

## **Spirit of the Siskiyou** **The Journals of a Mountain Naturalist**

by Mary Paetzel

Edited by Jackie Elliott and Lee Webb

Preface by Robert Michael Pyle

This November 1998 book published by OSU Press details five special areas in southwest Oregon; three of these areas are on the Siskiyou National Forest. OSU Press gave the Siskiyou National Forest permission to excerpt five stories from the book. In past years, Mary worked as an employee and volunteer for the Siskiyou. For further information, contact OSU Press at 101 Waldo Hall, Corvallis, OR 97331-6407 (541-737-3166 —e-mail [www.sou.orst.edu/dept/press](http://www.sou.orst.edu/dept/press) )

For twenty-five years, Mary Paetzel roamed the Siskiyou Mountains of southern Oregon, tracking rare plants and insects and recording her experiences in a series of illustrated journals. A rugged land of peaks, canyons, and rushing rivers, the Siskiyou are renowned for their unusual plant life. Traversing logging roads in an old Volkswagen bus and hiking the high country, Mary, a self-taught naturalist, came to know the Siskiyou as few ever have.

*Spirit of the Siskiyou* gathers the best of Mary Paetzel's writings along with selections of her paintings and drawings, many in full color. With their descriptions of wildflowers, birds, butterflies, bees, and wasps, Mary's journals are an important natural history of the Siskiyou Mountains. Together, they also chronicle one woman's personal journey through a little-known, but fascinating, wilderness.

Mary Paetzel, born in 1919, has written articles on plants and insects for publications ranging from *Sunset* to *Insect World*. She has discovered rare butterfly populations, helped establish national forest botanical areas, and pushed for increased plant and butterfly protection. She lived near Grants Pass, Oregon from 1945 to 1992. She now divides her time between Merrill, Oregon, and the mountains near Dolores Colorado (her childhood home).

The following excerpt is from the Preface, by Lee Webb, Forest Wildlife Biologist for the Siskiyou National Forest:

### **How do I feel about Mary?**

She makes life more interesting for others. Mary is one of a kind—as she puts it, “Thank goodness, one is enough!” Mary and I share a love of the land—the Siskiyou. Mary's journal entries make me want to leave my desk and head for the woods. Her words remind me why I chose to spend a career working for the Forest Service, helping to manage the nation's National Forest land. At times, during field trips with other Forest Service folks to places Mary has written about, I have even taken some of her writings with me and read them out loud to the group.

As I read her words, she swiftly transports me to the natural world—she lets me smell the forest, hear the wind in the trees, feel the texture of the crusted snow, and see the delicate beauty of a flower or insect. I have visited many of the places Mary describes, and I often wonder how I missed things she saw. Her words portray the pleasantness of the forest, the real world—the natural world. She paints elegant word pictures of the strength and mystery of an old snag, the pacific quietness of moonlight on a deserted meadow, the stark beauty of a winter snowstorm, and the infinite variety and mystery of Mother Nature's weather patterns and flow of the seasons.

You do not have to know Mary's places first hand to enjoy this book, and buttress your appreciation for the land. Her themes are universal, and apply to the natural world in general. Her insights and observations heighten our awareness to the natural world surrounding us. Mary and her journals are a treasure of the Siskiyou worth far more than all the gold flakes which still lie in the stream beds of the mountains. This book brings Mary's work to the public, so all who wish to can share in the wonder and beauty of the natural world in the Siskiyou Mountains.

Wherever you live, I hope this book encourages you to go to the woods, go out on the land, and get down on your hands and knees.

### From Chapter 3

#### Chrome Ridge and Freeland Mountain: *Trees of Chrome Ridge, July 10, 1980*

Silvered skeletons they stand, with their twisted limbs and broken tops. Weathered to the grey patina of driftwood, their bark long since gone, these old monarchs of Chrome Ridge, even after life has departed, stand defiant against wind and storm.

Nothing on these rugged serpentine headlands brings home so clearly the fierce struggle for survival as these gnarled giants of the past. Perhaps they're not "giants" in comparison to the huge old hemlocks of Lake Mountain, or the old-growth firs down in Briggs Valley, but for their place and conditions, they attained a remarkable growth in their lifetime.

