

# neighborhood naturalist

Nature you can find in town and the nearby countryside

Corvallis, Oregon

Summer 2007

## Western Pond Turtle

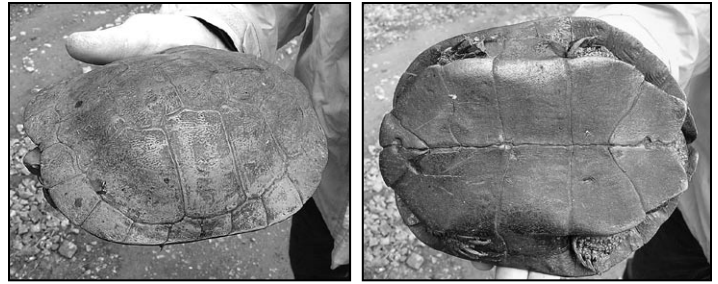
### *Clemmys marmorata*

article and illustrations by Lisa Millbank

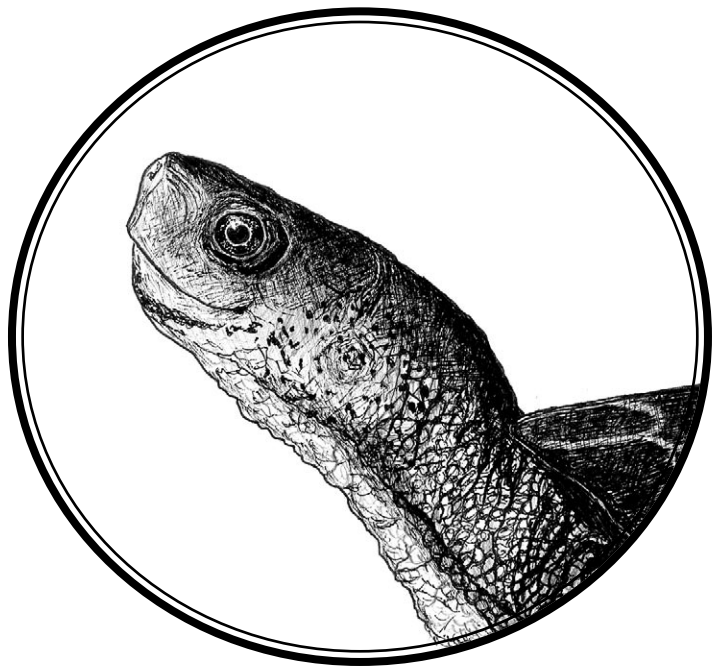
On lazy summer days, when the still air is heavy with the scent of tarweed and the toneless buzzing of cicadas, some of the most venerable and aged residents of the Willamette Valley sunbathe in quiet ponds and river backwaters. Western Pond Turtles may see seventy summers, a lifespan unmatched by any other non-human species in our area. They are the only turtle native to the southern parts of the Willamette Valley, and while their numbers are much fewer now than in the past, good sites still exist where these turtles contentedly bask in the sunshine.

The Western Pond Turtle grows to be about eight inches long. It is omnivorous, eating almost any food of animal or plant origin. It catches insects, fish, crayfish, and amphibians, eats cattail, wapato, and other aquatic plants, and snaps up any carrion it finds. It has wrinkly, pebbly skin, long claws, and prominent nostrils at the tip of the snout, allowing it to submerge and still breathe with only the snout protruding. Its upper shell (carapace) is dull dark olive or brown, often mottled. The lower shell (plastron) is yellowish to dark brown, and is concave in males and convex in females. In waters that contain tannins from plants, the shell is stained a uniform dark brown. The Western Pond Turtle's dull color distinguishes it from the colorful Painted Turtle, which is also native to northwestern Oregon, but rare south of Salem. Sliders, Snapping Turtles, and many other species can occur in some areas; these exotic turtles are released pets.

