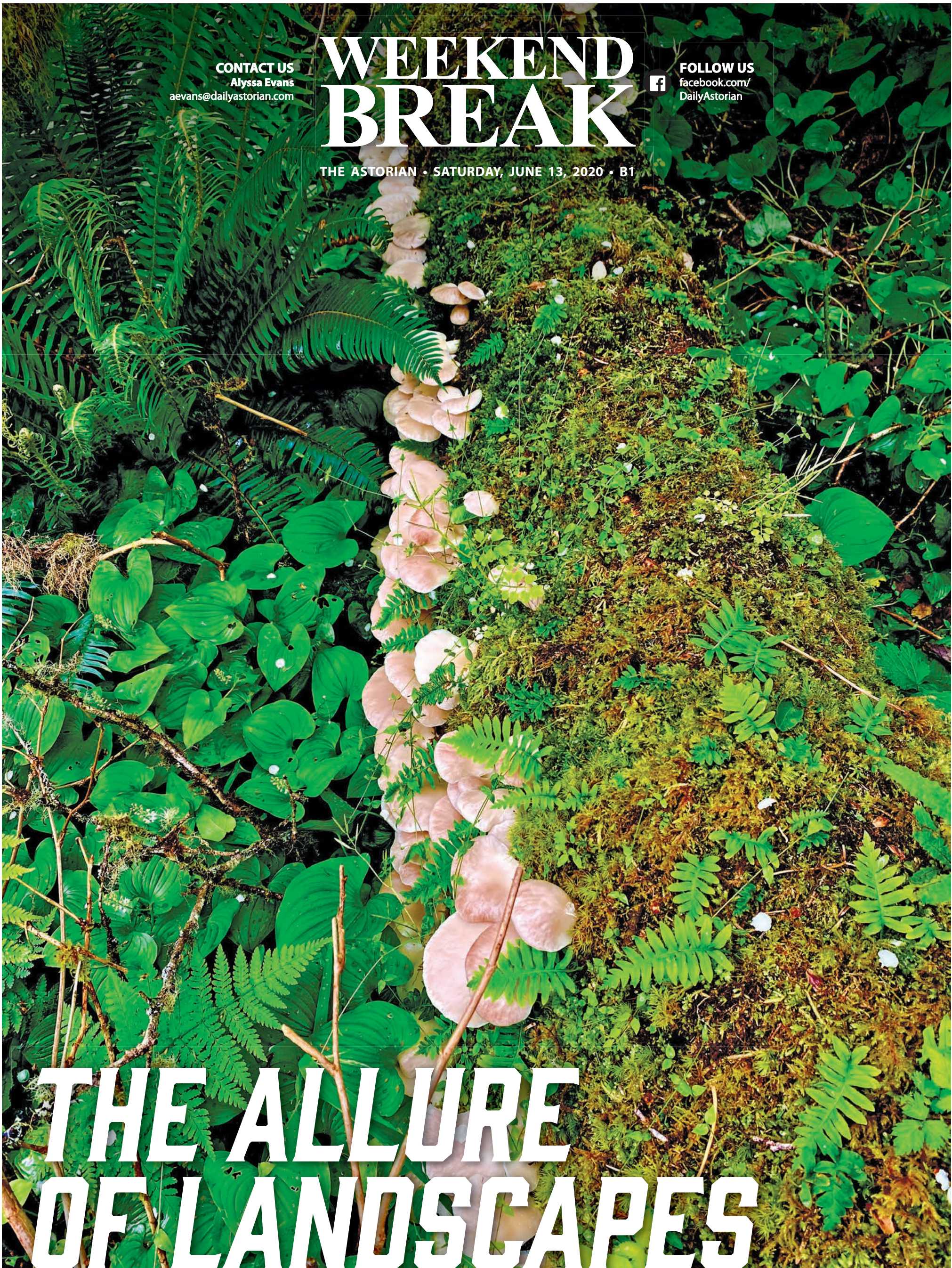


CONTACT US
Alyssa Evans
aevans@dailyastorian.com

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THE ALLURE OF LANDSCAPES

Leadbetter Point State Park is a place for reflection, nature viewing

By DAVID CAMPICHE

My friend Steve Romero is one of those undeterred guys who steps off a trail and plunges into the deep underbrush in pursuit of wild ingredients: fiddlehead ferns, watercress and the allusive wild oyster mushroom. He steps forward gleefully, his heart beating rapidly.

"I am home," he thinks. The word bushwhack comes to mind.

"Hurry up," he says, "I've blazed a trail and back there a few hundred yards I found a dead alder tree loaded with oyster mushrooms."

Off we go, two souls on a pilgrimage.

The deep forest creates a trance. The air is fragrant but seems a bit short of breath. So is the light, thin, that is — fractured and laddered in small, delicate servings. The ground is thick underfoot, damp and crowded with a patchwork of bramble. False solomon seal pokes upward like a soft carpet.

I count the ferns. Four varieties. Five. Six.

Salmonberry bushes, not yet ripe, crowd against us like an outcropping of humans on a New York City subway platform. Huckleberry idles, the fruit's blossom still months away. The tall majestic trees are mostly alder, spruce and pine. On the dead alders stumps lay pale-white oyster mushrooms so pale because of their color, shape and sublime taste.

