

Dirt Time at the Refuge



BY: **MARY FRENCH**

It is 6:00am, Wednesday, May 1. The eastern sky begins to glow red, orange, then white as the sun rises on another day. A very special day. My “dirt time” on this day will be on trails I have not walked for seven months. For on May 1 the seasonal trails open at the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge.

There is a place, basically in Tualatin’s backyard, where you can learn about dirt time, seasonal trails, and much more. That place is the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge – or “the Refuge” as us regulars call it. Located just off Pacific Highway in Sherwood, you will find Refuge headquarters, the Wildlife Center, and acres of land that has been set aside for wildlife, which you and your family can explore.

In 1992, with a gift of 12 acres from Tom Stibolt and Lisa Brenner of Sherwood, the formation of the Refuge began. Over the years, through the tireless work of the Friends of the Refuge and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, what was once primarily a dairy farm and onion fields became a protected wetlands, riparian forest, and oak savannah that is home to over 200 species of birds, 50 species of mammals, 25 species of reptiles and amphibians, and a huge variety of native plants and insects.



Western Trillium.

As a refuge, these lands have been set aside as a sanctuary for wildlife. This means that of the 1,856 acres that make up the Refuge over its five units, only one unit is open for public access – the 450 acre Atfalati unit just off Pacific Highway. The Atfalati unit offers miles of trails to explore, some of which are wheelchair and stroller friendly.

I volunteer at the Refuge as a naturalist and a trail rover which means I put in a lot of dirt time – walking the trails, talking with visitors, pointing out interesting plants,



A White-Crowned Sparrow at the trailhead.

animals, birds, and marveling at the beauty of a place so close to home. Each fall, October 1 to be exact, the majority of the trails of the Atfalati unit are closed, for it is during this time that the fields are allowed to flood in preparation for the thousands of migrating waterfowl that call the Refuge home all winter long. During these months, my dirt time is limited to the year-round two mile out and back trail that meanders past small ponds (once hog wallows), through the oak savannah and riparian forest, to the wetlands overlook at the back of the Refuge. Don’t get me wrong, being “limited” to this year-round trail is fine for there is much to see in these ponds, fields, forests and wetlands from black tail deer, mink and river otter to Bald Eagles and on any given day up to 25 different species of water birds and nearly as many species of songbirds.

Yet even with this diversity, the re-opening of the seasonal trails on May 1 is a reason for celebration. With all trails open, there are nearly three miles of trails to walk, allowing close up viewing of the drained fields and remaining ponds and wetlands, with their wildflowers and songbirds that have arrived to summer over at the Refuge. This is the time to see Savannah Sparrow, Marsh Wren, Lazuli Bunting, as well as many goslings and ducklings that have hatched out in the weeks

before. Over the ponds, especially in the early mornings and early evenings, hundreds of swallows twist, dive, and skim the water for insects – Barn, Violet-Green, Tree and Cliff Swallows are the most common. And early morning on a warm summer day, in my experience, is the best time to see a coyote on the Refuge – while the morning fog hangs on the fields and birdsong fills the air.

Interested in doing some dirt time? Here are some things to help you plan your trip to the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge.

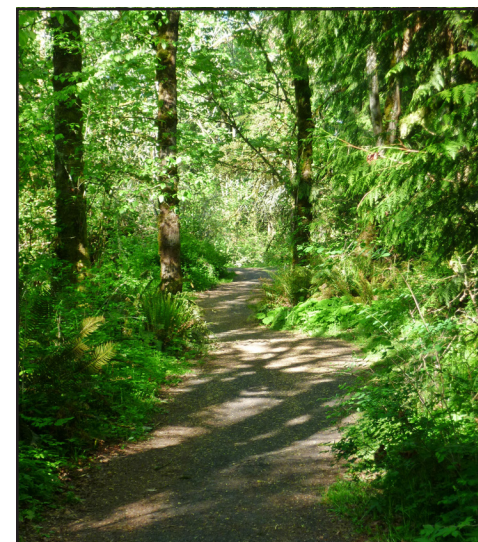
First off, remember, this is a wildlife sanctuary, a safe place that animals and birds call home. So please stay on the trails; leave your pets at home; walk the trail - jogging and bicycles are not allowed; enjoy the plants where you see them – no collecting. Bring your camera, your drawing pad, your nature notebook and take time recording your visit.

- The Refuge address is 19255 SW Pacific Highway (Highway 99W) and is open from dawn to dusk every day.
- Visiting the Refuge is free. There is plenty of parking.
- The Wildlife Center is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00am to 4:00pm. The center is closed on Mondays. The center has a gift shop, restrooms, and an exhibit area with murals, dioramas, and informational displays about the history of the Refuge, the plants and animals who call the Refuge home, and of the native people who once lived here.



Oregon White Oak trees about 350 years old.

- There is a covered picnic area and additional restrooms at the trailhead. These restrooms are open dawn to dusk every day.
- During spring and summer, when all trails are open, there is a vault restroom available at the opposite (West) end of the unit approximately one mile away, so plan accordingly.
- Trail Maps and other Refuge brochures are available at the trailhead as well as online at <http://www.fws.gov/tualatinriver/visit.html>.
- Pack with you the things you will need for comfort during your dirt time such as water, hat, sunscreen, snacks, etc. There are no garbage cans on the trail, so please carry out everything you carry in. There are water fountains and garbage cans at the Wildlife Center.
- Bring binoculars for a closer encounter with the various birds and other wildlife that live here.



The forest trail.

- Check the events calendar to see what is happening at the Refuge. The calendar can be found at www.fws.gov/tualatinriver/specialevents.html.
- Come to the **2013 Tualatin River Bird Festival on May 18!** This is the biggest event of the year at the Refuge with guided walks, conservation exhibits, food booths, and more! Find details at tualatinriverbirdfestival.org.
- If you like what you see, consider joining the Friends of the Refuge (www.friendsoftualatinrefuge.org) or becoming a volunteer.

Lastly, look for myself and other Refuge volunteers & say “Hello” – we are the people in blue vests, with US Fish and Wildlife Volunteer badges, and yellow name tags. Our job as volunteers is to make your visit to the Refuge safe and memorable, something you will want to experience again and again. Come out and enjoy the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge.



Mary French is a native Oregonian who lives in Tualatin. She is a Volunteer Naturalist with the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge, and has completed the Oregon Master Naturalist program with Oregon State University.