As a reptile, the Western Pond Turtle spends much of its time optimizing its body temperature by basking or submerging itself in water. When it emerges from hibernation in early spring, a turtle will sit on its favorite basking log, head high, slowly blinking in the bright sunshine; a true sun worshipper. Multiple turtles climb on the best logs and sometimes, as their bodies warm up, they jostle, ram, or even bite their neighbors. But once everyone is comfortable they coexist quite peacefully.



*I had wished for many years that I could touch a Western Pond Turtle but they were always out of reach – swift swimmers in their aquatic world. When a male turtle crossed a gravel road this spring, I had my chance and picked him up. He immediately withdrew his head, legs, and tail into his shell and hoped I would go away. I released him on the other side of the road, still shut tightly into his protective armor.*



*A Western Pond Turtle's beaklike jaws are fixed in an enigmatic, Mona Lisa-esque smile (which I find really endearing). Its neck has loose, wrinkly skin to allow it to retract its head inside its shell.*

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photo by Don Boucher



The best time to look for turtles basking on logs is mid-morning as they warm themselves in the sun. This turtle lives at Marys River Natural Park in Corvallis.

Though they are aquatic turtles, they can wander long distances over land on their stumpy legs. During their slow journeys, turtles become vulnerable to predators such as Coyotes and Raccoons that pose little threat when they can dive to safety in ponds. They may be hit by cars as they amble across roads. Turtles travel over land to disperse from an overpopulated pond or when conditions are unfavorable. A male turtle may also leave his natal pond to seek females. An adult female turtle leaves the water in the late spring or summer to lay her eggs.

Western Pond Turtles must reach the age of 10-14 years before mating. A mated female turtle digs a hole and lays from one to a dozen leathery eggs, usually on a south-facing slope, up to a quarter-mile from her pond. She carefully conceals her nest and leaves it. Many nests are complete failures due to predation. Raccoons, whose numbers are unnaturally high around human habitation, find and eat many turtle eggs, but Striped and Spotted Skunks, River Otters, and Coyotes also dig up nests.

A successful clutch of eggs hatches after 80-100 days. The average temperature to which the eggs were exposed over their incubation period determines the sex of the little turtles. Warmer temperatures produce females and cooler temperatures produce males. Often the hatchlings overwinter in their nest and do not emerge until spring.

A hatchling's shell is only one inch long. The tiny creature has little protection against introduced Bullfrogs and Largemouth Bass. Poor survival rates for young turtles and extensive habitat loss have contributed to this species' overall decline. However, because adult turtles are hardy and long-lived animals, it is hoped that they can successfully repopulate with habitat protection.

Turtle-watching takes some patience. A Western Pond Turtle is a wary and shy creature. Approach a pond too quickly and any basking turtles will slip into the water in an instant. Keen vision enables turtles to detect you up to 100 yards away. It helps to use binoculars and hide behind shrubs and trees while advancing toward a turtle pond, checking every log that protrudes from the water. Marys River Natural Park in Corvallis offers a good look at turtles who are used to foot traffic on the nearby sidewalk and not too shy. Wilder turtles demanding a little more stealth live at Snag Boat Bend National Wildlife Refuge on Peoria Rd., Herbert Open Space south of Corvallis, William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge, and Willamette River Greenway Park at Truax Island. Other populations exist at scattered sites throughout the Willamette Valley. 🦢



**neighborhood  
naturalist**

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

**Submissions:**

This is a newsletter that caters to nature enthusiasts. Any article suggestion, story, poem or artwork which celebrates nature in the Willamette Valley will be considered for publication. 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 \$5 to \$12 per year, sliding scale (based on income—honor system) or HOUR notes. Order on-line or make checks payable to Don Boucher.

