

# **DESERT** RAMBLINGS

NEWSLETTER OF THE OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION | WINTER 2017 | VOLUME 30, NO. 3





Steens Mountain Wilderness. Photo © Greg Burke

#### By Dan Morse **Conservation Director**

The August day when ONDA volunteers set out to pull the last unneeded fence from the Steens Mountain Wilderness was sunsoaked and hot, with a gentle breeze rustling the dry grasses, much like any other summer day on the mountain. And, on this classic summer day, this team of volunteers decided to pull the very last post together, with each person giving it a tug, or two. This is exactly what it takes to protect wild places and wildlife: persistence and cooperation, each person doing his or her part.

Pulling the last miles of fence out of this wilderness area would not have been possible without another moment of cooperation which took place nearly two decades earlier, in the late 1990s, when a group of stakeholders gathered in Frenchglen to discuss management approaches for the mountain. That conversation led, not long after, to the Steens Act.

The landmark legislation that protected Steens Mountain as Wilderness on October 30, 2000 was a notable achievement

FENCE PULL, continued on Page 3

рното: 97,000 acres of the Steens Mountain Wilderness are now fence free thanks to the work of this team of volunteers and staff and the scores of wilderness advocates who have worked to protect Steens for decades. From left to right: Aaron Hellickson, Andrew Soulek, Craig Terry, Ellysa Lindenmaier, Amber Lamet. Michael O'Casey, Corinne Handelman, and Clifford Rone. Photo © Sage Brown

**INSIDE DESERT Protect:** Grassroots resistance: a groundswell of support for public lands. Page 4.

**RAMBLINGS:** Defend: In face of attacks, your support defends sage-grouse. Page 5.

Restore: One volunteer's commitment encapsulates 30 years of stewardship. Page 6.

### MAKING NEWS WORTH READING

#### By Brent Fenty, Executive Director



**Brent Fenty** 

It can be tough to follow the news these days.

In the year since the last election, the shift in the political winds has affected the federal government's approach and commitment to public lands management so dramatically that some politicians are raising the prospect of selling off public lands altogether. It's hard to find any bright spot in that.

We also face an administration that has moved away from embracing diversity and is instead putting in place measures that encourage discrimination.

Add in news of natural disasters and other national and global tragedies, and I suspect you can relate to the sense of trepidation I feel each time I look at my phone or pick up a newspaper.

Amidst all the doom and gloom, it is easy to forget that there is much to be celebrated. Many people are working daily to make their communities better. In Oregon's high

desert, I see people restoring streams and recovering wildlife corridors. America is great thanks to the public lands we are blessed with, and it is remaining great thanks to the people who are working together to honor and preserve the biological, philosophical, and cultural diversity that characterizes our nation.

I hope this issue of *Desert Ramblings* reassures you that we will keep moving forward thanks to the collective efforts of ONDA's members and people all around the country.

Is it challenging? Of course. Oregon's high desert faces changing fire patterns, invasive species, overuse of limited resources, climate change, and much more. But ONDA members aren't content to simply complain about problems. Our members are taking part in the solutions.

ONDA volunteer Barbara Engel (page 6) is a shining example, and she is just one of the thousands of committed volunteers who are getting great work done on the ground. This year, hard-working volunteers pulled the last bit of barbed wire fence out of the cow-free portion of the Steens Mountain Wilderness, proving conservation is an exercise in persistence (page 1).

I am further heartened by what I hear people say when they gather over food and drink to talk about their love of and responsibility for public lands through the Public Lands Leaders program (page 4).

This is the work and the dialogue that will shape and secure the future of our wild places. And, in a political environment where we can no longer assume that justice and equity are shared core values, we have a responsibility to empower and engage diverse and often overlooked voices in this dialogue.

This work will take a variety of shapes, with a focus on building upon our current restoration partnerships with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and the Burns Paiute Tribe. We will also be carrying forward from the "Common Ground" theme and sessions from last year's desert conference.

A key to all of our efforts is that our work is grounded in respect. We can recognize divergent perspectives while remaining steadfast in our mission to protect, defend and restore Oregon's high desert. In these conversations, we can agree to disagree, without being disagreeable.

