



A Pacific aquatic garter snake feeds on a Pacific giant salamander.



A western toad.

Applegate Middle Fork hosts heaps of ‘herps’

BY ERIC CISLO

The Middle Fork of the Applegate River just south of the Oregon-California border is a hotbed of biodiversity. Among the fauna native to this region are several beautiful and unique reptiles and amphibians, or “herps” (*herpetofauna*).

The Middle Fork is home to one of the most beautiful snakes in North America, the California mountain kingsnake (*Lampropeltis zonata*). The etymology of the kingsnake genus alludes to “shiny skin”—*Lampro* = bright, and *peltis* = skin. These serpents are uncommon and rather elusive, taking advantage of the sheltering boulders tumbled beside river torrents.

A more ubiquitous denizen of the Middle Fork is the Pacific Coast garter snake (*Thamnophis stratus*) probably the most aquatic of all species native to the

western United States. They are stealthy predators, feeding on crawdads, fish hatchlings, toads, frogs, and the Pacific giant salamander.

The western toad (*Bufo boreas*) population is vibrant in the Middle Fork. Once plentiful in the lower valleys of Southern Oregon, they have succumbed to habitat loss and perhaps over-use of pesticides in the orchard industry.

In late summer, garter snakes can be observed trawling the shoreline just above Seattle Bar looking for its prey: young toads. Higher upstream, they search for more elusive and challenging prey, like the Pacific giant salamander (*Diambodon ensatus*).

The giant salamander is the jewel of the Pacific Northwest, the largest species of salamander in North America. It is



The Middle Fork of the Applegate River dips south of the Oregon-California border above Applegate Lake. Photos: Eric Cislo.

elusive, rare, unique, and threatened. Developing into adulthood, they have external “lungs”—gills, if you will—and depend on a habitat of the purest of water.


Spending time in nature is healing during this unprecedented

period. When you are out there, please consider that these fragile and beautiful species whose habitat we share deserve to be observed unmolested with reverence.

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A California mountain kingsnake.



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