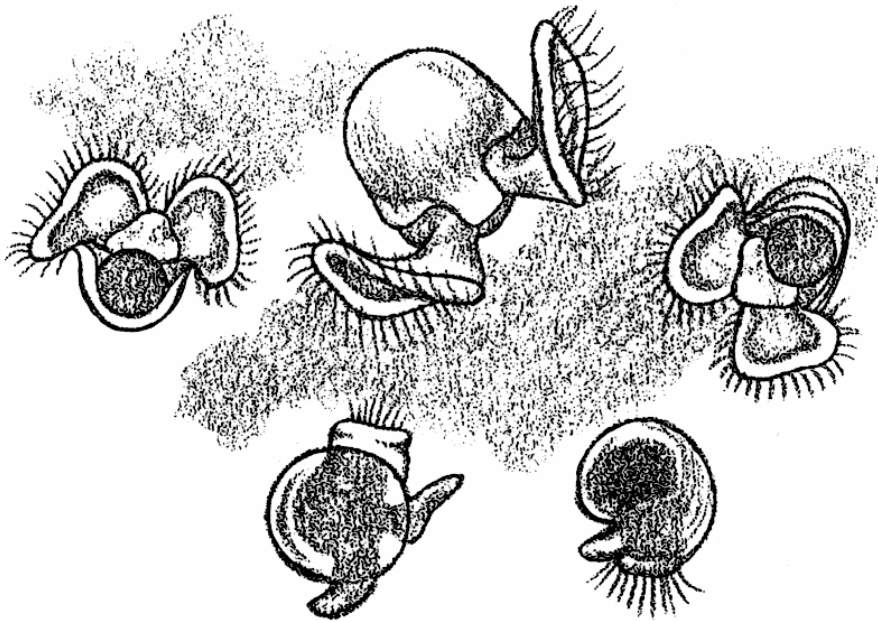


Spring on the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht



Spring often roars into Oregon in the form of a pounding storm, something many call an equinoctial storm. Contrary to popular belief, however, such storms have nothing to do with the equinox. The spring or vernal equinox is one of two times during

the year when the sun crosses the plane of the earth's equator. This occurs about March 21, when days and nights are of approximately equal length around the world.

Though the day itself might be no different from the one that preceded it or the one to follow, it marks the beginning of a gradual awakening in the estuary. If the winter has been mild, some signs might already be pointing to that awakening, as if the snooze alarm had been going off every few days.

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During spring, the estuary literally comes to life. As days grow longer and temperatures rise, plant growth increases--from the single-celled phytoplankton thriving in the estuary's nutrient-rich waters to the lush plants foliating in the marshes and the trees rising above them.

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Zooplankton populations explode in the spring and continue to flourish well into summer. Among them are the holoplankton, which spend their entire lives in the estuary as plankton and include copepods and mysids; meroplankton are in the estuary temporarily in this form as the embryo and larval stages of such diverse species as clams, shrimps, crabs, sea stars, sea urchins, and fishes.

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Flocks of migrating birds and waterfowl swell the ranks of resident and overwintering populations. Some, such as cinnamon teal, stop only briefly on the estuary to feed and rest. A few linger longer before heading farther north, while others remain to join resident populations that will court and build nests in the marshes, meadows, and forests on the fringes of the estuary. Most will be rearing fledglings by season's end.

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Sunny days invite hikers and nature observers to explore the estuary's edges, canoeists and kayakers to paddle its backwaters and sloughs. Fickle weather delights the outdoor photographer, whose subjects, large and small, are endless in the estuarine environment.

Spring on the estuary is a time of vitality and variety. As it ages toward summer, it often seems a reward for our having put up with winter.