Thank you for doing your part to right past wrongs and ensure a brighter future. And thank you for your sustained help to ensure that ONDA can continue to grow stronger and give voice to the amazing and diverse high desert that we all love.

Explore eastern Oregon online through the new and improved **ONDA.org** website.

As you explore Oregon's high desert region by region, you'll enjoy beautiful photography, interesting natural and cultural history stories, and even the sound of the desert. You'll also find helpful Visitor's Guides to spur your own exploration. We've set up an events calendar that will make it easier for you to find the events you're interested in, and a whole lot more.

Take in the vistas, listen to birdsong, and watch pronghorn run across the steppe. And, then take action to protect this remarkable place.



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# A FENCE PULL TWO DECADES IN THE MAKING

#### Continued from Page 1

for many reasons. It created the nation's first congressionally designated no livestock grazing wilderness area. It added 29 miles to the federal Wild and Scenic River System and withdrew 1.1 million acres from mining and geothermal development. It protected nearly half a million acres from off-road vehicles and new road construction. And, it designated the nation's first Redband Trout Reserve.

But, as climbers know, reaching the summit is only the half-way point, not the end of the journey, and more often than not the most difficult work lies ahead. Such was the case with Steens, with the legislation marking a midpoint in the decades of work to fully protect this iconic mountain and region. Efforts to establish permanent protection for the Steens had been unfolding for years before its designation; it has taken seventeen years since the Steens Act to refine on-the-ground management.

Our path down from the summit has rarely been simple, or clear. To uphold the spirit of the Steens Act, we have participated in a local advisory group, advocated against proposals that would negatively impact the mountain, and more.

"We all recognized when the Steens Act passed that there was still work to

"The watchdog role is an important one for ONDA."

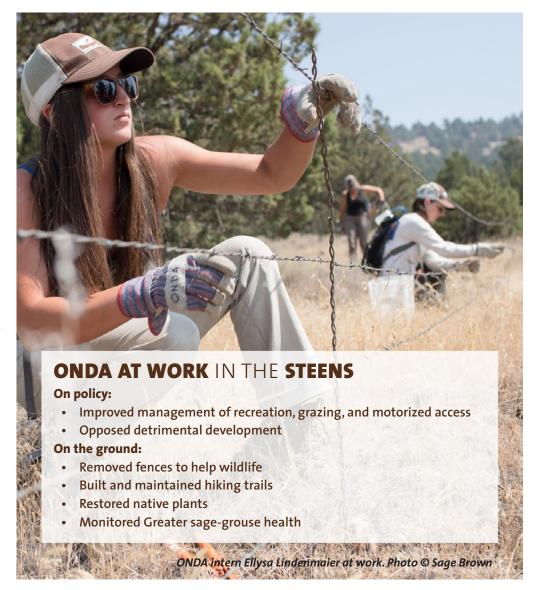
- ALICE ELSHOFF

be done. Detailed management plans were needed, specific issues remained to be resolved. That process is still unfolding. Steens is a large, complex landscape and there are no

easy, perfect solutions," explained longtime Steens advocate Alice Elshoff, adding, "The watchdog role is an important one for ONDA."

#### Policy plus field work

ONDA volunteers and staff have invested thousands of hours studying details about the mountain and its management. We have worked with conservation partners to help improve recreation use, grazing management, and motorized access all across the mountain. ONDA took a lead role in opposing controversial development projects, like the Steens Wind proposal, that would have irrevocably changed the wild character of the Steens. We strongly advocated against unnecessary motorized



juniper tree removal in Wilderness Study Areas. When the BLM moved ahead with the use of motorized equipment, despite the fact that it was inconsistent with their own policies, we launched into a complex legal process and ultimately prevailed, helping to ensure that wilderness values on the mountain will be protected in the future.

While we're engaging on policy and management issues like these, ONDA is simultaneously working on the ground. ONDA's Wilderness Stewardship program has enabled hundreds of public lands lovers to dedicate thousands of hours to the wilderness and waterways that make Steens Mountain a beloved place. These stewards have removed hundreds of miles of fence, carefully monitored sage-grouse leks, built

trails, and restored vegetation.

ONDA's unique ability to blend advocacy, legal defense, and stewardship has kept Steens wild character intact. It remains, and will always be, a remote, iconic piece of Oregon's high desert, and a favorite destination for generations of Oregonians and visitors.