We trudge on, cautiously stepping between the verdant plants, careful not to break a limb or branch. Perhaps this is a territorial instinct or the ancient precaution of remaining hidden from the gleam-

ing eyes of a predator.

The sun lirts south. The days are still short but not as drastic as during winter. Under the green scattering, nearly black after the rainfall are thousands of falling needles. Fluttering, gathering, rotting. Unlike the spread of concrete and asphalt, this is the natural way of the planet. With decay comes life.

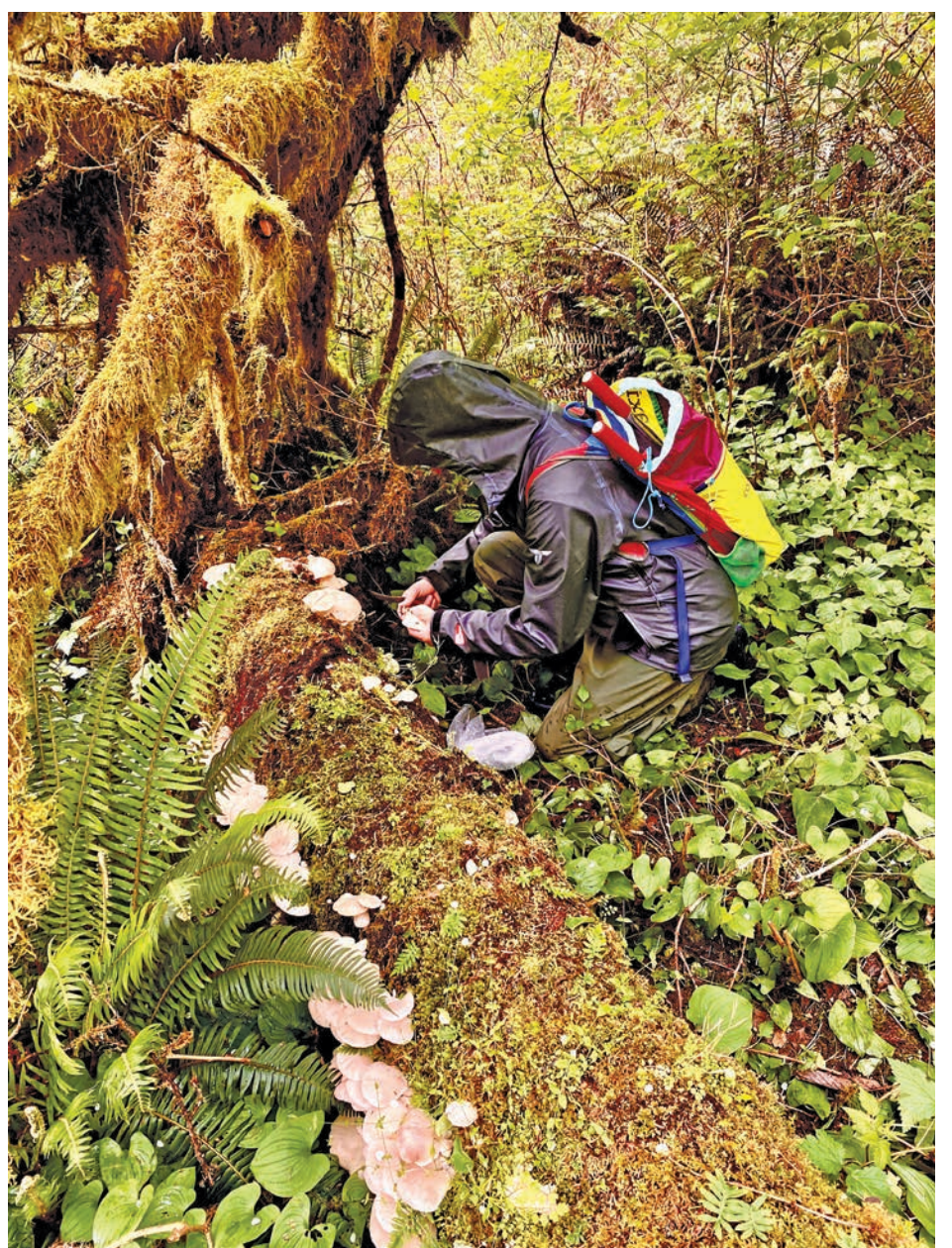
Steve is a city kid who built a home in Oysterville, Washington, and adapted to the natural world in his backyard like a badger seeking shelter under a decayed stump or a tunnel wedged into clay and duff.

In Steve's backpack is a pair of shears. Along the way he clears away some of the gorse. Yes, he is trailblazing in a sense. Truth be told, that lovely yellow-clad bush with sharp spines is quickly invading the fragile ecosystem of Leadbetter Point State Park and the Long Beach Peninsula. Park rangers spend a lot of time attacking the pest. They may be losing the battle.

Our two families have been quarantined for a couple of months. Steve and I arrived in separate cars. The only other mammal we see is a sow bear.

"Thirty feet away," he says. The bear seems indifferent and we slowly slink away.

I am glad to be here, bear or no bear. I feel the release of so much pent-up energy, and a fair amount of anxiety, to boot. I am thinking, you too can take a walk into the green lush world of our backcountry, the out-bush of the Long Beach Peninsula.



Photos by David Campiche

TOP: A row of wild oyster mushrooms. **ABOVE:** Steve Romero gathers oyster mushrooms on a decayed alder log.

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