

# *Nature Trails*

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## **La Niña, El Niño, and La Nada: The Big Weather Makers in the Northwest**

John Fischer

Former Chief Meteorologist, KEZI, Eugene, Oregon

**Friday, 20 May 2011, 7:30pm, Room 100  
Willamette Hall, UO Campus**

John Fischer is a happy man. He did what most of us fantasize about doing but don't have the guts actually to do: he quit his day job early enough so he could tick off the items on his life's to-do list while he still has the energy and the desire to do them. Such items as: ski, hike, garden, prune, recycle, bike-ride, compost, drywall (drywall?). One of the hikes he had wanted to do for a long time, the John Muir Trail in California's Sierra Nevadas, takes about four weeks, but while he was working his vacations were never long enough. After he retired he and two of his three daughters completed this adventure. With his luxuriant beard and thin, erect frame Fischer looks a bit like a modern-day Muir; in fact, he has plans to do some readings of Muir's prose, in period costume. Who knows, he may even do one for us.

The majority of you know what Fischer retired from; he was KEZI's chief meteorologist for many years. Perhaps the only persons pleased by his decision to step away from the camera were the weather-presenters on the other TV stations in our area. No longer would all of them be playing second fiddle.

Fischer knew at age five that he wanted to be a weatherman. Like most of us, though, his path to his ultimate career was, if not tortuous, at least decidedly crooked. He grew up in the hills above Oakland, California, with a big wood to play in across the street from the family home. When he was sixteen his family moved to Spring, Texas (residents pronounce it Sprang), where he graduated from high school. He then came back to the Bay Area and lived for a couple of years with a small group that labored – and failed – to convert a piece of bayfill into an organic vegetable farm. From there he moved to Tahoe and existed for a year as a ski bum, after which he enrolled in the environmental engineering program at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, California. Two years into the program he lost interest and left to become a house builder. This lasted until the housing market soured. It was at this point in his life that he entered the University of California at Davis and got his degree in meteorology.

Fischer's first position in meteorology was at a TV station in Green Bay, Wisconsin. This sounds like a foolhardy move – Northern California to Northern Wisconsin – and when Green Bay folks would learn where he had come from their reaction was always the same: they were stunned (“You did what?”). But his parents had grown up in the area, so he had relatives there, which made the winters easier to take.

Fischer was in Green Bay for four years (he said he got to a couple of Packer games a year but didn't become a huge fan and doesn't own a Cheesehead hat). Although Green Bay's weather was more exciting than Eugene's the Eugene job was much better. He rode his bike to work in Green Bay, even in the winter, a mode of transport he maintained throughout his three decades at KEZI.

Gardening has been a life-long passion, starting when he was six, and it wasn't because of his parents. He planted a peach seed and watched it grow into a tree that one year bore so many peaches he had to prop up its limbs with boards – boards that provided ready access for the raccoons that ate every peach. Notwithstanding this severe setback, Fischer continues gardening. He does it because it's fun and healthy, and it saves money. His talks on gardening

methods (ask him about ‘lasagna gardens’) are quite popular.

Fischer continues to hike and ski, sometimes on the same outing. He likes to hike up to the top of peaks like the Middle and South Sisters, or Mt. Shasta, then put on the skis he has carried up there and ski back down. He said the round-trip on Mt. Shasta takes about 17 hours – 15 to go up and 2 to come down. As a member of the Willamette Pass Alpine Ski Patrol one of his duties is to find potential avalanches in

the Willamette Pass area and render them harmless before they take out some unfortunate skier.

Even though Fischer is busy with his many passions his interest in weather and climate has not gone away, for which we can be grateful. Fischer will be getting a little outside his comfort zone when he talks to us. He pointed out to me that he is a meteorologist, not a climatologist, and that study of the El Niño/La Niña Southern Oscillation is more in the realm of climatology than meteorology.

We can be sure, nonetheless, that John Fischer knows a lot more than we do about El Niño and La Niña events, how they form and the way they alter climate in areas far from their immediate location. He will be telling us about this, as well as talking a bit about why ‘the weatherman is always wrong’, and how the science and lore of weather forecasting has changed during the time he's been involved in the trade.