Everyone who has come along on this journey to protect the Steens can take satisfaction not only in protecting this remarkable place, but in the knowledge that their work serves as an example of how the conservation of other important areas of Oregon's high desert can and must proceed. The progress may be to hard to see at times, but persistence and patience yield results as impressive as the desert itself.

# **GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE**

## A GROUNDSWELL OF SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC LANDS

By Gena Goodman-Campbell Public Lands Coordinator

When President Trump ordered Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to "review" dozens of national monuments, 2.8 million Americans responded to the call for public comments. A study of 1.3 million of those comments found that 99.2 percent of them were supportive of national monuments.

If you think that sounds like a strong response, you're right. You are witnessing the largest outpouring of support for public lands in the history of our country. And, you're not just watching it, you're part of it.

And yet, in spite of this overwhelming show of public support for public lands conservation, the Trump administration continues to pursue actions to strip protections from national monuments and other public lands, as well as from wildlife like sage-grouse.

While it is discouraging to watch the Trump administration repeatedly ignore the will of the public, it is reassuring to see that each time the administration or Congress floats a proposal that threatens public lands or wildlife, the public responds – loudly. ONDA members and supporters are part of this movement, sending over 10,000 messages to decision makers this year.

When their constituents speak out, elected leaders at the local, state, and Congressional levels are emboldened to stand up for public lands. In Oregon, Governor Kate Brown and Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley have become increasingly vocal in response to threats, standing up for plans to protect



Sending personalized postcards to lawmakers goes a long way to support public lands.

sage-grouse and their habitat and tirelessly defending Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument against attacks by the Trump administration.

Resistance from the public and elected leaders, along with legal action by states, Native American Tribes, and conservation groups, is proving to be the recipe for delaying, and ultimately defeating, the threats our public lands face. In order to keep up the momentum we have built so far, we need everyone to stay engaged and to help grow the network of people speaking up for public lands.

So what's the best way to take action? Perhaps you've heard that phone calls are more

effective than emails or postcards. Oregon's members of Congress maintain that all types of grassroots advocacy carry equal weight.

"Everything is read, every call and voice mail is listened to. We don't discriminate when it comes to phone versus e-mail versus letter."

That's from Isaiah Akin, the deputy legislative director for Senator Wyden, as reported in a recent *New Yorker* article, "What Calling Congress Achieves."

Whatever method you use to contact your elected leaders, personalizing your communications is key. Duplicative form messages count, but have less impact. When you send an email using ONDA's action page, be sure to take a few minutes to edit your message (and even the subject line) to reflect your personal views or experiences.

You can also help by bringing your likeminded friends along with you. ONDA has developed a new tool to help you inspire others to speak up for public lands. Our Public Land Leaders program makes it simple, and even fun, to get your friends together to take action.

Grassroots advocacy has played a key role in impeding threats, and ONDA's work is evolving to meet each new challenge head on. Thanks to you, we're doing all we can to ensure that the major threats to our public lands continue to be met with unequivocal resistance.

Find out more about ONDA's
Public Land Leaders program at:
ONDA.org/PublicLandLeaders

# GET SOCIAL WITH ONDA







# YOUR DONATIONS AT WORK IN OREGON'S HIGH DESERT

Thanks to you...

**40,000 individual points of habitat data** were gathered by volunteers and staff, offering critical information to the BLM about Greater sage-grouse populations. Tell Oregon leaders to protect sage-grouse: **ONDA.org/take-action** 

5 collaborators, including a private landowner, federal and state land management agencies, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, launched a coordinated effort to cool and retain desert water to make the John Day River watershed more sustainable and support the recovery of native beaver populations. Find the story: ONDA.org/blog

10,890 messages were sent to state and federal leaders asking them to protect public lands and we hosted more than 20 public events, presentations and trainings organized to defend Oregon's high desert. Get all the information you need to stand up for public lands: ONDA.org/take-action

1 moose was spotted in the Owyhee by ONDA field crew members – for real! This is the first ever documentation of a male Alces alces in the far southeast corner of Oregon. See the photo and stay up-to-date on high desert conservation: Like Oregon Natural Desert Association on Facebook and follow @TheOregonDesert on Instagram.

