

# Lamprey:

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mothlike caddisflies from the water's surface. The honey-sweet odor of wispy cottonwood bloom floods the air. Water cascading from upstream rapids masks the sound of nearby freeway traffic.

I stand still as a patch where a patch of loose gravel has collected atop ancient lava flow and watch a pair of Pacific lamprey wriggle in gentle current. Named the "night eel" because of their nocturnal behavior and serpentine shape, lamprey lack the backbone of true eels that spawn in the Sargasso Sea. Without paired fins to maneuver and an air bladder to stay buoyant, they are more challenged than a '49 Ford on a Los Angeles freeway. What lamprey do possess, though, is the ability to navigate rock-faced falls using their sucking mouth to grab hold and flexible tail to corkscrew up and over.

Adult lampreys migrate from the Pacific Ocean from May to September and "hold over" in mainstem reservoirs of the Columbia and Snake Rivers before spawning the following year. Their appearance in Blue Mountain streams coincides with the spring migration of chinook salmon, welcome bloom of arrowleaf balsamroot and the joyful song of meadowlark.

Both sexes of Pacific lamprey build a nest in sandy gravel via body vibrations and by moving small rocks with their mouth. After eggs hatch,



Major Lee Moorhouse/Contributed Photo, File

**Billy Barnhart's camp on a bluff above the lower Umatilla River, around 1903, showing "eels" drying on wooden poles.**

the larvae or ammocete burrow into the river bottom to feed on microscopic algae for 5 to 7 years.

cover of spring freshets. Only after they transform to the young adult stage do they attach to other fish and

the spent carcasses of sea-going lamprey contribute ocean-derived nutrients to tributary streams.

## "LAMPREYS THE SIZE OF A SMALL GARTER SNAKE EMERGE FROM THEIR BURROW AND BEGIN A LENGTHY, DANGER-FRAUGHT JOURNEY TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN UNDER THE COVER OF SPRING FRESHETS."

During this time, the juvenile form has an oral hood, lack teeth and eyes are underdeveloped.

Lampreys the size of a small garter snake emerge from their burrow and begin a lengthy, danger-fraught journey to the Pacific Ocean under the

suck body fluid and blood for nourishment.

Adult Pacific lamprey have no value to sport anglers (except for use as sturgeon bait). However, they are part of the food web for sea lion, white sturgeon and fish-eating birds. Similar to Pacific salmon,

Coincident with hydroelectric dam development in the Columbia River, numbers of adult lampreys migrating over Bonneville Dam declined from 350,000 in the 1960s to 22,000 in 1997. A similar pattern of decline was observed in the Snake River after comple-

tion of the Hells Canyon complex and the four lower Snake River dams in the 1960s. Loss of critical tributary habitat from poor irrigation practices, deforestation, grazing and treatment with rotenone to poison "trash fish" added to the toll. That juvenile lamprey are poor swimmers and have a bottom-dwelling lifestyle make them particularly vulnerable to introduced bass, walleye and channel catfish.

Regional Indian tribes and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lead conservation efforts to restore runs of Pacific lamprey populations. Lampreys dried in the sun or roasted over wood coals are considered a delicacy by tribal elders. Translocation, or placing adult lamprey in Columbia Basin streams where populations were formerly present, has produced promising results in several streams, including the Umatilla, Yakima, Methow, Wenatchee and Clearwater rivers. In some cases, numbers of returning fish have been large enough to support a modest subsistence fishery for tribal members.

The anthropologist Eugene Hunn wrote how Sahaptin-speaking peoples from the mid-Columbia intercepted a spawning run of "eels" during a 19th century spring root-gathering excursion up the John Day River. At large falls such as Celilo and Kettle, migrating lampreys were collected off rocks where they attached to rest. A tradition of tribal harvest continues today at Oregon's Willamette Falls.

The Wanapum Tribe tells of an important fishery near Pasco, Washington, a loca-

tion referred to as Kosith or "at the point of land." Adult lamprey congregated there, perhaps confused by flow from three adjacent rivers, and were caught at night from canoes by Indian fishers who used dip nets made of hemp. The flooded backwater of McNary Dam put a stop to that practice.

The Snake River near Asotin, Washington, was another traditional harvest location for Indian fishers. An 1892 report of the United States Fish Commission described the occurrence of this revered "three-toothed" lamprey as far upriver as Lower Salmon Falls. Nez Perce elders still share stories of catching "eels" as young children in the Clearwater River.

Dark clouds loom overhead. Behind me, on a shoreline lined with brush willow, a redwing blackbird struggles to balance on a branch that sways with each gust of wind. A thunderstorm is in the works. Three lamprey as long as my arm swim into the shallow riffle at my feet and join the party. One male grasps a female with his sucking mouth. Their bodies twist and intertwine. Eggs and milt mix their life energy with the river.

The ancient night eel has survived against all odds for thousands of years. Bearing witness to their return assures the circle of life is not broken.

*Dennis Dauble is a retired fishery scientist, outdoor writer, presenter and educator who lives in Richland, Washington. For more stories about fish and fishing in area waters, see [DennisDaubleBooks.com](http://DennisDaubleBooks.com).*

# Vassey:

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could make wrestling a real deal after high school. He could wrestle with anyone. He was phenomenal for us from Rollie Lane on."

Vassey's third-place finish at state helped the Bulldogs secure second place in the team standings. He finished the season with a 33-8 record.

"When I went there, I was expecting something not as big as it was," Vassey said of the state tournament. "The opponents I went up against were tougher than I thought they would be. I thought it was an honor to work my way up and get there. I was pretty upset about losing that one match, but it was motivation to win the consolation bracket. You have to go against guys more motivated than you. I made it to the top three, that was pretty awesome."

Larson said Vassey really excelled his senior year.

"He did everything he had to do to be a state placer," Larson said. "Top three gets eyeballs looking at you."

Vassey plans on majoring in nursing at EOU. It's a profession that is important to him.

"My mom (Tiffany Hodge) is a nursing instructor at Good Shepherd," he said. "She works hard and is my inspiration. She's my No. 1 supporter. She has always been there for me."

## It's a grind every day

Wrestling is not for the faint of heart. Workouts,

diet and dedication to your craft can eat up a lot of your time.

Vassey has been wrestling since the eighth grade. When he got to high school, he realized he needed to work on his strength, and has spent a good amount of time in the weight room, in addition to time on the mat.

"I have to work out several hours a day to manage my strength," the 6-foot-2, 215-pound Vassey said.

"Usually there are a variety of huge guys, and when you are in the middle, you have to make up that difference with strength."

Vassey typically wrestled 5 pounds underweight during the season. With fellow senior Sam Cadenas moving from 220 to 285, it allowed Vassey to slide into the 220 slot.

"I couldn't have gone to 285, so my only option would have been to go down," he said. "Being at 220 is better than 195. Instead of cutting weight, I was able to maintain my weight and that made it easier to wrestle. Sam is my No. 1 training partner. We spar and make each other better."

Vassey's time in the weight room has benefitted him greatly, according to Larson.

"Our weight training program has been pretty consistent for a few years," Larson said. "Emilee Strot and David Faateete have really pushed it. Our weight training program is a result of all these kids signing and having opportunities. It's phenomenal. It's making women and men in our school much better athletes."



Vassey

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