Since ‘the weather’ is something we all talk about and pay close attention to, and because he is such an excellent meteorologist and, it must be said, a bit of a ham, John Fischer's talk to the Eugene Natural History Society promises to be fascinating. Make



sure you don't miss his presentation "La Niña, El Niño, and La Nada: The Big Weather Makers in the Northwest" on Friday, 20 May 2011, at 7:30 pm, in

### **Sumptuous Masses of Bloom by Reid Kimmel**

In their book *Tree, the History and Natural History of a Douglas Fir*, David Suzuki and Wayne Grady quote John Muir's reaction to finding himself in a clearing in Oregon's ancient Douglas fir forests. "A charming wild garden...with colors so gay and forming such sumptuous masses of bloom, they make the gardens of civilization, however lovingly cared for, seem pathetic and silly." I was thinking of Muir when I walked in the cedar tree grove up the hill yesterday. The calypso orchids are more numerous this year than ever before. Pale golden fawn lilies (*Erythronium*) are everywhere under the scrubby poison oak that is the understory in these woods. The first anemones are blooming. Soon tiny pink Pacific Starflowers (*Trientalis latifolia*) will appear everywhere. However lovely, this is not the lush scene that Muir described, but in a week or so the sunny places on the hillsides beyond the cedar grove will be painted with every shade of lavender, violet and purple when the iris (*Iris tenax*) blooms. I love the way *Thermopsis*, with its bright yellow flowers, grows and blooms amongst these clumps of iris. This is more like Muir's wild garden. He'd also appreciate the acres and acres of deepest blue Camas in the Nature Conservancy's West Eugene Wetlands. Oregon's springs truly are a feast for the eyes and the soul.

This year Chuck and I were able to experience another sort of spring, in a treeless land half a world away. We walked for hours every day along a rocky, very hilly path that hugs the coast of Cornwall, England. On our one hand were stone walls and hedgerows. On the other, cliffs and the most remarkably azure, amethyst and turquoise ocean you could ever hope to see. Kestrels (not ours, but the larger *Falco tinnunculus*) hovered in the wind, hoping for a mouse or rabbit to appear. Gannets flew low over the waters, while closer inshore, fulmars, cormorants and gulls contemplated raising families on the cliff ledges. One morning, not far from The Lizard, England's most southerly peninsula, I watched a pair of choughs click bills and court before they disappeared into what appeared to be a burrow in the grass between us and the sea. I was absolutely thrilled to see these birds because choughs are rare, a red-beaked red-legged crow that has been making a recovery from near extinction during the past decade.

Room 100 Willamette Hall on the U of O campus.  
And save room for the cookies. John Carter

If the cliffs and the views were not enough to make us giddy, the endless masses of flowers, in every color, some blowsy, some dainty, scented like honey, like garlic, like the warm sea air, made my senses explode with joy. I was filled to the brim with the sun, the salty wind and the riot of color.

What exactly did we see? Gorse, neatly formed into topiary balls by the relentless winds and covered with brilliant gold flowers smelling of honey and vanilla, was a dominant species. Fritillary butterflies and huge buff-tailed and red-tailed bumblebees (*Bombus ssp*) visited the blooms. I saw several bumblebees disappear into their nests under the gorse and thought how much harder it is to follow our Oregon bumblebees to their homes. Dainty flowers, when growing in big clumps, have an enormous visual impact. Squill (*Scilla verna*) covered the most wind- and rabbit-ravaged cliff tops with tiny pale blue blooms. Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) popped out of crevices in the stone walls and along their bases. Colors within each clump were uniform, but hues varied from delicately pale to screaming shocking pink. For reds and reddish pinks there were red valerians (*Centranthus ruber*) and red champions (*Silene dioica*). Whites? There were so many white flowers, Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), white champion (*Silene alba*), and great swaths of three-cornered leek, which is a beautiful invasive species. Coastal Cornwall, particularly the Lizard Peninsula, is practically frost free, sunny but well watered and fertile. You see quite a few introduced species gone wild, thriving in disturbed areas. Yellow- and pink-flowered ice plant (*Carpobrotus edulis*) grows in profusion on the most barren and steep slopes. Monkshood (*Aconitum*) prefers moist declivities. We even saw some tamarisk bushes, looking delightfully moribund. And then there was blue, true blue, a very uncommon flower color, but here there were bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scriptus*) growing in sun and shade – acres and acres of the purest blue. In the bright sun as I looked seaward, it almost seemed that the sea and the land were merged, blue-green sea wedded to the blue flowers and green grassy stems of the bluebells. But even more amazing were the bluebells in the gardens we visited. We walked in beech woods whose understory was entirely blue with these flowers. At Trevarno Garden we read that the trees and the bluebells had been growing together