...and so much more, all made possible because of you!

# IN FACE OF ATTACKS, YOUR SUPPORT DEFENDS SAGE-GROUSE

By Mac Lacy **Senior Attorney** 

Oregon Natural Desert Association has worked for decades to save dwindling Greater sagegrouse through conservation of the vast sagebrush landscape the bird relies upon in Oregon's high desert. But after important progress in recent years, the grouse is again under fire from a hostile White House and an army of anti-grouse litigants looking to roll back recently won protections.

In 2015, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) unveiled sweeping plans to protect the grouse and its sagebrush habitats on public lands across the West, including Oregon. Though not perfect, the plans represented an important step forward for sage-grouse conservation. This was clear from the steady stream of lawsuits then filed by industry groups and state and county governments hostile to conservation of the grouse and its remaining habitats. The assembled anti-grouse plaintiffs have asked courts to throw out BLM's plans before they even have a chance to be implemented - which would leave the bird unprotected save for scattershot, inconsistent, and generally far weaker state plans largely powerless to impose conservation measures on the sagebrush habitats the bird relies upon for survival from one year to the next.

For some time, Oregon was the only state whose federal sage-grouse plan was not under direct attack in court. One reason for this was that BLM's plan for Oregon resulted in large measure from collaborative work undertaken by the Governor's Sage Grouse Conservation Partnership. This group sought to coordinate federal, state, and local efforts to address the multiple threats to sage-grouse across the Oregon sagebrush landscape. A broad cross-section of stakeholders had worked together to create a plan that most felt was



ONDA moved to intervene in a lawsuit aimed at sage-grouse protections and may seek the same in a second suit. Meanwhile the government signaled its intent to reduce sage-grouse protections. Photo © Devlin Holloway

an important first step in the difficult task of saving the sagegrouse from extinction.

But in 2016, the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) filed a lawsuit challenging BLM's sage-grouse plan for Oregon in a federal court in Washington, D.C. ONDA was concerned that if Harney SWCD convinced that court to vacate BLM's plan, sage-grouse in Oregon would be vulnerable to extinction given the urgency of the bird's conservation status. And that would be bad news for about 350 other species also dependent upon these same sagebrush habitats. That is why ONDA moved to intervene in

the Harney SWCD case earlier this year, and why we are also evaluating intervention in another recent lawsuit filed against the sage-grouse plan concerning grazing in Research Natural Areas that are also important to the survival and recovery of the sage-grouse.

Complicating matters, the Department of the Interior, under new management since January, recently announced its intent to "reopen" the plans. Extractive industries that operate in sage-grouse country are licking their chops at this second bite at the apple. Interior's new recommendations are likely to reduce the areas, like Sagebrush

Focal Areas, where sage-grouse conservation is prioritized and to severely limit the ability of BLM to effectively manage the sagebrush steppe. Efforts to scale back the plans' mitigation standards, mating grounds buffers, and more would be devastating for the bird.

Through our participation in the Oregon anti-grouse cases, and our collaboration with conservation partners working on the nine other lawsuits pending in federal courts throughout the West and the District of Columbia, ONDA is doing everything in our power to make sure the sage-grouse does not go extinct on our watch.





ONDA member Barbara Engel. Photo © Vicki Fox

Warning:
You, too,
could fall in love
with stewardship.
Barbara Engel
has been on
more than
30 trips
with ONDA
and keeps
coming back.

#### ONE VOLUNTEER'S COMMITMENT ENCAPSULATES 30 YEARS OF STEWARDSHIP

#### By Ben Gordon Stewardship Director

ONDA is celebrating our 30th anniversary this year. To commemorate the work of literally thousands of volunteers, we're highlighting the story of one ONDA volunteer who has been on a whopping 31 trips and traveled to every nook and cranny of ONDA's geography.

In June 2009, Barbara Engel took a fateful trip, joining ONDA's Stewardship Coordinator Jefferson Jacobs and 13 other volunteers for a fence removal project on the Pine Creek Conservation Area. Located next to Spring Basin Wilderness in the John Day Basin, this land is owned by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and managed to improve its wildlife habitat value; ONDA began partnering on restoration projects here in the early 2000s. On this trip, Barbara's efforts contributed to the removal of 4.3 miles of barbed wire fence and she and the rest of the crew chalked up more than 360 stewardship hours, camped out for three nights, and hiked all over Pine Creek.

