



OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

# DESERT RAMBLINGS

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A MILESTONE  
IN THE MAKING





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Backdrop Photo: Kari Ferber

## OVERHEARD

“My favorite spot on earth is the Lower Whychus Creek Canyon from Alder Springs to its confluence with the Wild and Scenic Middle Deschutes. I’ve hiked, camped, fished, and kayaked here since I could do any of these things, just like my parents and grandparents.”



Timothy Freeman  
Terrebonne, Oregon

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Cover: Balsamroot awaken in the Owyhee  
Photo: Barb Rumer



Photo: Mark Lemaire

*Dear friend of Oregon's desert,*

Set foot in the sage-covered hillsides anywhere east of Bend and you're guaranteed a view that stretches uninterrupted for miles. Oregon's high desert is textbook vastness, a landscape that invites long-range thinking as naturally as wildflowers summon bees.

In this issue, we'll imagine what Oregon's high desert looks like twenty years from now, thanks to the meaningful work you are engaged in today. We'll also take a look back on how Steens Mountain came to be protected twenty years ago and how we've looked after this landscape ever since. And, you will learn that we are entering into a new era of stewardship work in the Oregon Badlands.

Throughout these pieces, a theme emerges: Designation is a milestone; conservation is a process.

That's our clear-eyed expectation for the Owyhee, too. In our cover story, you'll get caught up on the latest chapter in our Owyhee odyssey and learn how we came out of intense discussions with a bill introduced in Congress that proposes wilderness designations for more than a million acres of southeastern Oregon desert public lands.

While this Owyhee bill is complex and reflects compromise, ONDA is invested in its success because we believe in working with all those who care about the future of Oregon's public lands, even when our priorities differ.

We have no doubt that a meaningful, durable conservation designation is absolutely critical for the future health and vitality of this important landscape. That's why, we're committed to working alongside you, day in and day out, to achieve enduring protection for the Owyhee.

Thanks to you, we are engaged in the long arc of conservation.

Your steadfast support keeps Oregon's high desert sage-green, wide open and pulsing with life.

*Together for a wild desert,*

Ryan Houston  
Executive Director





# Steens, Forever

by Mark Salvo, *Program Director*

Known by the Paiute as Tse'tse'ede, the Steens is both a historic homeland and an unparalleled treasure in Oregon's high desert. The largest fault block mountain in North America, Steens stands sentinel over the mystical Alvord Desert and thousands of square miles of the sagebrush sea. It is a landscape that has endured for millennia, and this year we are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of a particularly important moment in time — the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act — that secured a future for this magical place.

Steens is a wonder to behold. The mountain is blanketed in a gorgeous mosaic of western juniper and mountain mahogany, mixed with mountain big sagebrush and groves of quaking aspen, and yielding to meadows of wildflowers and native grasses at the highest elevations. This diversity of habitats is a haven for wildlife, including iconic pronghorn antelope, charismatic Greater Sage-grouse, restored California bighorn sheep, spectacular Great Basin redband trout, dozens of migratory bird species, and incredible numbers of raptors that nest on rocky cliffs and soar on seasonal thermals along 50 miles at Steens' crest.

Such a special place deserves special protection and in 2000, ONDA and other stakeholders worked with the Oregon Congressional delegation to forge the nation's first and only

“Cooperative Management and Protection Area.” The Steens act is a model for legislating protections for landscapes important to wildlife and watersheds, as well as local communities and economies. The act protected nearly a half-million acres from incompatible land use and development and designated more than 170,000 acres of wilderness and over 40 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers on the mountain.

In the years since, ONDA members have defended the mountain from poorly sited wind turbines, off-road vehicles and other threats and rolled up their sleeves to remove obsolete barbed wire and conduct arduous and long-deferred trail maintenance.