there for four hundred years, ever since tin mining had ceased on that property.

When I think about British plants, with so many species shared with Continental Europe, I recall that all of Britain's flora is alien, arriving when the glaciers retreated and before sea levels rose and cut off Britain from the rest of Europe. Perhaps that is why with the exception of Rhododendron and Japanese knotweed, recent invasive species are not loathed or particularly persecuted. People regret that in some areas the showy garden variety of bluebell (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) is hybridizing with the native bluebell (*H. non-scripta*). Unpleasant words might be spoken about three-cornered leek, which is very smelly, or the spread of ice plant, but nature lovers seem to be accepting of change. Every

## President's Corner

### Growth by Tom Titus

I've been back in Oregon longer than I was away, and it will take nine strong persons and a very mean dog to get me out of here again. But living in the Pacific Northwest does require vast amounts of patience with the weather, especially changes in the seasons. These transitions seem to occur with little respect for dates on a calendar and behave like a foot-dragging child, never ready to get out of bed or catch the bus or come in for dinner or go back to bed. Our seasons are nearly always late. In Oregon early spring is winter, and early summer is spring, and because it rains a lot in winter, it follows that there is also a lot of rain in spring. When "summer" arrives we all leave our raincoats on a hook by the door until at least the Fourth of July.

So far this spring has looked a lot like winter. Last week 15 inches of new snow fell in the mountains, and although we are officially into May, nighttime temperatures are still falling into the thirties. Many May wildflowers are two weeks behind in blooming. The Calypso orchids that Kim and I saved one year ago from an imminent clearcut are in full bloom. They are beautiful but seem so small, and like such a small gesture. But at least they are *some* thing. In the valley, giant camas, California poppies, and Oregon iris are finally opening. I am impatient in a spring like this and want to reach out and pry the late-blooming buds into full flower. But their time must arrive without my help.

The Eugene Natural History Society is now in full flower and has been for some time. Our membership continues to grow. Although we don't keep official records, anecdotal head counts indicate that monthly

discussion of the matter seems to include some reference to the fact that newly introduced species cause problems in disturbed areas. Prevention then is the cure. This is a powerful concept. People in this country are just beginning to take note of the importance of prevention in landscape management. I for one feel rather changed by my week of wallowing in floral beauty. I have a new appreciation for gorse. I plan to encourage bluebells, not in my garden beds, but under trees in my yard. I am wondering what else I can scatter around: hardy deer-resistant native plants, violets, iris, columbines and grasses. To create, not a garden bed, but a complete landscape of interesting plants and flowers is a huge challenge, but I believe that Muir was so very right when he found the greatest beauty in wildflowers.

attendance at meetings has increased and never been better. We likely set a new attendance record at Noah Strycker's penguin talk in April. New memberships have been coming in over the entire year, and thanks to these and our long-time supporters, the treasury remains in excellent shape. Money isn't everything, but a healthy bank account has allowed us to recruit new speakers that otherwise would have been financially beyond our reach not very many years ago.

Should we continue to grow? Here in Eugene "growth" is often a fightin' word. Certainly there are costs to growth, even for a local natural history society. From an environmental standpoint, resources are used to print more newsletters, and energy is consumed when more people transport themselves to meetings and speakers come from far away. Logistically, our directory must be maintained, and every month Nature Trails must be printed, folded, stamped, and mailed.