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# Turkey Vulture

## The Peace Eagle

article, photos and illustrations  
by Don Boucher

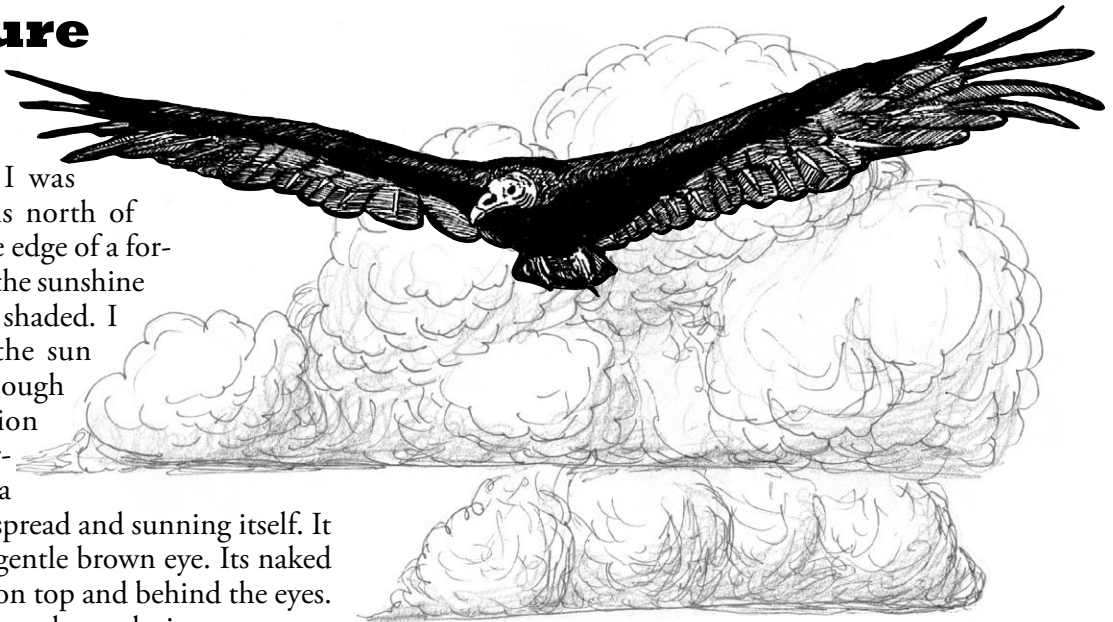
One sunny summer day I was hiking in the forested hills north of Corvallis. I had lunch at the edge of a forest clearing. I took a nap in the sunshine and I awoke with my face shaded. I had mistakenly assumed the sun had drifted behind a fir bough but it came to my attention that I was shaded by a Turkey Vulture, perching on a nearby snag with its wings spread and sunning itself. It was so close I could see its gentle brown eye. Its naked red head was slightly fuzzy on top and behind the eyes. This magnificent bird had such a calming presence, unlike the intense posture and glaring eyes of hawks, eagles and owls.

This vulture had not mistaken me for a sick animal or carcass. Turkey Vultures, as you would expect, are keen observers. My relaxed, regular breaths would have told the vulture that I wasn't a candidate for a meal. The other missing cue was the essence of rotting corpse, the chemical ethyl mercaptan. Unlike most birds, Turkey Vultures have a keen sense of smell and ethyl mercaptan is their dinner bell.

Turkey Vultures prefer fresh meat but can easily make a meal of meat so spoiled it would make other creatures ill. Their digestive juices are so acidic that their feces are sterile. They often excrete on their legs, but this is no accident. The moisture from their urine helps the bird cool off in hot weather. This is a trait they share with storks.

This is a clue to the Turkey Vulture's true family history. Even though they resemble eagles or hawks, vultures in the Americas, such as the condors, and Black and King Vultures, are more closely related to storks and flamingos. This is not so with vultures in Europe, Asia and Africa, which are true birds of prey.

