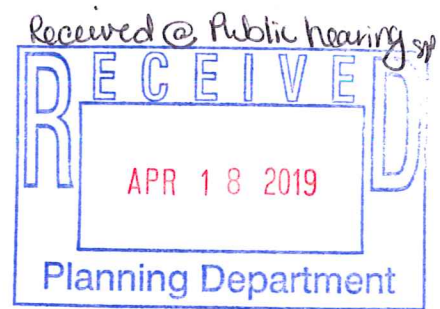


**IN DEFENSE OF THE WILD**



My name is Scott T. Wellman, and my wife and I live on Pinot Noir Drive in the subdivision known as Oak Ridge. Subdivisions are often given high-falutin names such as Tuscan Villas or Pembroke Estates, but for our neighborhood the developer stuck with what is obvious: we live on a ridge where there are a large number of oak trees! Below our ridge is a basin, a basin that has been created by the action of a creek, named for the once prominent Mr. Baker, that has been flowing down from the western hills for countless centuries. This basin is integral to the cycle of the creek, because it is this basin that absorbs flood water when rains overwhelm the creek's relatively shallow bed. Over the entire length of Baker Creek there is only one place upstream where there is flooding, caused mainly by the removal of all the riparian foliage at a crucial bend. Below that point, Baker Creek is joined by Berry Creek from the north and the Draper Farms creek from the south, increasing its volume significantly. Thus, the dynamics of the creek dictate the largest portion of the floodwaters pour into the basin below us, with water of some depth covering the entire surface.

Over time the flooding has created a wetland out of this basin, encompassing some 60 percent of the 25 acres of land involved. It is also clearly established that waters accumulate here as a result of drainage from the ridge above, and from springs below. These entirely natural forces have created a refuge for animals of all kinds, the most obvious being the deer and the birds. But though we don't often see them, frogs abound, and raise a chorus in every season, including winter! They need to keep themselves hidden because there are both mammals and birds that prey upon them, mammals that may include raccoons and coyotes, both of whom have been observed in the basin, and a great many predatory birds, including vultures, eagles, hawks, owls, and the occasional egret.

The Audubon Society has noted that there are some 40 species of birds altogether who take advantage of the wetland basin to find food and to make nests. Most prominent are the Acorn Woodpeckers who live along the ridge finding their home in the dense oak groves to the west. Ornithologists reveal that this is a rare convergence of a large colony of nesting birds, whose welfare would be seriously threatened by the loss of many more oak trees. Other rare birds who make this basin home include the California Quail (not seen anywhere else in McMinnville), coveys of which are often spotted on the slopes of the basin, taking cover in the extensive blackberry thickets. Flocks of geese, pairs of ducks, and other waterfowl are also frequent visitors.

When you flip through a bird guide such as "Birds of the Willamette Valley Region," what you notice is that so many of the birds share a fondness for a certain kind of habitat: open lowlands, brushy river edges, wetland verges, shrubby hillsides, and the fringes of human habitation. These birds, including various species of sparrows, wrens, warblers, finches, and swallows, as well as such larger birds as flickers, tanagers, blue jays, waxwings, and so forth, flock to this basin because it has every feature that is characteristic of their normal habitat. The blackbird is particularly conspicuous in how it takes advantage of the wetland, establishing nests among the dead grasses on its borders, with the males posting guard in the stunted trees and dive bombing any living thing that comes near.

Needless to say, the construction of seven houses wedged along the slopes of the basin, and the intrusion of a paved road along the edge of the wetland, would destroy most of the habitat that attracts such a fascinating variety of birds. If we then consider the addition of another eight homes in the proposed cul-de-sac area, on wetlands that have supposedly been mitigated by several feet of fill dirt, then we have some 15 houses and something over 30 cars, along with who knows how many barking dogs, growling lawn mowers, and buzzing leaf

blowers. And then there would be the children, not known for being subdued when playing outside. This may not drive away all the deer, but it would seriously inhibit them, and deprive us of the joy of seeing them cavorting in spring when the fawns are born, or in squaring off to spar when the rut begins in fall. Certainly there would be wetland remaining, but it is the edge or verges of the wetlands that are key to these birds and animals. That is where they forage for their food and make their nests, not in the open water. Additionally, home and street lighting would have a detrimental effect on the many creatures who use the night as protective cover for their activities.

Conservationists since John Muir have done all they could possibly do to impress upon us the need to keep ecosystems intact, not only for the benefit of the plants and animals involved, but for the benefit to human well-being. Here in Oregon we know only too well about the disasters that can ensue when the ecosystems of the ocean, the rivers, and the forests are disrupted. Closer to home we have water shortages that come with the destruction of wetlands, the depletion of water tables, and the failure of aquifers as Yamhill County Commissioner, Casey Kulla, has recently pointed out.

Henry David Thoreau once wisely remarked in an essay entitled simply "Walking" that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." Rivers that remain wild, wetlands that are left wild, riparian plants that are kept wild, all help to preserve the balance that our world depends upon. But the wild is also an aspect of human consciousness. There has been a lot of discussion recently in the media about the fragility of our mental health these days, and of the mounting anxieties that have come with the rise of social media and the status competition of consumer society. There is a rush that seems always upon us, and that we often seek to escape by going away. We go away to the expansive wilderness of our mountain parks, or we go away to the vast sandy beaches of our ocean shoreline. But isn't it infinitely better (and not to mention more

affordable) to find some of the wild right here in a neighborhood setting where all can be nurtured by the undisturbed elements? I urge you to set aside these 11 and a half acres of the Baker Creek Wetland Basin as a nature preserve where citizens from across the city may come, enjoy, and learn. As it says in McMinnville's own natural resource policy goals, and I cite number 168: "Distinctive natural features and areas shall be retained, wherever possible, in future urban developments." Well, the Baker Creek Wetland Basin is as distinct a feature as it comes, and its preservation eminently possible.