Klickitat Wild

Discovering Swale Creek

By Bill Weiler

One doesn't forget a sight like this: Three mountain lions scampered down a slope, one mama and two grown kits. Mama clenched a full-grown turkey in her jaws. Her offspring matched her every stride. They knew what was coming for dinner.

Welcome to the wild world of Swale Creek, Klickitat County, Columbia River Gorge.

East of the wind-surfing haven of Hood River—where oaks and pines dominate—the terrain turns soft sienna, and a hidden, little-traveled gem, Swale Creek Canyon in Washington state, awaits.

Swale Creek is the secret prize of the 31-mile Klickitat Rails-to-Trails system, the most remote section winding 11 miles one way.

Starting at the Harms Road Bridge trailhead, one enters a natural community of flowing grasses and volcanic outcrops.

The gentle trail never strays from Swale Creek, a stream hiding steelhead trout and ample cover for ducks and herons.

Plenty of prey is available for the 11 raptor species found here, including bald and golden eagles and the rarer ferruginous hawk.

Swale Creek is an outstanding birding area.

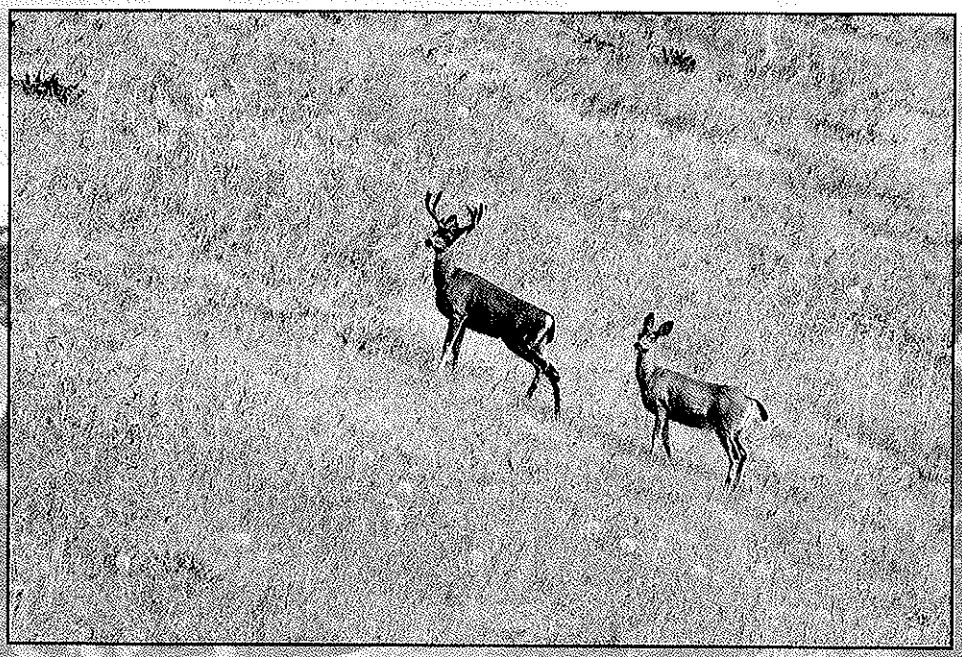
Plenty of spring migrant birds hang out amidst the dwarf white oak trees. Apparently, smaller oaks are magnets for a variety of moth species, which are in turn gobbled by insect-munching birds, contributing to the rich avian life.

