

Duck Tales

Coloring and digging at the UO

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Getting wet for class

A rooster crows again and again from a nearby farm. The sun glints out from behind clouds and off the water in the meadow as cars pull up on the asphalt. It's about four miles away from Highway 126, which is full of campers heading for the Oregon Coast. "I've got shovels over here," says Ryan Ruggiero, the instructor for this University of Oregon landscape architecture class. Landscape architecture is one of the School of Architecture and the Allied Arts' many different departments, and it focuses on the wise use of land.

Ruggiero earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in landscape architecture from the UO, so he's familiar with the program, and he easily gets the attention of his students. The undergrads, dressed in knee waders, rain jackets, T-shirts, and jeans—one courageous soul is wearing shorts and Tevas on this mid-April Saturday—cluster around Ruggiero. He's now a land protection manager for the McKenzie River Trust, which is somewhat like the Nature Conservancy, only smaller and more local. The McKenzie River Trust finalized the purchase of this 161-acre property—the Coyote Spencer Wetlands, where Coyote Creek meets Spencer Creek before they dump into the Fern Ridge Reservoir—in early March, just in time for Ruggiero to pull this class off.

He leads most of his 23 students into the wetlands via a road that the previous owner had illegally created without a permit "under cover of darkness," he says. Some of the students grow fascinated with this story while others start identifying plants beside the gravelly road (camas, rush, maybe some checker mallow) and the bridges over little waterways.



Another student, who brought his partner and their baby, keeps good notes on a clipboard of everything Ruggiero says. Soon, he and his group members will start to dig in the dirt, or rather the mud, of the wetlands. Ruggiero wants them to get some data about the soil and the water of the area. They'll come out for a second field trip and learn more about local plant life later in the term, when there's more to see than scrubby moss and lichen-covered ash and oak trees.

Heading toward the meadow where they'll do their research, Ruggiero stops and picks up a tiny plant. "This is an invasive," he says. The scallop-edged, slightly red-tinged bit is a shining geranium—*Geranium lucidum*, he elaborates—and it's perhaps harder to manage than blackberries. Ruggiero also stops at a puddle and pulls out a small frog. "Ooh, he's cold right now," he says. The young tree frog will soon change color to match the green growth of spring.

The class, which is held once a week, focuses on figuring out where and how to situate a wetlands resource center on this property. The challenge is to identify the federally endangered or federally watched species in this acreage, and to plan around them. Ruggiero says the property hosts one of the most diverse native plant communities in the Long Tom watershed, which is just west of Eugene.

Senior Jennifer Purcell is thrilled to be out on actual land. Though she has taken landscape architecture studio classes, this is different. She could have graduated at the end of last term, she says, but she stayed so she could take the Coyote Spencer Wetlands class with Ruggiero. "It's so exciting to have the opportunity to go out and do calculations for this site," she says. "It's something you don't find in every class."