The largest I measured was 13' 2" in circumference. Most were between 9' and 11', and perhaps 100' tall. The most unusual feature of the dead trees is the twisting growth of the trunks; which is most noticeable where bark is absent. Fully 90%—both standing trees and downed logs—have this oddity to some degree. It reminds one of a large twisted cable, and must have been caused by wind pressure on the growing tree. Trees of middle and lower elevations are

seldom subjected to such force, and if they are, the trunk snaps or the roots give way. But on the high places the tough old cedars and Jeffrey pines won't give an inch. Often their tops are broken off, and occasionally one splinters and falls, but mostly they continue to grow, turning away from that wild wind. With their roots anchored among those huge boulders, they hang on until old age and waning vitality finally takes its toll.



Long after the life-giving sap has ceased to rise, they stand against their enemies, the snows and winds and freezing rains of winter. Then perhaps one calm, warm day in summer the old giant will crash to the ground in a light breeze—brought to earth at last not by the mighty gales of the storm gods, but by the unrelenting work of a colony of termites or carpenter ants. "*Sic gloria transit mundi.*"



General locations of the five areas described in Mary's journals

### From Chapter 3

#### Chrome Ridge and Freeland Mountain: *The Old Fritillary September 30, 1982*

I saw her on a sunny day, but with a cold wind out of the northeast. She came into the rabbit brush, the last blooming plant on all of that rocky hillside.

How she ever managed to become airborne is a mystery, for half of her hind wings had been torn away, probably by some bird. The once bright color had faded to a dull tan; even the black markings on the upper surface were more grey than black. But she sailed and soared, dipped and danced about the flowers with as much energy as on the day she had emerged from the chrysalis.

She would alight on a blossom for a little, then glide off in the wind, making a wide circle across the road, up the hill, across the road again, down the hillside, then back to rest a moment on the yellow flowers. She sipped a little nectar, but mostly seemed interested in flying for the pure joy of skimming the endless air.

BUTTERFLY-Callippe (Hedley); Family Nymphalidae; Species *Speoclis callippe*  
PLANT-Rabbit brush & ripe wood heads. *Chrysothamnus nauseosus*

Only the week before I'd seen four fritillaries cavorting about that same bush, but today she was the only one left. Had she outlived all her younger relatives? Or was she the last of the four I'd seen? As I remembered, all the others were bright and new-looking. Nevertheless, sometime in early September I recalled seeing a faded fritillary among the others, but then its wings were undamaged. This species does fly about a good part of the summer, and it's not unusual to find some with dull, tattered wings, but mostly the ones who last till cold weather have hatched later, and are young enough to take the frosty nights and windy days of these higher elevations.



However old she was, she completely and thoroughly enjoyed the sunny hour, and when I left at three o'clock she was still sailing happily in the sun, though the shadows were long across the road and the chill of coming evening was in the air.

### From Chapter 3

#### Briggs Valley and Horse Creek: “*The Good Grey Rain* \*” December 2, 1981

Today the mist obscures the little round hill to the west, and a quiet, drizzling rain slants across the field beside Horse Creek. The old apple trees have lost every leaf and stand black and naked in a sea of dead grass and sedge. To some, this would be a dreary, miserable December day—and at home, in the lowlands, it would be so for me.



But here, as I walk across the long, rolling field and hear the rush of water among the alders and willows, and see tiny birds flitting about in the bushes, I count it a beautiful day. Not as cheerful as a sunny one, not as exhilarating as a snowy day, nor as inspiring as a golden afternoon in autumn. But there is something of special beauty in winter days; the “good grey rain,” the gentle mist that softens far hills; clouds of December that blend the subdued colors of early winter into a calm, restful mosaic of peace.

When we first came to Oregon, even before I'd become accustomed to this “rain forest” type of weather, I loved it. Now after more than thirty years, I still love it. Perhaps more this year than ever, for now, after six years of drought and low rainfall, we are having a normal wet winter.