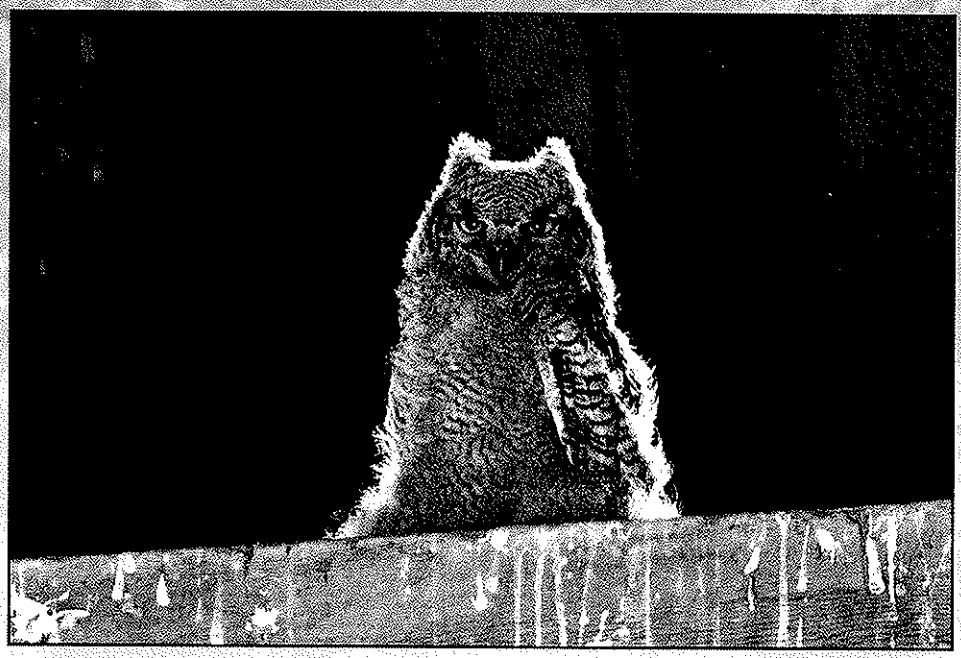
In addition to the occasional big cat, coyotes, bobcats, threatened

western gray squirrels and lots of deer roam the Swale Creek landscape.

Botanically rich Catherine Creek —located 20 miles away—attracts the wildflower-loving crowds, but here is secret No. 2: a wider variety of wildflowers exists along Swale Creek.

Habitat diversity comes quickly here. Grasslands, cliffs and water yield downstream to aspen, pine and





Top, deer are abundant on the slopes and in the meadows along Swale Creek. ***Above,*** *an owl keeps a wary eye on visitors.* ***Opposite page,*** *a turkey wanders amoung the tall grasses. Photos by Allen Weiss.*

Douglas fir forests, with the citrus-sweet scent of mock orange and the soothing sounds of water rounding out a highly sensory environment.

Unique and Significant

The Swale Creek Canyon is a critical link between two of the largest publicly owned conservation areas in Klickitat County.

To the south, the 3,000-acre Columbia Hills State Park exudes beauty, recreational opportunities and cultural treasures.

The Columbia Hills Natural Area Preserve (NAP) borders the state park on the north. The NAP was set aside for a cavalcade of botanical blooms, both common and rare.

Swale Creek Canyon is a ribbon of beauty leading to the Klickitat River and the 13,000-acre Klickitat Wildlife Area.

Swale Creek Location

From the town of Lyle on Highway 14, turn onto the Centerville Highway. Wind up the two-lane road above the Klickitat River and head northeast about 16 miles to Harms Road. Turn left onto Harms Road and go about one mile to the Swale Creek trailhead. A portable toilet is at the trailhead. ■

A few tips for the hiker and bicyclist

- ➜ If you plan to hike or bike oneway, consider a shuttle vehicle at the terminus of the Swale Creek trail section, at the parking area by Schilling Road. It's a long way back, and you don't want to be "up the creek."
- ➜ Bring water. There are no places to fill a canteen along the way. After May, most of Swale Creek goes dry.
- ➜ If you stray off the railroad bed, expect a tick or two to find you from February to June.
- ➜ Be advised that almost all of the land bordering the trail is privately owned, so please respect landowner signs and close any livestock gates you may encounter.
- ➜ If you explore the rocky spots, watch where you place your hands to prevent any rattlesnake encounters.
- ➜ Leave your swimsuit at home. Swale Creek can be mostly dry, and even if a few pools exist, they are full of algae.

If you like to be alone, away from the masses, the Swale Creek trail is for you. The trail receives little use, especially weekdays. ■