Taken together, permanent protections, ongoing vigilance and hands-on stewardship have restored wildlands and supported wildlife to thrive on Steens, with the added benefit of providing endless opportunities for nature observation and recreation for more than 100,000 visitors annually. You may have a favorite Steens memory of your own. Standing at the rim of Kiger Gorge, descending the trail to Wildhorse Lake, wandering the rolling sagebrush grasslands, catching sight of a Golden Eagle, or looking out over four states from Steens summit. And, thanks to you, people can continue to enjoy this mountain's rich past and breath-taking views for decades to come. ♦

2020 marks the 20th anniversary of landmark legislation that established the first wilderness area in Oregon's desert. Ongoing vigilance and stewardship since then have helped preserve the mountain's rich natural habitat. *Photo: David Ramirez*









# Best Case Scenario

Twenty years out, will Oregon's high desert be dusty or lush?

Photo: John Cushing

by Lace Thornberg, *Communications Manager*

What do you see when you imagine what the future holds for Oregon's high desert?

With study after study documenting the acceleration of climate change, the rampant spread of invasive species and the threat of massive wildfires, it's not hard to let your mind go down a dark path and picture a frighteningly brown and too quiet future for this fragile ecosystem.

Or, do you glide into a utopian daydream, where sage-grouse, revered for their tenacity, have joined the ranks of the bald eagle as symbol of national pride, and native salmon once again ply the furthest reaches of Oregon's desert rivers?

In fact, our future reality will depend on the actions we take now.

There's no question that it will take comprehensive and sweeping action at every level — from personal to global — to stave off the worst impacts of climate change, achieve sustainable use of our natural resources, and save species from extinction.

Here at ONDA, we're confident that Oregon's high desert will fare well, thanks to the many dedicated and forward-looking individuals — including you — who are so deeply invested in seeing this culturally and ecologically significant landscape thrive.

Care to join us on a tour through the high desert on a spring day in 2040, where your commitment to the health of Oregon's high desert is on full display?

## Flourishing Beaverhoods

The banks of the South Fork Crooked River are not easy to walk along. The river is a big swampy mess with no clearly defined edge between river and land — and that is, in a word, perfect. Beaver lodges are strung along the length of the river. Their dams cool and store water, recharging the underground aquifers and creating lush habitat for buzzing insects, melodic songbirds and hungry fish.

Deploying the latest science on climate change and ecosystem adaptation, ONDA began creating inviting "beaverhoods" along this river corridor, and several others, in 2020. By focusing in on strategic half mile sections, rather than planting more diffusely along the rivers we worked on, we were able to provide the ultimate mix of food and space to encourage rapid beaver expansion.

The beaverhoods we established were a hit. Beaver have reclaimed their keystone role in this ecosystem, creating natural reservoirs of clean, clear and abundant water that supports a remarkable diversity of life that is successfully adapting to climate change.





Thanks to the inspiring commitment, energy and innovation shown by this community of conservation advocates, watersheds throughout the desert are literally abuzz, everyone has a voice in setting the conservation agenda, and the night skies are still magnificently dark. *Photos, top left to bottom right: Chris Schmoekel, Sage Brown, Ben Canales.*

## Enduring Partnerships

When we reach the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, we hear Tiyana Casey launching into a talk she has given many times. She has the full attention of dozens of young adults representing the Wasco, Warm Springs, Northern Paiute, and the Burns-Paiute tribes among others.

“Indigenous conservation practices are values and age-old traditions we have ingrained in our culture since time immemorial,” she begins.

Tiyana led ONDA’s first tribal stewards field crew in 2019 and has remained involved in various capacities as the tribal stewards project grew and evolved. With many enduring relationships built over time, tribal leaders enjoy working together with ONDA to address shared priorities in this landscape.

## Freedom to Roam

Just outside Adel, Oregon, our view of the horizon is temporarily obscured as a large herd of pronghorn antelope move past on their annual migration between Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northern Nevada

and Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in southern Oregon.

This swath of sagebrush steppe had long been recognized by federal land managers and conservationists alike as a high priority conservation area due to the region’s intact plant communities and its importance to threatened wildlife such as the Greater Sage-grouse and pygmy rabbit. With scientists, public lands advocates and rural community residents calling in unison for the preservation of this essential migration corridor for pronghorn, the original 1930s vision of a single large wildlife refuge was finally realized.