This country of the Siskiyou is meant to have rain in its season, and nothing is so heartbreaking as seeing the old trees dying on the hillsides, and colonies of rare plants slowly disappearing because they have too little moisture to survive. Heat and dryness, brush fires, long periods of high temperatures in summer, they can take in stride, for they have been born and bred to those conditions through millions of years on these rugged serpentine ridges. But when the fierce suns of summer cool to the pale light of December, the waiting reservoirs of life must have their annual renewal of both raging storms and gentle mists from the not too distant sea.

There have been droughts before, and there will be again, and we know not how many species have disappeared from their ancestral sites because of them, but for this year, they will flourish and increase, and soon lift the heart with their breath-taking flowers in the wild and secret places of the hills.

\* Ben Hur Lampman's favorite expression for the soft, gentle rains of winter.

## From Chapter 5

### Bigelow Lakes and Mt. Elijah: *A High Mountain Meadow and Memories* October 4, 1973

This October afternoon I'm sitting beside the little pool where the yellow water lilies bloomed last June. The late sun slants low across the water and dragonflies soar on silver wings in the still air. Here in the high country where my heart has always been I find contentment I haven't know for twenty-five years.

Here, high in the Siskiyoues, are two bodies of water known as Bigelow Lakes, and a green open space slants down to the upper lake. Meandering through this meadow, a channel of water feeds both lakes—in reality they are large lily ponds—and in June and July flowers bloom in a profusion unknown in the lowlands.

This is the fifth trip for Sal and me and now I'm sitting in the golden October sun at the edge of the lower lake (Sal was Mary's trail dog). Long shadows of the trees on the far side creep slowly across the quiet water and the dragonflies glide and sail in October's bright blue weather as though they knew the frosts of winter are only a range of hills away. The grasses of summer have ripened and scattered their seeds to the restless wind and little brown birds chirp with an urgent note among the willows along the shore.



This morning, as we started up the trail, frost was heavy in the shadowy places, and on the high ridge a lonely wind stirred the stunted trees—and I remembered that in these high places the voice of winter is heard in the sighing of the wind and the rustling of the grasses, long before the first snowfall.

There isn't too much color here in this meadow, which is a disappointment, but in the morning sun on the rocky outcrops, a species of huckleberry burns with a crimson flame, almost like glowing embers. Dogwood and vine maple were alight in the canyons lower down, and occasionally a lone big leaf maple threw a spotlight of brilliant yellow on a rocky crevice far up the hillside. But here at 5,600' the predominant colors are tawny yellow of the grasses and grey-green of willow clumps, with the dark green of alpine firs ringing the water and climbing the hillsides.

Earlier we climbed to the top of the ridge—6,281'—on Meadow Mountain Trail. From there, wave after wave of blue mountains march off to the hazy horizon, and to the southeast stands Mount Shasta in all its glory! That was an unexpected bonus for the long climb. As we looked, a great golden eagle—the largest I've ever seen—cruised by. There was no doubt it was on its migratory flight. Its wings were rigid as those of a glider, the tips of the primaries turned upward in graceful curves, and straight and true he glided on a long slant across the hazy canyons until lost to view.

And now, here beside the little lake, the day's exploring over, memories of other high places come to mind. The mountain meadows of Colorado; high mesa lands in October; winds of autumn in the pinon pines; gold of aspens deep in a hidden ravine; summer lingering on a sunny ledge of rim-rock. But somehow, this time the old familiar memories are less painful, the sense of regret and homesickness less sharp. While these meadows aren't the meadows of home, perhaps they will be sufficient until that distant time when the memories will have become reality.

Now the shadow is almost to the edge of the pool where I sit. Across the open space between the water and the willows, each tawny grass head is outlined in pale golden light, and the dragonfly wings are molten silver. Dark and mysterious as the forest primeval are the firs on the other bank. Off to the right a fallen log has the weathered sheen of ancient driftwood.

Among the clumps of willow still in sun the little birds chatter to each other. Overhead the dry rustle of dragonfly wings mingles with the hum of late bees, and I see a tiny grey frog and a bright green one sitting companionably side by side in the last bit of sun at the water's edge.

