

Return of the night eel



Major Lee Moorhouse/Contributed photo

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



The Associated Press, File

Pacific lamprey attach to rock cliffs prior to corkscrewing up and over falls impassable to other fish.

Pacific lamprey have endured the effects of dam-building



DENNIS DAUBLE
THE NATURAL WORLD

It is a breezy day in late May and I am knee deep in the Umatilla River. Flows dropped enough following a recent surge of snowmelt and rainfall to allow for safe wading. Cliff swallows carve a graceful path through the air as they pick 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 post 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 an '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.

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A boatload of embarrassing moments

If you've ever owned a boat, you'll have at least one good story



GARY LEWIS
ON THE TRAIL

If you ever shake hands with my dad, you will comment on his grip. He got it milking cows, and it has saved his life more than once. One time while fishing the Cowlitz River with friends, it was time for my dad to get out of the boat and fish from shore. Our guide assured me and dad it was a safe place to climb out, despite the river being at flood stage.

I protested three times, but the captain was so sure, dad jumped out and went in up to his neck. The river was near raging and dad's legs were sucked under the boat. Fortunately, dad had a good grip. He kept a tight hold on the side of the boat with one hand and that's what kept him from being swept under the boat and out into the main

current where he would have drowned.

Anyone who has owned a boat has an embarrassing story.

Several of the boats I have owned were embarrassing just sitting in the driveway. Here is a list of boating mistakes people make every day.

We hit the dock too hard. Watch an experienced captain drive a boat up next to a dock and cut the engine, using the wind and current to glide right in. It's a thing of beauty. But 50% of the time, the current and the wind are against you and it's a thing of entertainment. For anyone watching.

The hardest boat I ever drove was a twin-engine houseboat. In fact, fellow outdoor scribe Terry Sheely and I took turns on that trip. But it was my job to get it into the mouth of the tiny harbor. The wind was blowing 20-miles-per and the boat acted like a big sail. I barely kept it off the rocks while everyone watched.

We misjudge the weather. Once on Crane Prairie Reservoir southwest of Bend, we launched a canoe on the west shore and paddled out.



Gary Lewis/Contributed Photo

Things can go wrong, even on the best boats. It pays to carry a long tow line and a couple of paddles. Longer paddles would have been better. One of the best things the prospective boat owner can do is take a boating course. In Oregon, it's required to operate powerboats with engines bigger than 10-horsepower. The BoatUS Foundation offers a free online course.

By the time we were in the standing timber, the wind was howling and the whitecaps were up. Water was coming in over the sides. We blew to shore and I ended up walking halfway around the lake to get the vehicle.

We misjudge the depth. I've done it out in the middle of the Columbia. It's a good way to meet

your fellow boaters. And get them to tow you off a mud flat.

We forget to secure the boat. There is a lot going on at a boat ramp. Remember to strap that boat to the trailer or to the top of the vehicle. Once, I used the wrong kind of straps. You should ask my wife about picking up her kayak off the highway.

We use the wrong fuel. It's easy to get the wrong fuel in the tank. This happened to me in a borrowed boat. We had bad fishing to start, but the fellowship was good. The conversation stalled when the motor quit working. That was on the far side of the lake. It was a long limp back to the dock with the trolling motor, with frequent pauses to let the battery juice come back up enough to turn the prop.

Our politicians have saddled us with burning corn (which used to be considered food) in our engines. The federal mandate requires a conversion to ethanol. More than 90% of the fuel available at pumps is E10, which doesn't work well in marine systems. Buy the wrong fuel and your face is going to be red. Average cost for repairs caused by poor fuel is \$1,000.

We use the wrong life-jacket. If you have a boat, keep child-size jackets on board. A child in a life-jacket that is too big is just as much danger as if they didn't have one.

We fall out. One of the most common things we do around boats is fall out of them. A marine patrol officer once told me most

drowning victims have their zippers down when their bodies are recovered. If you're going to drown, at least do it zipped up.

Once I saw a couple of gray-haired guys with a spanking new Hewes Craft. They were backed almost down to the water, trying to shove her off the trailer from dry land into the river. They never thought to watch someone else launch a boat or ask for advice.

It was great fun to watch. Eventually they figured out the trailer was supposed to go in the water so the boat would float off. Speaking of the boat ramp. ... This is one of the best places to collect your own embarrassing moments. Once I backed another guy's trailer off the ramp and hung a tire on the concrete, letting the air out of said tire. Red face.

You can collect a boatload of other people's embarrassing memories. Trust me, it's more fun to tell their stories than your own.

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