But these costs seem small compared with the benefits. Our primary mission is to provide community natural history education. This is not a frivolous endeavor. Rachel Carson understood that we will not save anything in our world that does not hold deep, emotional value for us, a view that has recently been promoted, elaborated, and expanded upon by environmental philosopher and author Kathleen Dean Moore. Developing a profound connection to our place requires knowledge of our world. We hope that we can contribute to this strong environmental ethic as more people attend our meetings and read our newsletter. So I'm glad that our Society is growing.

Is there a way in which we should grow? We have not explicitly sought to increase our membership beyond my brief monthly pitch at our general meetings. Our growth has resulted from a focus on delivering exceptional monthly programs, maintaining our presence at local natural history events, organizing field trips for our members, and producing high quality issues of Nature Trails. People are attracted to us because we are an excellent organization, not because of promotional glitz and glitter or because we have “membership goals.” Growing like this has a fundamental appeal for a natural history society dedicated to environmental education. Our development is similar to that of forests sustained by deep healthy soils, as opposed to many “third-growth” tree plantations that are nursed along on depleted soil by pelletized fertilizers. Nourishing soils are complex biological communities produced from small, incremental additions of organic material over long periods of time. These soils nurture the plants, animals, and fungi that over

the years contribute leaves, lichens, stools, stems, and stipes back to the ground on which they grow. This seems an excellent model for sustained growth.

The Eugene Natural History Society has remained fertile and healthy because of the collective contributions of your memberships, your ideas, and your time. These inputs have made us a model for local grass-roots organizations. On behalf of the Board I can tell you that we are deeply appreciative of our members. You should know that our Board is “open source”; you have access to us in person, by phone, and via email. The continued success of our society depends upon your Board having a clear understanding of the needs and wants of our membership and then responding accordingly. Please join us at the annual year-end potluck at the Kimmel Farm Saturday, 11 June, at 2 pm to share an afternoon of food and ideas. By then it will be nearly summer and the weather might behave more like spring.

Reminder: the May meeting is the annual business meeting and members will be asked to vote on whether to accept the slate of officers and at-large Board members.

Melody Clarkson is retiring from the Board after 15 years of service to the Society. Thank you, Melody, for your dedication, and for the countless hours you have given us.

### **ANNUAL ENHS POTLUCK PICNIC, 11 June, 2 pm.**

Once again the Kimmels are hosting our annual ENHS potluck picnic at the farm on Fox Hollow Road. We will hold the event on Saturday, 11 June, rain or shine. Just bring a favorite dish or beverage to share and come prepared to watch some birds, walk around the wild area and the pond, pat the horses, socialize with the critters, or best of all, to sit outside or by the woodstove chatting with friends, old and new.

Here are directions to the farm, 30306 Fox Hollow Road.

If you are driving south on Hilyard St., in .25 miles after passing the 30<sup>th</sup> St. light, (see the Dari Mart) go left on W. Amazon Dr. (This turn is the next light after E. Amazon Dr. Both intersect Fox Hollow actually.) Go .75 mi. (see Calvary Chapel, which looks like a warehouse). Turn Right [west] on Fox Hollow Road. Ignoring the street numbers, drive through suburbia into the countryside. In 4.7 miles you will see S. Willamette St. coming in on the right. \*Drive on. In another 1.9 miles there will be a fire station on your right, and Macbeth Road will join Fox Hollow Road from the right. Bear Left, [southwest] staying on Fox Hollow Road. The road will curve downhill in a southerly and southwesterly direction. In 1.1 more miles you will see our mailbox on the right [Kimmel, 30306]. Turn Left into our driveway and park by the barn, the garage, the front walk or on the grass beside the driveway. You have now gone 8.7 miles from the intersection of 30th and Hilyard. The entire road is paved.

\*If you are coming from Willamette Street, just follow S. Willamette out into the country past Spencer’s Butte Park to the stop sign and junction with Fox Hollow Road and follow the directions from \*

If you are coming from West Eugene, go on Bailey Hill Road to Lorane Highway and turn left on Lorane Highway at Twin Oaks Church, just after Twin Oaks School. Go east on Lorane Highway to Macbeth Road, just past the Grange. Turn Right. Go 3.68 miles to the end of MacBeth, and turn right onto Fox Hollow. Go southwest down hill for 1.1 miles and turn left at our driveway.

