

The winter solstice: A ripple effect

Paddlers can celebrate quietly at Smith and Bybee Lakes

By JOE FITZGIBBON

Special writer, The Oregonian

On the darkest day of the year, Troy Clark is in search of the unconquerable sun.

And he's inviting canoeists and kayakers to join him this weekend at Smith and Bybee Lakes.

It's the winter solstice — an ancient festival honoring the birthday of the sun. Pagans called it the start of the season of light, when day overcomes night. Scientists say that it's simply the beginning of the Northern Hemisphere's tilt toward the sun.

Originally celebrated on Dec. 25, winter solstice is observed by today's revelers on Dec. 22.

"We decided to take our trip on Sunday because that's the quietest time on the lakes," said Clark, a postal letter carrier and self-taught naturalist. "I expect to see a dozen species of ducks — many wintering in from the Arctic. Then it'll be anyone's guess as to the number of other animals we'll take in."

When he first saw the 2,100-acre site, "it looked like a swamp," he said. "But once I canoed it, I fell in love with the place."

On Sunday afternoon, Clark will lead a party of nonmotorized boats around the two shallow lakes. There's no charge for the event, but participants will need to bring their own lightweight watercraft. All-weather clothes, binoculars and camera also are recommended.

Many visitors are shocked to discover river otter, mink, hawks and an occasional eagle nestled comfortably in the wildlife sanctuary, only a few yards from the roar of trucks along North Marine Drive.

Clark calls it an oasis in the middle of an industrial corridor.

"The more people stop to see what's here, the more they will want to protect it," he added.



ROGER JENSEN/The Oregonian

Troy Clark and his dog, Murphy, check out a route for a winter solstice canoe trip Sunday to the Smith and Bybee Lakes area. The broad lakes in St. Johns are home to numerous flocks of birds and wildlife.

Clark is one of the founders of the Friends of Smith and Bybee Lakes, a group dedicated to preserving the area while involving local school groups in wildlife-appreciation activities.

For years, the lakes and surrounding wetlands suffered from neglect and infill, mostly by the Port of Portland.

But, in 1988, armed with a \$3 million trust fund, supporters of preserving the lakes started working together. Residents, environmentalists, wildlife managers and government agencies developed a plan to improve water quality, reintroduce fish channels and create a greenway protection zone.

As a result, the marshy grasslands, shallow lakes and craggy-shaped trees today are home to more than 100 species of fish, birds, mammals and reptiles.

Clark and Metro officials plan additional boat outings, hiking and bird-watching trips this winter and spring.

day tripper

if you go

WHAT: Celebrating Winter Solstice on Smith and Bybee Lakes

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: Meet at Smith and Bybee Lakes parking lot. About two miles west of Interstate 5 on North Marine Drive.

EQUIPMENT: Furnish your own canoe, kayak or rubber raft. No motorized boats allowed. Rentals available from Alder Creek Kayak and Canoe at Jantzen Beach (285-0464) or REI (283-1300). Life jackets required. All-weather clothing, camera or binoculars are recommended.

COST: Free

CALL: For more information about the solstice outing or Friends of Smith and Bybee Lakes, call Troy Clark, 249-0482.