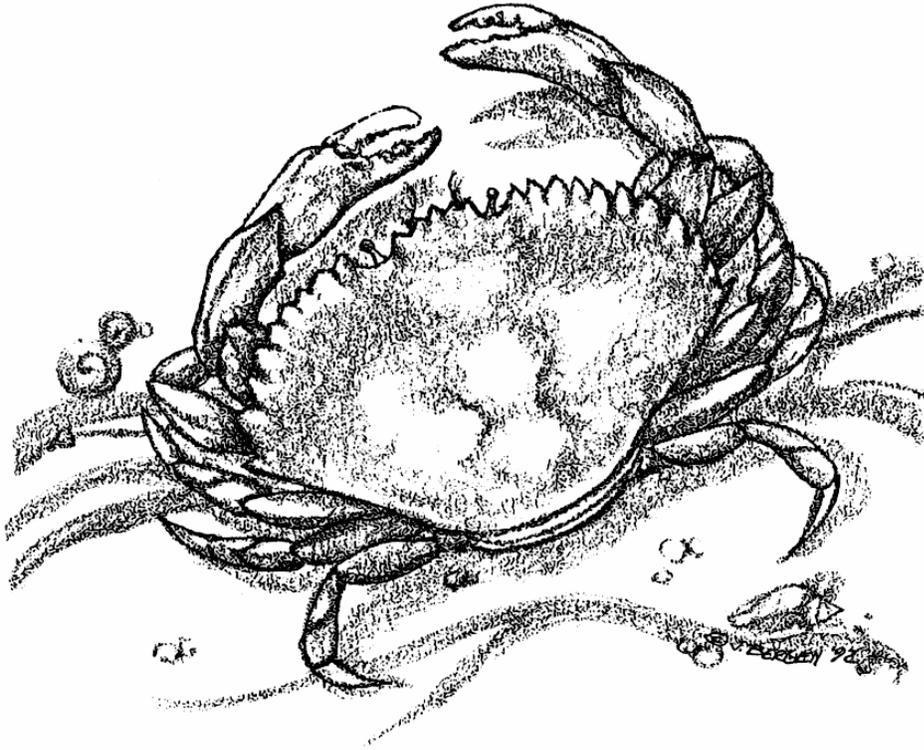


# Autumn on the Estuary

by Kenn Oberrecht

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*Although autumn is generally the most dramatically changeable season on the Oregon coast, early autumn seems only a continuation of summer patterns and processes. Indeed, the streams feeding Oregon's estuaries run clear and low then. Air*

*temperatures remain warm and are sometimes the highest of the year. Correspondingly, estuarine waters are relatively warm and salty.*

*Marsh plants also begin to die back and decompose, an important process that recharges the estuary's nutrient supply.*

By the end of autumn, the estuary will have changed considerably. Tributaries will be running colder and might be high and roilly. The estuary's salinity will have decreased, and the saltwater boundary will have migrated seaward.

Autumn arrives at the point of autumnal equinox, when the sun crosses the plane of the earth's equator for the second time of the year. That happens about September 22, when days and nights are of approximately equal length.

Warm weather usually continues through September and early October, and might proceed on to November. As the hours of daylight decline, however, the bay begins to cool.

Foliage changes color and dies. Alders lose their leaves. Those that fall into the rivers, creeks, swamps, and marshes darken the water as they decompose, reducing sunlight penetration. Marsh plants also begin to die back and decompose, an important process that recharges the estuary's nutrient supply.

Roughly coinciding with this process is a seasonal upwelling offshore. Flood tides rush into the estuary bearing nutrients from the ocean bottom, triggering an autumn plankton bloom on the bay.

Abundant berries in the thickets along the edges of the estuaries continue to ripen, providing food for many birds, mammals, and humans.

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Waterfowl and other migratory birds begin arriving. Tiny green-winged teal are the first to show up, usually in September, in their sporadic, darting-and-diving flocks. The first bad weather up north drives other puddle ducks down--the mallards, pintails, and gadwalls. After Thanksgiving, the diver ducks pour in with every storm front.

The rains of autumn change the estuary's salinity and signal the salmon schooling offshore. During times of drought, some coho and fall chinook seem to grow impatient and meander in, a few at a time, rain or not.

Minus-tide cycles swing to the graveyard shift, and most clam diggers just give up till spring. Crabbing, on the other hand can be best of all in the fall, with the catch hard-shelled, plump, and tasty. Torrential rains, however, freshen the estuary and drive the crabs downbay to water of higher salinity.

Autumn at the South Slough Estuarine Reserve is when educational programs get underway for the academic year. During the months that follow, the reserve hosts as many as 3,000 students from throughout the state who come to take advantage of the formal programs offered. Thousands more will visit the reserve on an informal basis, hike the trails, and learn on their own with materials available at the interpretive center. Although summer hours no longer apply at the interpretive center, the hiking trails remain open all daylight hours all year.

Like spring, autumn offers tremendous variety on the estuary. It's a busy time, too, with opportunities abounding for those who will take the time to observe and participate.

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