Beginning in Fall 2011 we will be making Nature Trails available electronically to those ENHS members who indicate that they would prefer this option. Our rationale is that electronic delivery will reduce paper consumption and save on postage. This will be an option on the renewal membership form beginning in the September 2011 issue. We will continue our tradition of posting on our website the current issue of NT the day after the monthly meeting.

**Bike Path Cleanup.** Ten ENHS members turned out for our annual bike path cleanup. We have committed to making an annual sweep of the North Bank Bike Path between the Ferry Street Bridge and the Washington-Jefferson Bridge. This year we converged on the parking lot at McMenemy's North Bank on Sunday morning, 20 March. It was a pretty nice day for March – cloudy and cool but no rain. Just perfect, because it meant being able to keep on a sturdy jacket while probing the trailside thickets for stray bottles and bags.

Other crews, probably the sheriff's inmate contingent, had apparently been through before. Coupled with this being a stretch used mainly by bikers, runners and walkers, the amount of casual debris was minimal. We competed for the prize trash. A novelty this year was using buckets instead of plastic bags. These could be dumped straightforwardly into either the recycling rolling cart or the trash rolling cart. Only glass bottles for recycling needed to be put into a separate bag.

Spring green was the badge of color for the day. Not much in bloom yet, only the promise of blooms to come soon. We stopped at Marge Zane's licorice fern stump to groom the ferns. This took some considerable effort as English ivy had begun to snake its sneaky stems among the fern stalks. We stripped those back some distance from the stump. It looked glorious when we were done and should look even better next winter.

The usual climax was the lunch back at the North Bank. Such a congenial group, we wondered that more members weren't there. If only they knew what a fine event this is. Maybe next year you will join us? Trash hunters this year were Melody Clarkson, Tim and Sandy Godsil, Judi Horstmann, Phil Johnson, Chuck and Reida Kimmel, Tom Titus, and Connie and David Wagner.

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## Out and About

*“Out & about” is a periodical encouragement to Eugene Natural History Society members to get out and experience our magnificent Oregon*



### **Tide pool at Strawberry Hill**

What extraordinary creatures inhabit this special ecosystem! These guys have to endure extreme changes – twice each day they are immersed in salt water, only to be exposed to the drying effects of the wind and pounded on the rocks by crashing waves. Strawberry Hill, Neptune Beach and Cape Perpetua (all 20-30 miles north of Florence) offer excellent access to this habitat. Plan to arrive an hour before low tide so you can observe the dramatic changes. The lowest daytime tide of the year occurs in July.

Google “strawberry hill oregon tides”.

David Stone

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## Events of Interest in the Community

### Lane County Audubon Society

**Saturday, 21 May, 8 am-noon. Third Saturday Bird Walk. Elijah Bristow State Park.** Elijah Bristow State Park, near Pleasant Hill, has a variety of habitats, including riparian, open meadow, and forest zones. Join walk leader Dave Bontrager to look for flycatchers, thrushes, passerines, and raptors.

**Tuesday, 24 May, 7:30 pm. The Colorful World of Birds. Dan Gleason** will present a program about birds and color, supported by many of his excellent photos. You will learn how birds obtain their color, its importance in their lives, and how they perceive color differently than we do. Eugene Garden Club, 1645 High St., Eugene.

**Saturday, 18 June, 8 am-noon. Third Saturday Bird Walk. Alton Baker Park.** Join walk leader Jim Regali as we look for nesting songbirds, water birds, woodpeckers, and raptors as we walk the paths both near the river and through the open or woody areas. We will meet at South Eugene High School at 19<sup>th</sup> and Patterson, rain or shine, at 8 am and return by noon. A \$3 donation is suggested, as well as a share of gas costs for carpooling. Please note: As a precaution, do not leave valuables in your parked car.

Questions? Contact Maeve at 541.343.8664 or [president@laneaudubon.org](mailto:president@laneaudubon.org).

### Mount Pisgah Arboretum

34901 Frank Parrish Rd., Eugene, 97405. Located off I-5 Exit 189, 15 minutes southeast of Eugene. Call Peg Douthit-Jackson at 541-747-1504 or email [mtpisgjp@efn.org](mailto:mtpisgjp@efn.org) for more information or to sign up for any of the following Arboretum activities.

