



### **Coast Range Chronicles 3: “Delineation Rage”**

by

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On occasion I suffer from a condition called Delineation Rage. Part of my job involves delineating wetlands, which are protected by various local, state, and federal laws. If somebody’s going to fill them, they need a permit. And to get a permit, they have to know where the wetlands are.

Hence the wetland delineation.

The causes of Delineation Rage are numerous and poorly understood, but at the heart of the condition is a simple paradox: nature is a continuum, but humans need the continuum partitioned into discrete units. Wetland or upland. Forest or grassland. It’s the only way to reduce earth’s complexity into a manageable landscape. But the units are fake. The wetland delineator has to draw a line that doesn’t really exist.

Wetlands piss people off like no other habitat. Endless opinions exist about their location and extent. Every jackass within shouting distance wants to critique the

delineation: wetland fillers, wetland savers, government bureaucrats, greasy politicians, bloodsucking lawyers, the guy hauling cement to the project site.

In a Mediterranean climate like California, not all wetlands are obvious marshes. Any fool can draw a line around a cattail marsh. Most of the suspect wetlands are seasonal, barely distinguishable from surrounding uplands half the year. Beautiful and ecologically important, but not obvious to delineate. It's not like somebody's floating by on a barge.

Don't get me wrong. Delineating wetlands can be fascinating, even enjoyable. It's a test of ecological prowess. It's fun to slog through the muck spotting wildlife and plants. Even the bewildering hydric soils can be interesting.

But here's the hard truth: it's often an unbearable pain in the ass.

Plant identification is vital to any delineation, but many plants are distinguished based on microscopic and/or disturbingly gradational characteristics (back to the continuum thing). After struggling through the plant key for an hour trying to identify a plant crucial to the wetland boundary determination, without fail you'll reach a decision break in the key that says something like: flowers 4 to 8 millimeters long OR flowers 6 to 10 millimeters long. And, I swear, the flower is always 7 millimeters long. Always. That's if you're lucky enough to have any flowers at all.

Soils are important, too, but if you can differentiate between silty clay and silty clay loam in a pouring rain, I'll buy you a fresh biscuit and a tankard of ale.

Just thinking about it is starting to trigger my Delineation Rage.

Delineating wetlands can range from glorious to disastrous, enough to drive a person mad. Seriously. Delineation Rage is complex, but isn't without warning signs. So I've developed a sort of threat-level system identifying the factors leading to rage.

**Level 1: Green.** Perfect weather, gorgeous project site. Wetlands present but clearly defined by topography and/or vegetation. It's an easy stroll through rolling grassland. An imbecile could delineate the wetland boundary. The project budget is robust. No ticks or poison oak. I love this job. I can't believe they pay me for this.

**Level 2: Yellow.** Weather is decent. Ticks and/or poison oak absent or very sparse. Wetlands are straightforward, serious head-scratching rarely necessary. Gentle topography, no bushwhacking required. One or two curse words are considered but not spoken. The project budget is adequate. This job is pretty good.

**Level 3: Orange.** Rain threatening but rarely falling, or heat mitigated by a light breeze. Ticks and/or poison oak present but avoidable with diligence. Wetlands range from easy to marginally complicated. Moderate topography, light bushwhacking required. Numerous curse words muttered under breath. The project is slightly over budget. This job is okay. A raise would be nice.

**Level 4: Red.** A steady rain or uncomfortable heat. Wetlands are mostly complicated and counterintuitive. The wetland boundary is educated guesswork. Curse words spoken at a conversational volume. Steep terrain, frequent bushwhacking required. The project is moderately over budget. Job resignation is considered but rejected, a large raise necessary to stick around.

**Level 5: Delineation Rage.** Pouring rain with gusty wind or a blistering, windless heat. Ticks in attack-mode, requiring forcible removal from scrotum. It's an incessant

bushwhack up nearly vertical slopes through head-high poison oak, trailed by a creepy vagrant with barking Rottweiler. The whole project site could be upland or wetland. It's a coin toss. Curse words shouted to the hilltops. The project is over budget by several orders of magnitude. No amount of money is worth this. Thoughts turn to a new career, as long as it's indoors and devoid of ticks: sales clerk, desk job at the DMV, anything.

Yeah, Delineation Rage ... It's a serious condition. You can alleviate some of the symptoms with strong drink and a diligent avoidance of plant keys. But there's only one cure: score a desk job and forget about the continuum. Just forget you ever heard of it. Treat it like you might some questionable alien encounter on a dark and empty road: it never happened. Wipe it from your mind.

The alternative is madness.