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*Turkey Vultures may be recognized by their tiny heads, large primary feathers or "fingers" and the specific black and gray pattern on the undersides of the wings.*

*Unlike other soaring birds, they rely heavily on their wing tips to steer and appear as if they are unstable or "tippy." They also consistently hold a characteristic "V" position while soaring.*

*Turkey Vultures are gregarious and enjoy soaring together, even if there is no prospect for food.*

*Sunning not only warms the bird but may also kill bacteria and parasites.*



*It is common to see them roosting together. Roosting occurs at night or just for a mid-day rest, especially after a meal.*



## Turkey Vulture *continued from previous page*

When I look into the eyes of a Turkey Vulture, it's obvious to me they are a breed apart from the hawks and eagles. American Vultures lack the heavy brow or *supraorbital ridge* of hawks and eagles. Turkey Vultures lack the long, hooked, razor-sharp talons of a hunter.

### Harbingers of Spring

The Turkey Vulture is the first migratory bird to arrive in the Willamette Valley. The first few vultures arrive in early February but most arrive throughout March. By summer, the Turkey Vulture is the most common soaring bird in the sky. Soaring saves energy and a Turkey Vulture is the master. It can glide for hours with hardly a wing flap. Wind currents and rising warm air are the vulture's free ride. Even though there are plenty of dead things to eat during the Willamette Valley winters, the weather conditions aren't suitable for soaring. Only while soaring can a vulture find food. So our vultures migrate to Southern California, the American Southwest and Mexico in September and return in late winter and early spring.

Turkey Vultures have a sporadic food source. They must prepare to go long periods without food. They are accustomed to saving energy whenever they can. They wait until late morning for favorable air currents before they take to the air. If a vulture finds a carcass, and there's no obvious competition, it may perch nearby and wait hours before feeding. Animal carcasses attract some dangerous predators and it's always safer to wait.

Vultures are patient and relaxed birds. I once watched a pair of perched Turkey Vultures in a mating ritual. One bird took five minutes to tip its spread wings from one side to the other. Turkey Vulture sexes look alike, but in this instance, I could tell that this was a male's breeding display since he then mounted the female. Turkey Vultures are patient and relaxed birds. Everything they do takes due course and they are rarely hurried. It's something I admire about them. The Cherokee regard the Turkey Vulture as the "peace eagle." The Latin name for Turkey Vulture is *Cathartes aura*. *Cathartes* mean "cleanser."

Turkey Vultures range throughout North America (as far north as southern Canada), Central and South America. They are the Willamette Valley's only vulture. During winter months, Bald Eagles and Common Ravens take up the role as aerial carrion dispatchers.

Turkey Vultures have poor vocalization capabilities. They have no vocal organ and can only hiss and grunt. They usually hiss when they feel threatened. Grunts are commonly heard from hungry young, and adults in courtship.

The late Franz Dolp told me a story of a Turkey Vulture nest he found on his property in Burnt Woods. The nest was atop a hollowed tree stump on a steep slope. When he went to get a peek at the nestlings, one of the young birds coughed up a vile, reeking pile of half-digested meat. This is a defense measure. If the smell doesn't drive away a would-be predator, an easy meal of meat bits may offer distraction.

In addition to providing sanitary cleanup of rotting carcasses, the Turkey Vulture's sense of smell is an asset to humans. Those who maintain gas pipelines watch Turkey Vultures to tell them where gas leaks are. The smelly additive in propane and natural gas attracts Turkey Vultures.

Those white puffy clouds of summer allude to perfect conditions for Turkey Vulture soaring. Each puffy cloud is at the top of a column of rising warm air. Take a pleasant summer afternoon, watch the clouds drift by and enjoy the buoyant flights of Turkey Vultures. 🦅



*These vultures are scavenging rodents recently killed by mowing. Turkey Vultures are up to 32 inches long, with a wingspan around 6 feet. Healthy adult Turkey Vultures weigh approximately 6 pounds.*



*This is an elk carcass at William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge in southern Benton County. Notice the Turkey Vulture feather on the lower left and white droppings from vultures perching on the carcass.*

