

Long Tom Watershed Council

By ED ALVERSON

For a few weeks in April and May, certain prairies, meadows and pastures in the Long Tom watershed will take on a solid blue hue as the camas lilies come into bloom. Camas lilies can grow in great abundance in low, seasonally wet areas that were open prairies 150 years ago when the first white settlers arrived in the Willamette Valley. Camas was a culturally important plant for many Native American peoples, and the remaining patches of camas lilies today provide a direct reminder of the cultural

history of the Willamette Valley.

Camas lilies have a rosette of strap-shaped basal leaves which, on first glance, may look like grass leaves. The pale blue to purple flowers have six petals, one to two inches long, which are arranged along a stalk that is typically 18 to 24 inches tall. The "root" or bulb of the camas lily was an important food source for Native Americans throughout the Pacific Northwest, providing an abundant source of carbohydrates. It is said that the burning of prairies in the Willamette Valley was done, at least in part, for the benefit of increasing the abundance of camas and other wild root plants that grew in the prairies.

Camas lilies have declined in abundance in the past 150 years as native prairies have been utilized for farming, grazing and urban development. There were originally 300,000 acres (470 square miles) of wet prairie in the Willamette Valley, and about 35,000 acres (54 square miles) of wet prairie within the Long Tom watershed. Since the mid-1800s, the extent of wet prairie in the Willamette

Valley has been reduced to less than one percent of its original extent.

Some of the best remaining wet prairies in the Willamette Valley are protected on public lands within the Long Tom watershed. However, good camas patches can still be found on private lands in the area. Typically, these are hay fields or lightly used pastures that do not have a history of intensive agriculture. Camas lilies are more tolerant of disturbance than most other native prairie grasses and wildflowers.

Landowners can ensure the continued survival of camas lilies on their property by avoiding disturbance when the plants are in active growth in the spring, and by following practices that prevent blackberries, brush, and other shading vegetation from taking over. Cutting the grass for hay in summer, or mowing after the camas seed has matured, actually stimulates the growth and flowering of camas lilies the following year, possibly in much the same way fire kept the prairies open in earlier times.

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