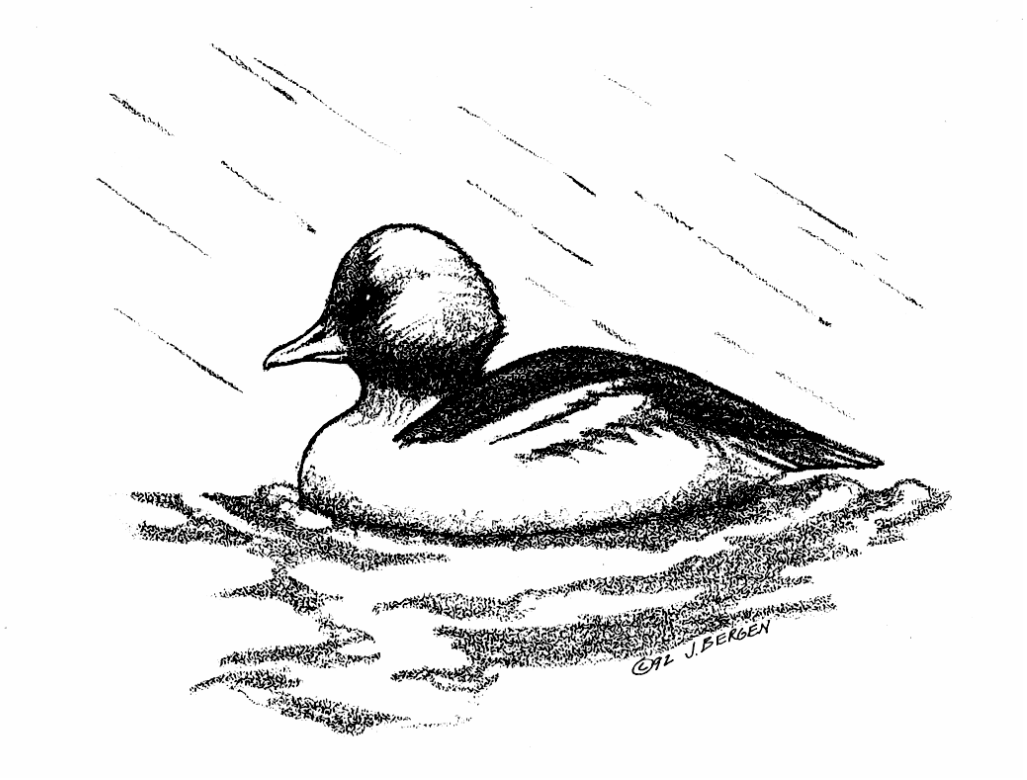
Winter on the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht



Winter has earned a bad reputation on the Oregon coast, but if it ever lived up to its full potential, few of us would find it bearable, year in, year out. Sometimes winter lashes the jagged coast and turns the bay a lifeless gray. Storm on storm, wave on ceaseless wave. Trees topple, taking power lines with them. Rivers spill their banks. Occasionally we even get a hard freeze, or the rare bit of snow. But not every winter, and not all winter long.

We get breaks, respites from the storms and norms--blue holes in the skies of our discontent, wisps of warmth carried on foreign breezes, shafts of slanted sunlight that seem to probe the bay for signs of life, reminders of Junes gone by. John Greenleaf Whittier called winter the mother of spring. Hold that thought, John.

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Winter solstice is the pistol shot that starts the season. This occurs when the sun reaches its southernmost point, 23.5 degrees south of the celestial equator, about December 22. It's the day of the year we get the least amount of sunlight. We usually think of it as the year's shortest day or longest night.

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marine animals react in kind, moving farther downbay or even into the ocean.

Swollen tributaries also carry an increased silt load, creating turbidity in the bay and decreasing sunlight penetration, impeding photosynthesis. Plankton production plummets.

Coos Bay remains fairly well-mixed all year, but in winter, mixing of fresh and salt water is enhanced by the amount and turbulence of the fresh water entering the estuary. Consequently, oxygen-rich surface waters are churned toward bottom to benefit animals dwelling there.

Water quality can suffer from the excessive runoff of winter. Waterborne sediments carried in the currents of creeks and rivers often bear the pollutants of industry, agriculture, and human habitation.

Marsh vegetation dies back and is broken down to become part of the detritus supply of the bay and nourish the many detritus-feeding organisms.

Local flooding is common during the winter rainy season. When storms combine with high spring tides during persistent westerly or southwesterly onshore winds, lowland flooding is almost assured.

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With overwintering and migrating flocks joining resident populations, bird and waterfowl numbers peak during the winter on Coos Bay. Birders and photographers find the greatest variety and concentration on Pony Slough and North Slough.

The winter months offer some of the best crabbing of the year between storms. During periods of heavy rains and runoff, though, crabs migrate downbay.

A few hardy anglers, crabbers, wildlife watchers, and outdoor photographers get out on the estuary during the winter. For the most part, though, we hunker under the season and button up against it, waiting for her to give birth to spring.

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