



Urban cave man

Walking the Springwater on the Willamette path is an exercise in industrial sightseeing

We skitter across the surface of the planet, rarely thinking about what lies beneath — the folks driving on Southeast McLoughlin Boulevard near the Ross Island Bridge, for instance, are likely unaware that they trundle over a causeway laid atop a moonscape of boulders and spooky caves.

I had no idea either, until a sunny morning a couple of weeks ago when I walked downtown from Westmoreland along the recently completed Springwater on the Willamette path. I knew the topside of McLoughlin reasonably well,

having spent decades as a dedicated Sou'easter. I've often driven the street and live a couple of blocks away from it. In all those years, I never suspected caves lurking under my wheels.

But there they were, gazing out over the river like a skull's bottomless eye sockets. McLoughlin is perhaps 80 feet above the path, up a precipitous hillside covered with scrubby brush, litter and discarded clothing. (For people obviously live or have lived under the

piers of the roadway, enhancing the spookiness factor, especially as dawn was just breaking.)

The caves were just one of the many discoveries of that morning, and they all reaffirmed the joys of scuttling about in the foundations of our urban world. The Springwater path combines urban exploration with the massive, calm presence of the river and all its wildlife. By taking what was industrial scrubland and reframing it, the path reorders our perception.



OUT THERE

John Foyston

The Springwater on the Willamette Trail is perfect for urban exploration. This power pylon from the 1920s is right next to Linda Wysong's public art piece, "Shifting Assets."

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In the mile or more from my house near the Oaks Bottom trailhead to the Ross Island Bridge, I'd already seen a bottomless lagoon, public art both intentional and accidental, the place where concrete trucks go to die, giant machines munching gravel like a hungry kid with a handful of Reese's Pieces, squabbling geese, swimming nutria, enough wild clematis plants to choke an ecosystem and now, caves under the road.

Still to come: the exotic dance of the forklifts, a real submarine and the revelation of the Ross Island Bridge's sur-

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Urban: Readymix plant offers plenty to gawk at

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prising, if austere, beauty when dawn is breaking and the mists swirling. But first a bit of background.

The Springwater on the Willamette Trail is the latest part of the Springwater Corridor, which extends from Southeast Ivon Street near OMSI to Boring. The existing 14-mile path stops east of McLoughlin Boulevard. The new river section adds another three miles to the total — from OMSI south past Oaks Park — but the two segments won't be linked until about 2006.

When all is complete and linked to the Eastside Esplanade and westside trails, Portland will have one of the biggest urban trail systems in the country. But you can enjoy some first-rate urban exploration right now, because the new path follows the old Portland Traction railway line — is separated from it by a three-mile-long fence — and railway lines traditionally serve the industrial part of town.

The 12-foot-wide asphalt path passes the backside of the Ross Island Sand & Gravel headquarters on McLoughlin Boulevard, its mining operation out in the Ross Island Lagoon and the Drymix

and Readymix Plant just north of the Ross Island Bridge.

All make for good industrial sightseeing, though the mining operations are distant, across the Holgate Slough on the bank of Ross Island. And the headquarters (the concrete-mixer-truck graveyard is in a corner of the bottom lot) is screened by tall cyclone fences and block walls.

But the Readymix plant is right there for the gawking: The path goes hard by the plant's boundary, and several tons of machinery hulk just on the other side of the tall fence. There are tall silos, settling ponds and a web of five conveyor belts that feed gravel from huge piles into shakers and sifters and mixers.

Forklifts dart under cascading hoppers clutching yellow tubs now holding 2½ tons of rock; a crane pivots majestically over that huge gravel pile as the operator opens the bucket (which is polished and shiny from use) and unloads with hardly a pause in his traverse; backup horns hoot and rock, crushers squawk and growl. Should a person be doomed to spend much of the day in nonsensical meetings, it's no bad thing to begin that day with the sights and sounds of real work.

Most of the walk is quieter: Geese honk overhead, fish splash occasionally, the rising sun gilds the West Hills, and at your back you always hear the grumble and cluck of derailleurs as yet another bicyclist draws near. The path winds through flat grassland with benches and picnic tables occasionally set on the verge. About a quarter-mile south of the Ross Island bridge are the prepared stones and grassy berms of Linda Wysong's public art piece, "Shifting Assets."

The piece is interesting in its own right: Three concrete stub walls radiate from the larger berm like a small, inscrutable Stonehenge. Three of the large stones in the group have been sliced horizontally several times and reassembled with thick sheets of steel or plate glass interposed to create bands of green or rust. The glass bands glow green in the dawn.

Wysong also chose her location well. By placing her artful assemblage next to some very unintentional public art that we'd never have seen were it not for this path, she emphasizes how the trail re-frames this land and our vision. Near the installation, some big abandoned piers jut from the river like ancient ru-

ins. Their concrete is dark, granitic, crumbling and frosted with fluorescent green lichen.

Just to the north soars an old power pylon built sometime early last century and still used by Pacific Power and Light to send power lines over to Ross Island and then to the west bank. Its concrete piers are stained from nearly a century of use, and the tower is built of fabricated beams — flanged beams laced together by hundreds of riveted iron straps. Except for being steel and not duralumin, they look for all the world like trusses from the Graf Zeppelin.

Along the Springwater path, art is where you find it.

Enter the path at its north end by the Ross Island Sand & Gravel Readymix plant, 2611 S.E. Fourth Ave. You can get on the southern end at Southeast Spokane Street near Oaks Park. For more information, call Portland Parks and Recreation, 503-823-7529, or www.parks.ci.portland.or.us/Planning/SpringwaterOMSI.htm.

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