It is time to go, and with dragging feet we turn homeward. If the snows of winter come soon, the better part of a year may be history before I return, and through the long winter months I must wait in patience. But come the melting snows of spring and the thousand, thousand blossoms that follow, I, like the bees and dragonflies, will follow my heart to the mountain meadow, and while these may not be the hills of home, I will be content.

## From Chapter 5

### Bigelow Lakes and Mt. Elijah: *The Black and White Crane Flies July 22, 1976*

Today, Sally and I are back in the meadow. The sun is bright, the sky blue, and the heat in the valley beyond endurance. But here it is warm in the sun, cool in the shade, and altogether pleasant and beautiful.

Went up to Oregon Caves and had hot chocolate and a roll, bought a gift in the gift shop, then came on up, so we started up the trail rather late this time. I think it was after nine. Took the camera and all the equipment, expecting to find the wasps busy. But we didn't see any! In Shasta Meadows\* all is quiet, with very few tunnel entrances showing. It rained heavily here a few days ago and that may have discouraged them—perhaps even put an end to their nesting for this season.

The pussy paws are in full bloom, and last year the little *Cerцерis*\* was out and active at the same time, but now they seem to have never been here at all. I believe we are just a bit late; the flowers are a little beyond their prime blooming period. Did see a few wasps loitering about in the sun. So again I've missed the little weevil hunter. And I so wanted to get pictures of her bringing in prey, and take notes on her methods of digging and closing the burrow.



Even the wasp colony just inside the first gate seems to have disappeared—or maybe never appeared. It may be too early for them, as the flowers there haven't started out, except for the ever-present pussypaws. They cover every bare spot with their little rosettes of dark green leaves and fuzzy blossoms.

The most interesting spot is once again the tiny hidden pond off the trail above the meadow. Here those strange black and white crane flies\*\* dance and float over the surface of the water and entangle themselves in the grasses at the pond's edge. Caught two, one large, one small, so may have a pair. And will get them identified if I can. One thing I'm sure of—they are crane flies, but much more graceful and interesting than their common cousins.

Such an airy way they have of getting about, seeming to float on the breeze like the lightest of thistle-down. As they fly they hold their very long black and white-banded legs out at a graceful angle and bent backwards, so they have even more of a resemblance to a thistle sailing on its way.

But before long they collide with each other and end up in a bundle of wings and legs among the grasses. They never seem to suffer any damage in these pile-ups, and soon disengage themselves and sail off. But they are extremely delicate, for, even though I was careful, they were always injured when I caught them.

Not knowing how rare they are, I only handled the two and saved both of them for identification later. I think I should especially look for them along the edge of both lakes, for I'm sure they must be in other wet places around here. Most of the habitat seems the same, although the lakes have more water and are not as sheltered as this pond. Fascinating as they are, it will be impossible to study their life history by watching their activities—you'd practically

have to wear hip boots to do that!

Perhaps I'll have some luck getting more pictures and can sketch them as they fly so I can get someone to recognize them and tell me what they are and how they live. One always wonders when some uncommon insect like this is observed if perhaps you've found a new species that no one knows anything about.

\* Shasta Meadows and the *Cerceris* colony: The "meadows" are two small naturally clear, sandy areas just off Meadow Mountain Trail where you have the first glimpse of Mount Shasta. Here, a rather extensive colony of *Cerceris* wasps dig their tunnels and store prey. The wasps are quite small, less than 1/4". Striped black and pale yellow, or white, they provision their nest burrows with weevils found on plants in the area (possibly taken on *Orthocarpus* species).

\*\* Phantom crane flies - *Bittacomorpha* Spp.: "The phantom crane fly soars slowly through the air with its legs extended. When it flies into shade, only the white leg bands are visible, and the insect seems to appear and disappear like a phantom." Also, they are an eastern species, not mentioned as being found in the west (Milne, Lorus and Margery. 1980. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Insects and Spiders. Knopf, New York. 989 p.)