



neighborhood naturalist

Nature you can find in town and the nearby countryside

Corvallis, Oregon

Summer 2005

Blackberries—Worth a closer look

by Lisa Millbank. Illustrations and photos by Lisa Millbank

The blackberries are members of the rose family. We have three species in the Willamette Valley: one native and two Eurasian species. The berries are actually clusters of tiny individual fruits called drupelets, collectively known as an aggregate fruit. Blackberries contain a white core (the receptacle) within each berry, which differentiates them from the hollow raspberries. And as every berry picker knows, blackberries are all armed with sharp thorns.



Dewberry *Rubus ursinus*

In open areas and along roadsides, such as in McDonald Forest, you can often find large, sprawling clusters of this native blackberry. Its prickly stems trail over the ground or sometimes hang over other shrubs and lower limbs of trees. I have often returned to a spot where I had seen these plants covered in white flowers, expecting loads of summer berries. But in this species, male and female flowers are on separate plants, and often those promising patches were only male plants producing pollen but no fruit. The female flowers' petals are small and round, the males' are elongated. There are three dark green leaflets. The berries are shiny black, tart, and richly flavorful.



Himalayan Blackberry *Rubus armeniacus* (formerly *Rubus discolor* or *Rubus procerus*)

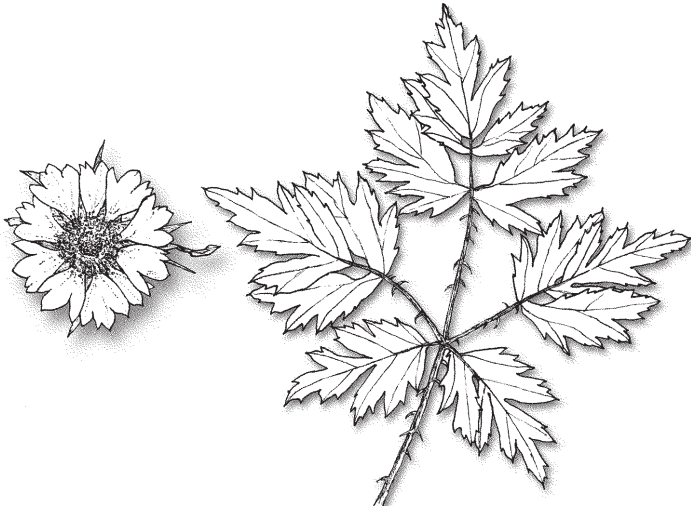
This is the most common and familiar species of blackberry in the Willamette Valley. This Armenian species forms mounds that often approach ten feet in height, with the new growth draping over a mass of woody, thorny, dead brambles accumulated over many years. The flowers are white to light pink, and the five leaflets are whitish and fuzzy underneath. In our area these shrubs are more or less evergreen, with many of the leaves retained through the winter months.

Classed as a noxious weed in Oregon, this species is adaptable and successful. It forms dense thickets, generally in the wake of human disturbance, and smothers native shrubs and herbs.

See "Blackberries" on next page.

Blackberries

continued from front page.



Evergreen Blackberry *Rubus laciniatus*

A locally common species, this blackberry is unique in its leaf characteristics. It's generally similar to the Himalayan Blackberry, but is entirely evergreen, with deeply cut leaflets showing greenish undersides. The flowers have incised petals, echoing the features of the leaves. The Evergreen Blackberry escaped from cultivation, and some blackberry gourmets prefer the flavor of these berries to the Himalayan.

Scratches on the hands and forearms often identify blackberry pickers! Countless sharp thorns protect the plants, and if you happen to be a small animal, you can use this characteristic to your advantage. In places such as Bald Hill Park, you can find thickets of Himalayan blackberries with rabbit runs along the margins. Eastern Cottontails and our small native Brush Rabbits find refuge in the impenetrable depths of the arching, thorny canes of years past. You can hear Spotted Towhees scratch in decomposing leaves deep within the tangle, and Song Sparrows guard their thicket with sharp calls. In the winter, these birds are joined by White-crowned, Golden-crowned, and Fox Sparrows, all foraging in busy mixed flocks. White-throated and Lincoln's Sparrows are sometimes present. When frightened, the birds disappear into the inaccessible brambles until they can peer out and see that the threat has passed.

Almost every fruit- or seed-eating bird enjoys blackberries. The evidence is obvious in late summer when purple, seedy droppings adorn newly-washed cars. Mammals such

as rabbits, squirrels, and chipmunks feed on the berries and shoots. Raccoons and Red and Gray Foxes like a meal of berries when they are abundant, and you may find their seed-packed scat along footpaths.

Bees, butterflies, and certain flies are drawn to blackberry bushes for nectar from the abundant flowers. Other insects come to eat the foliage or to suck juices from the plant.