Jefferson recalls that Barbara "reveled in the sights, the hard work, and every chance to hike over the next hill."

Obviously the hook was set pretty deep on Barbara after this first trip. Over the next seven years, she tried every type of project in every location that ONDA works in. She pulled fence from Cottonwood Canyon State Park, the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Summit Creek in the Malheur National Forest, Steens Mountain, Hart Mountain, and Pine Creek. She planted native plants along the South Fork Crooked River, Deschutes Rim and Pine Creek. She has surveyed the Oregon Desert Trail near Lake Abert and floated the Lower John Day and Owyhee Rivers with ONDA. Raptor monitoring on Hart Mountain? Check. It doesn't get much more remote or dedicated than monitoring Wilderness Study Areas in the Owyhee Canyonlands, and, yes, Barbara has done that too.

All told, Barbara has contributed more than 750 hours toward restoring Oregon's high desert.

ONDA is grateful for Barbara's contributions and honored that she and so many others have chosen to give their time and talents to Oregon's high desert.

In ONDA's first 30 years, our dedicated volunteers have given an ocean of blood, sweat, and tears toward leaving the desert

better than we found it. Propelled by member support, we've removed obsolete fence from all of Hart Mountain and the entire cow-free portion of Steens Mountain. We ground-truthed the entire Oregon Desert Trail route, covering 750 miles give or take a few between Bend and the Owyhee. We've restored critical steelhead habitat on Bridge Creek, Pine Creek, Cherry Creek and many other tributaries of the John Day River, improved redband trout habitat on the South Fork Crooked River, monitored millions of acres of wild public lands and a whole heckuva lot more.

The next 30 years kicks off when registration for our 2018 trips opens on Monday, February 19.

To ONDA's stalwart volunteers, we look forward to seeing you in the season ahead. For anyone considering joining in on the fun, be advised that your story may end up like Barbara's. You may fall hopelessly in love with traveling to far-flung high desert locales to make them better. At least we sure hope you do!

Bookmark
ONDA.org/volunteer

# **MEMBERS**

#### MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Jeff Frank joined the ONDA board in 2010 and he has served as treasurer. He and his wife, Ann, split their time between Bend and Santa Barbara. ONDA members since 2009, they recently decided to leave a legacy gift by designating ONDA as a beneficiary in their will.

#### What inspired you to become an ONDA member?

My friend Jim Davis, a longtime ONDA volunteer and photographer, invited me to join him on an ONDA stewardship trip. He shared his love of the desert with me and helped me to see its beauty and I was inspired to join him as an ONDA member.



ONDA member Jeff Frank

#### What is your favorite place in Oregon's high desert and why?

They're all interesting, but with the sheer magnitude of the landscape and the solitude that you can find out there, the Owyhee Canyonlands are, for me, an almost spiritual place. I really appreciate the many years of effort that ONDA has put into keeping the Owyhee wild.

#### What was your most memorable experience in the high desert?

I visited the Alvord Desert in early spring, but it was so cold that it felt like winter still. And, seeing the night sky unobstructed by city lights was almost like seeing stars for the first time.

#### Why have you included a bequest to ONDA in your estate planning? Any advice you'd offer to ONDA members who are considering legacy giving?

I want to do all I can to keep these places wild for future generations. I'm proud to support ONDA's effective conservation work through my regular membership and, now, through a bequest. Ann and I found that a legacy gift was easy to set up in our will. We're confident that it will have a strong impact protecting all the places we have come to love.

Are you a proud, dynamic member like Jeff? Find out more about making a bequest at ONDA.org/legacy.

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Welcome, Justin Rae

ONDA's newest board member is Justin Rae, a former river guide and current principal at Northline Wealth Management. Rae guided throughout North, Central and South America for close to a decade, before coming to the Pacific Northwest and settling in Bend. Local paddlers may know Rae from his work with the Bend Paddle Trail Alliance, and the instrumental role he played in bringing the first whitewater park to the West Coast. We are thrilled to have him join us. Read the rest of Rae's bio, and meet ONDA's other board members at onda.org/our-community.