# Naturalist's Calendar

article and photography by Lisa Millbank

As the verdant richness of spring fades into the tranquil summer, the pace of natural events slows. The flowers of spring ripen their seeds, grasses dry, and the birds quiet after raising their families. There's no better time to visit the cool shade of local woods, take a canoe or raft trip, or pick a bucket of blackberries. Here's what to expect this summer:

## Late June-July

A beautiful purple lily, **Harvest Brodiaea** (and the very similar **Elegant Brodiaea**) blooms in grassy areas. Its leaves have already withered away. The large, brown **Common Wood-Nymph** butterfly flits through dry grass. Eyespots on its wings deter predators, and its dull color lets it blend into bark or dry grass when it lands. **Willamette Valley Gumweed** blooms in fields and on roadsides. Under the yellow ray flowers, the green bracts are coated with sticky resin.



*Harvest Brodiaea*



*Common Wood-Nymph*



*Willamette Valley Gumweed*

## August

**Himalayan** and **Evergreen Blackberries** are abundant, free, and delicious. Just make sure to pick your berries where they haven't been sprayed. A fine edible mushroom, the **Meadow Mushroom**, may pop up in irrigated lawns. This cousin of the cultivated button mushroom is superb, but as with any wild edible, be certain of your identification before sampling. In the last days of August, **Swainson's Thrushes** begin their night migration. On starry nights, listen for their soft *weep!* calls as they fly south together in loose groups.



*Himalayan Blackberry*



*Meadow Mushroom*



*Swainson's Thrush*

illustration by Don Boucher

## September

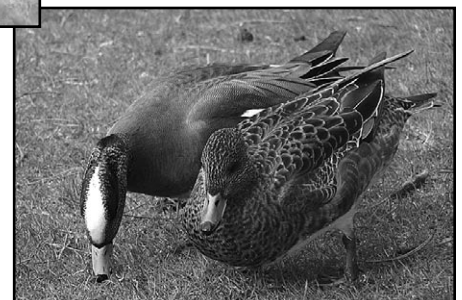
In mid-September the breeding season for **Roosevelt Elk** begins. At William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge, watch half-ton bulls sparring and bugling to win the favor of the cow herds. **American Wigeons** are returning from their northern breeding grounds to winter in the valley. The acorns ripen and fall from **Oregon White Oaks** in time for jays and squirrels to cache food for winter. 🦉



*Roosevelt Elk*



*Oregon White Oak acorns*



*American Wigeon*

# Events Calendar

## Naturalist Adventure

Free, Monthly

Meet at Avery Park Rose Garden, Avery Park in Corvallis

**Tracking - Wild Edibles - Native Plants - Birding**

Each trip will focus on a seasonal topic of interest. Sometimes we may seek edible plants, find mushrooms, visit a tracking spot or watch birds. Trips will be conducted in a holistic, 'poke-around' fashion. If you want to learn about tracking, these field trips are for you. Children are welcome, but trips are not structured for small children (under 8 years, call or email with questions). Please leave dogs at home. Bring water, binoculars, rain gear, and shoes that can get muddy. Led by Don Boucher, 541-753-7689, bouchdon@peak.org

**Sundays: 9am – Noon**

June 17—led by Mike Albrecht 541-752-4667

July 15

Aug 19

Sept 16

## Bicycle Birding

Free

9 AM–noon. Meet at the Avery Park Rose Garden (except May 27). 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, 541-753-7689, bouchdon@peak.org

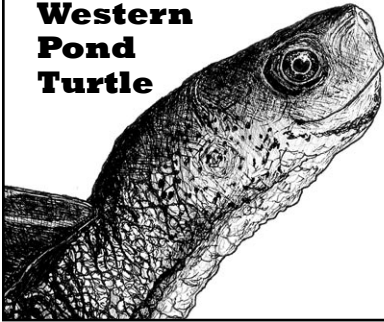
**Sundays: 9am – Noon**

**June 24 • July 22 • Aug 26 • Sept 23**



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