The native Dewberry was a valuable and favorite food for the Northwest coastal people. In July they gathered the berries and enjoyed them fresh, cooked them into a sauce, or dried them for later use. The Dewberry's leaves and roots yield a tea that was used for all kinds of ailments, from stomach problems to sore throats and fevers. People made a poultice of the leaves for wounds, as the tannins within the leaves act as an astringent.

Abundant Himalayan or Evergreen Blackberries make delicious pies, jams, sauces, juice, baked goods, and smoothies. A Dewberry dessert would be quite a fancy treat but more effort to gather. All of the blackberries are high in ellagic acid and other phytochemicals – powerful cancer-fighting substances. They are an excellent source of vitamin C, vitamin K, manganese, and fiber. The very young, tender shoots can be eaten fresh in a salad. The leaves of all species may be boiled into a pleasant tea, and in Europe, this tea is prescribed for minor mouth and throat pain.

The introduced blackberries are unquestionably invasive, weedy species. Even the Dewberry will opportunistically spread throughout a clearing or extend its prickly stems over trails. Like most weeds, the Eurasian blackberries establish themselves mainly in areas that have already suffered human disturbance to the natural plant community. They are so well established that there's little chance that they will ever be eradicated, despite some aggressive control measures. Blackberries provide a good deal of food and shelter for wildlife in exchange for their thorny ubiquity. And many of us berry lovers, too, would feel it just wasn't summer without purple-stained fingers and the fragrance of berries on the breeze. It seems reasonable to admit defeat and enjoy the summer bounty of free, nutritious, abundant, delicious fruit.

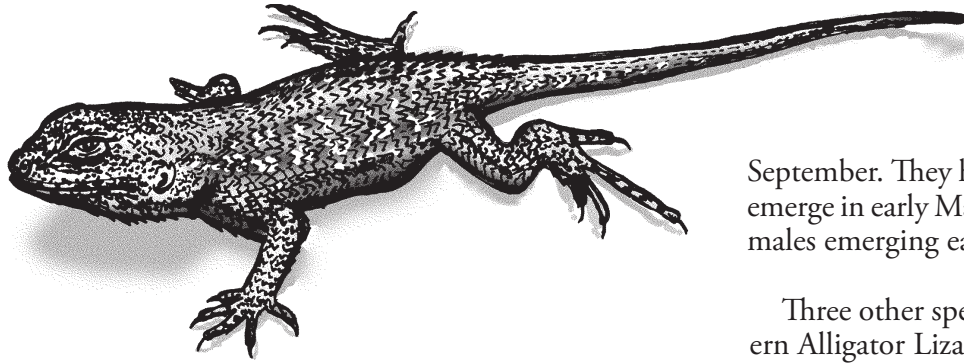
Suggested field guides

Northwest Weeds. By Ronald J. Taylor. 1990 Mountain Press Publishing Company

Plants of the Pacific Northwest. By Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon. 1994 Lone Pine Publishing

Northwestern Fence Lizard

Sceloporus occidentalis occidentalis



A subspecies of the Western Fence Lizard. It is brownish-gray to sooty gray. Pointy, keeled scales on back. The back and tail have wavy rows of double "v" spots (more like ">>") of white or blue. It does not have well defined stripes.

Up to 3½ in. from the snout to the base of the tail; up to 7 in. to the end of the tail.

Males have an iridescent blue patch on the throat and sides of the belly. Females have pale, smaller blue belly patches and in some cases, no blue patches at all. Females also have fewer blue spots on the back and tail.

Habitat

Foothills (especially the south side of hills), rocky areas, oak savanna, open second growth forests, forest clearings and logged areas. Absent from shady, dense forests and flat valley floors.

The Western Fence Lizard ranges throughout the west. It is the most commonly seen lizard in the Northwest. There are six subspecies and in Oregon there are two. In the Willamette Valley we only have one subspecies, referred to as the Northwest Fence Lizard. Males have blue patches on the throat and belly. They defend their territory by flashing these color spots as they do their "push ups," with throat puffing and contracting the sides of the body.

They're easy to observe—just find their preferred habitat and wait. After they've scurried away from your initial arrival, within five minutes they'll come back out and go about their business.

My favorite spot is on the south side of Pigeon Butte at Finley National Wildlife Refuge in Benton County. There is an old rock quarry there and many lizards. They are common and you can find them in any sunny spot where there are rocks, fence posts or forest openings. The best places are rocky open areas on south-facing slopes. They are good climbers and they like to perch to sun themselves. You will not find them in damp, dark forests or flat, featureless fields.