#### **Farewell, John Sterling**

Longtime board member John Sterling attended his last ONDA board meeting this summer, after 14 years of service. As President Ray Hartwell noted, "ONDA is stronger today thanks in large part to his efforts. We have the deepest gratitude for his work." Sterling is currently the executive director of The Conservation Alliance, where he has been a leading voice in getting the outdoor industry to be more active in public lands protection. He previously directed environmental programs at Patagonia. Sterling will continue to advise ONDA, but stepping down from ONDA's board should give him a bit more time to run, cycle, ski, and backpack through wild public lands.

#### Welcome, Lace Thornberg

In August, Lace Thornberg joined the ONDA staff in the role of communications manager. Thornberg comes most recently from Braided River, a nonprofit committed to preserving biodiversity in western North America through visual storytelling. Other previous roles include editor of Washington Trails magazine, development director at Washington Trails Association, and project manager at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle.



ONDA's new communications manaaer Lace

Are you interested in writing a blog post for ONDA's web- Thornberg wants site – or being featured in a post? Email her. Have you tak- to hear from en stunning images of the high desert you'd like to share? Michelle Bauer Give a call. Do you have a great idea for what you want to Photography see more of on ONDA's social media. Let's hear it! Email lace@onda.org or call (541) 330-2638.

#### HIGH DESERT SPEAKER SERIES

Join ONDA this winter and spring for our High Desert Speaker Series, where knowledgeable speakers will share stories of inspiration, recreation, ecology, and cultural history of the high desert. Save these dates and watch

ONDA.org/SpeakerSeries

for more details at:

#### **BEND SERIES**

January 16	Oregon Natural Desert Association Stewardship Team
February 13	LeeAnn Kriegh, author of <i>The Nature of Bend</i>
March 27	Bruce Jim, Warm Springs Tribal Elder and Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commissioner
April 10	Zach Collier, owner of Northwest Rafting Company

#### **PORTLAND SERIES**

January 29	Scott Burns, Professor of Geology at Portland State University
February 26	Bruce Jim, Warm Springs Tribal Elder and Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commissioner
March 26	Kirsten Blackburn, advocacy manager for The Conservation Alliance
April 23	Ben Gordon, stewardship director for Oregon Natural Desert Association



Oregon Natural Desert Association 50 sw Bond Street, Suite #4 Bend, Oregon 97702

## ONDA DESERT OUTING: FLATIRON ROCK TRAIL

The Oregon Badlands Wilderness provides a peaceful winter refuge when snow covers most trails around Central Oregon. Designated as Wilderness in 2009 thanks to advocates like you, the Oregon Badlands feels like another world, although it lies just 15 miles east of Bend.

The Flatiron Rock Trail offers a wonderful introduction to the Badlands, winding through inflated lava and old-growth juniper woodlands to one of the most prominent rock formations in the Badlands. From the trailhead, hikers have the option of taking the Ancient Juniper Trail, a short and pleasant route that links up with the Flatiron Rock Trail after about 2 miles. Flatiron Rock, at about 2.5 miles, makes a good turnaround point, or you can continue on to Castle Rock and Badlands Rock on the Castle Trail before returning the way you came.

Looking for a new way to experience the Badlands? Why not spend a clear winter evening hiking under a full moon in the high desert – with lots of layers and warm beverages of course!

Two full moons in January double the chance that you'll have cloudless skies and bright moonlight to guide you. On New Year's Day, the full moon will rise at 4:42 P.M., just five minutes after sunset. The "blue moon" falls on January 31.

#### DRIVING DIRECTIONS

From Bend, head east on highway 20/Greenwood Avenue. at milepost 16, turn left at the Flatiron Rock trailhead (turn-off is signed).



Star-studded sky above the Badlands, east of Bend. Photo © Cregg Large

For more detailed notes and advice specifically about this hike, see:

#### ONDA.org/hike/flatiron-rock

And, if you are looking for other suggestions in this area, be sure to check our all new Visitor's Guide to the Central Oregon Backcountry at:

ONDA.org/visitCentralOregon





ONDA is a member of EarthShare of Oregon, which brings support to environmental endeavors in local communities, across Oregon and around the world.