**Sunday, 15 May, 10 am-5 pm. Mount Pisgah Arboretum's 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Wildflower and Music Festival** (co-sponsored by the Native Plant Society of Oregon and Lane Community College). Come to the MPA for a day of wildflowers, music, food, and crafts. You don't have to be a plant expert to love our Festival, which is loaded with fun things to do for everyone in the family. Three to four hundred species of wildflowers will be on display, from Anemones to *Vancouveria*! Botanists will be on hand to answer questions. For an even closer look, guests may use on-site microscopes. Nectar glands at the base of the petals really glisten at 100X magnification! Parking is free on festival day. Suggested donation \$5 per person, children under 12 free. □ Please leave your dogs at home.

### Nearby Nature

Call 541-687-9699 or email [info@nearbynature.org](mailto:info@nearbynature.org).

**Saturday, 21 May, 3-6 pm. Lessons in the Learnscope Workshop: Making Drawings from Photographs -- Nature Illustration for the Artistically Inept.** Learn to use real life specimens to create accurate natural history illustrations. Instructor: David Wagner. Pre-registration is required and space is limited. The workshop costs \$30 for members, \$35 for non-members, or a work trade at the Nearby Nature Learnscope. To register or for more information, call 541-687-9699 or see [www.nearbynature.org/events](http://www.nearbynature.org/events).

**Sunday, 22 May, 1-3 pm. Nearby Nature Quest: Treasure Trails.** Join Nearby Nature and REI as we go on a variety of treasure and scavenger hunts using your powers of observation plus GPS units, compasses, and more. FREE for members, \$2/person or \$5/family for non-members. Pre-registration suggested: 541-687-9699. For the rest of 2011's Nature Quests, and for June 2011 Nearby Nature events, see [www.nearbynature.org/events](http://www.nearbynature.org/events).

**Directions to the Alton Baker Park Host Residence/Nearby Nature Yurt/Learnscope:** Turn into the main Alton Baker Park entrance or follow the bike path to the main part of Alton Baker Park. Go east on the road through the park, through the parking lots and down the road that says Dead End. Go past the Cuthbert Amphitheater. The newly painted blue Park Host Residence (our office), our yurt, and the Learnscope are on the right, immediately after the Community Gardens. Lock your bike in our bike shelter or park your car in the gravel lot in front of the gardens. For a map, see [www.nearbynature.org](http://www.nearbynature.org).

### Native Plant Society of Oregon, Emerald Chapter

**Sunday, 22 May, noon to 5 pm.** The Native Plant Society and the Lane County Dept. of Youth Services are sponsoring a Garden Tour at the John Serbu Youth Campus. This fun-filled event will highlight the outstanding horticulture program at the Youth Campus. There will be live music, food and a native plant sale. Visitors will have the opportunity to tour the program's farm, native plant gardens, hedgerow and native plant nursery facilities. Food prepared by the young people, as well as native plants propagated and grown here, will be for sale. The event takes

place at the John Serbu Youth Campus at 2700 MLK Blvd across from Autzen Stadium. For more info contact [ngap@emeraldnpsoregon.org](mailto:ngap@emeraldnpsoregon.org)

**The Individual in the Genomic Era: Spring Lecture Series hosted by the Graduate Evolutionary Biology and Ecology Students of the University of Oregon**

**Tuesday, 23 May, 7 pm. Reconstructing the Great Human Diasporas from Genome Variation Data.** Dr Carlos Bustamante, Stanford University. 150 Columbia Hall, U of O Campus.

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**ENHS Schedule of Speakers and Topics for the rest of 2010-2011**

<b>20 May 2011</b>	– John Fischer	– La Niña, El Niño, and La Nada: The Big Weather Makers in the Northwest
<b>16 Sept. 2011</b>	– Dave Wagner	– Natural History of India
<b>21 Oct. 2011</b>	– Tobias Policha	– Tropical Fungus/Orchid Mimicry
<b>18 Nov. 2011</b>	– Greta Binford	– Evolution of Spider Venom
<b>9 Dec. 2011</b>	– Jan Hodder	– Sea Birds

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