Life cycle

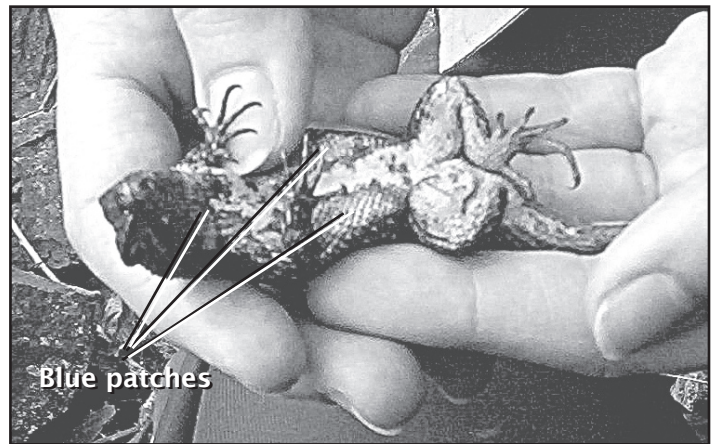
From May to early July eggs are laid (8-9 is typical) in rock crevices, log cavities or loosely buried in moist soil. Hatchlings emerge in late August through

September. They hibernate during the cold months and emerge in early March (or a late winter warm spell), with males emerging earliest.

Three other species of lizard occur here—the Northern Alligator Lizard, the Southern Alligator Lizard and the Western Skink. These species have relatively short legs as compared to our fence lizard and they run with a swimming or snake-like motion. Fence lizards have longer legs and toes, scurry along, and are adept at climbing. The Western Skink has well defined stripes along its body and sometimes a blue tail. The alligator lizard species can be nearly twice the size of our fence lizards and have square-shaped scales.

Suggested field guides

Reptiles of the Northwest—California to Alaska, Rockies to the Coast. By Alan St. John. 2002 Lone Pine Publishing
Reptiles of Washington and Oregon. By R.M. Storm and R.P. Leonard. 1995 Seattle Audubon Society



This male was caught in a rocky area on a south-facing slope in Benton County. This population is dark with orange areas on the belly (white or pale gray is typical) between the blue spots. This healthy lizard is missing his right rear foot. CAUTION: They might bite. If you do try to catch one, remember that the lizard is at more risk of injury than you are. Be careful!





neighborhood naturalist

Neighborhood Naturalist promotes interest about nature in back yards, parks and neighborhoods.

Submissions:

This is a newsletter which caters to nature enthusiasts. Any article, story, poem or artwork which celebrates nature in the Mid Willamette Valley is much welcome. The newsletter publishes 4 times a year around the Solstices and Equinoxes. Send your submissions two weeks in advance. Contact info below:

Subscribe

4 issues per year, from \$3 to \$12 per year, sliding scale (based on income—honor system) or HOUR notes

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Events

Bat Trip to Albany

July 16: Audubon Society of Corvallis. Meet at the Benton Center parking lot at 8:30 PM and we'll car-pool to downtown Albany and get there around 10 PM. Call or e-mail for details. Led by Marcia Cutler, 541-752-4313, mccarmel@peak.org

Bicycle Birding in Corvallis

Audubon Society of Corvallis

9 AM–noon. Meet at the Avery Park Rose Garden. Easy and flat ride of 3-10 miles. We'll poke along and find birds in every nook and cranny along bike routes in Corvallis. Bring water, binoculars and rain gear. Led by Don Boucher, 753-7689, bouchdon@juno.com

June 18: Saturday, Meet at the Avery Park Rose Garden. Destination—Marys River Natural Area in Corvallis.

July 23: Saturday, Meet at the Avery Park Rose Garden. Destination—Marys River Park in Philomath.

Aug 20: Saturday, Meet at the Avery Park Rose Garden. Destination—OSU Covered Bridge and the Fairgrounds.

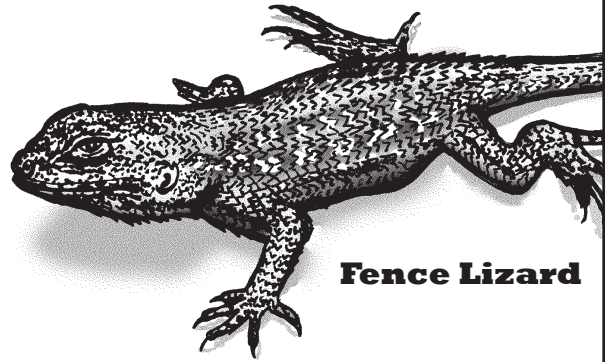
Avery House Nature Center's Family Nature Walk

June 18: Moonlight Hike at Jackson-Frazier Wetland 9-10PM. 541-758-6198 ext. 2

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A closer look into common blackberry species



Fence Lizard

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