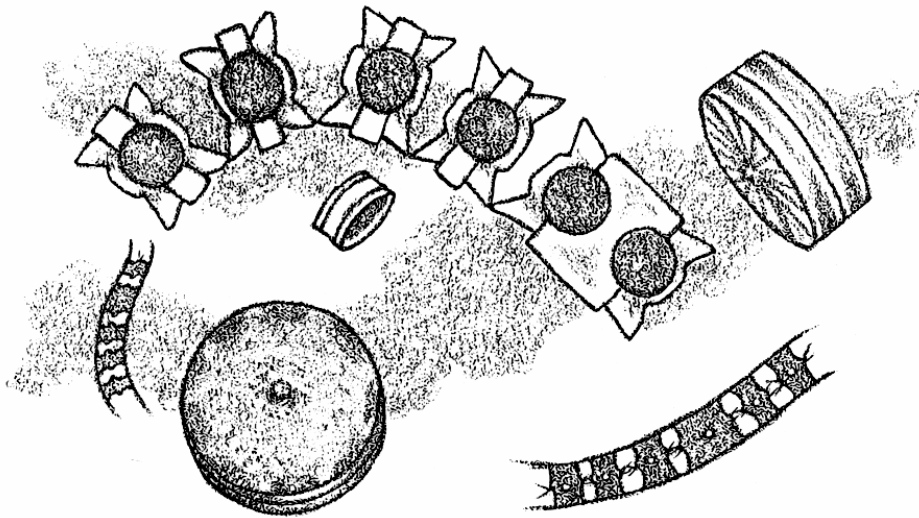


Summer on the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht



Were it not for calendar and clock, summer would likely sneak up unnoticed on the Oregon coast. Its official arrival, about June 21, is heralded by the summer solstice, when the sun reaches its northernmost point on the

celestial sphere, 23.5 degrees north of the celestial equator. This is one of two times during the year when such distance exists between sun and equator, and is marked by the longest period of sunlight of any calendar day.

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By the time summer comes to the estuary, many of the processes and activities of the season are already underway. Rainfall has greatly diminished or ceased altogether. Summer temperature patterns have taken over. The volume of fresh water flowing into the estuary declines and becomes warmer. Water clarity increases, allowing for greater sunlight penetration.

Aquatic and terrestrial plants respond by growing faster than at any other time of the year. Plant-eating organisms likewise thrive.

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On the marshes and in the backwaters of the estuaries, mallard, wood duck, and merganser parents trail trains of fuzzy ducklings behind them.

Ospreys hover and dive, hover and dive, on their day-long fishing forays, catching food for their hungry and growing broods.

Brown pelicans, so graceful on the wing, make crashing spectacles of themselves when they spot forage fish swimming below. They tuck their wings, stretch their necks, and simply let gravity take its course. They're a summer delight, and their numbers seem to be increasing on the bay--a hopeful sign for a species that's been on earth for 30 million years, but nevertheless barely escaped extinction in the 1970s because its food was so contaminated with DDT.

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Salinity of the estuary's waters is higher in the summer and early autumn than the rest of the year, causing the saltwater boundary to migrate farther landward, sometimes coaxing estuarine and marine animals farther up the bay. Lingcod, cabezon, and rockfish--normally associated with offshore reefs--frequently move into the bay during the summer months to feed. Young lingcod and rockfish move well up the estuary in search of food. Even adult sharks cruise the bay miles from the ocean and occasionally surprise a perch angler.

Sea-run cutthroat trout move into Oregon estuaries in late August and early September, feeding as they migrate toward fresh water to spawn. Summer steelhead also move through some estuaries and into the rivers in September. Crabbing is often good on the estuary during summer months, but the catch will include crabs in the soft-shell stage, which must be released. Cycles of the year's lowest tides occur throughout summer, exposing many acres of tidal flats for clam digging.

Summer is also a good time to learn about the estuary and its inhabitants. The Oregon Institute of Marine Biology at Charleston offers courses to the public during the summer. The South Slough National Estuarine Reserve has a bevy of workshops, organized nature hikes, and canoe trips on the slough. For those who prefer to go on their own, trails at the South Slough are open all daylight hours.

Summer's a great time to pack a lunch with the binoculars and camera, and get to know Oregon's estuaries.

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