## Dark Nights

With nightfall, we pitch a tent on the Alvord Desert playa, one of several sites in southeastern Oregon which has been recognized as an International Dark Sky Park. Our crystal clear view into the cosmos provides a fitting end to this brilliant spring day in the desert.

## Next Stops

If we had more time, we could have hiked across Sutton Mountain and checked in on its healthy elk and mule deer herds. We could have paddled one of the desert’s many Wild and Scenic Rivers or dropped into any of the 30 wilderness areas in the Owyhee Canyonlands that were established in 2020.

Oregon’s high desert in 2040 is so boundless in its recreational opportunities and so rich in natural habitat, there’s no way to take it all in. We’ll have to save those stops for another day. ♦





# A Milestone in the Making

by Corie Harlan, *Campaign Manager*

**With more plot twists than a best-selling novel, this past year in our long Owyhee campaign certainly proved to be a page-turner.**

**Thanks to your stalwart support, we moved into 2020 with over one million acres of new wilderness in southeast Oregon proposed in Congress.**

**Now, let's get you caught up.**



A vast intact expanse in Oregon's Owyhee.  
*Photo: Bruce Couch*





## The backstory

Last May, Oregon's US Senator Ron Wyden came to ONDA and our conservation partners with a rare and unexpected offer to participate in an in-depth discussion about the ecological health of public lands in eastern Oregon with folks of varying perspectives. A critical new chapter in our decades-long effort to preserve the most stunning and ecologically vital lands and waterways in Oregon's high desert was suddenly upon us.

ONDA stepped into this dialogue with eyes wide open. We knew engaging in this process alongside people who had ardently opposed past conservation efforts in this area would be a true challenge. We knew this could be an avenue for landmark conservation progress. And, we were honored to stand up for our values and serve as a strong voice for the area's wild lands, water and wildlife.

This conversation brought together sportsmen and women, ranchers, county and tribal representatives, conservationists, and state and federal agency staff to share perspectives on how to improve the long-term ecological health of public lands in Malheur County. How to best manage and protect the 4.5 million acres of federal public lands in this rural eastern Oregon county has been a hotly debated topic for generations. Given this scale and history, we all had a lot to talk about. We're grateful for our community's commitment and enthusiasm which fueled us through six months of intense dialogue.

## The bill

In early November, U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley introduced a Senate bill proposing 1.1 million acres of new desert wilderness.

This Owyhee proposal is a landmark public lands conservation bill. It is also an economic development bill written to give voice to local concerns and lift up one of Oregon's poorest counties. With the explicit intent of balancing differing priorities, Senator Wyden listened attentively to disparate voices and crafted a proposal seeking middle ground.

In the resulting compromise, we realize several important, and exciting, conservation gains:

- An unprecedented 1.1 million acres of wilderness in Oregon that forever protects an intact landscape and staves off myriad threats;
- A more certain and wild future for over 340,000 acres of wilderness-quality lands;



- Nearly 15 additional miles of Wild and Scenic River;
- A clear mandate to the Bureau of Land Management to manage all public lands in Malheur County in ways that improve their ecological health over time; and
- A robust framework for much-needed restoration and responsive, science-driven monitoring and adaptive management.

## Breaking gridlock, pragmatic compromise

In the face of pressing issues like climate change and rampant fire cycles, this pragmatic bill breaks decades of gridlock and makes tangible progress when we need it most. Imminent development threats would be shut down, thanks to the provisions to protect more than 1.1 million acres of public lands as wilderness.

There are elements in this compromise that will demand on-going vigilance and elements that provide a vital step forward in realizing ONDA's goal of resilient and healthy public lands in Oregon's high desert. On balance and over the long term, this bill offers benefits to the Owyhee's wildlands, Malheur County residents, Oregonians, and Americans, near and far, who have come to know and love the special, irreplaceable public lands of this region.

We're heartened knowing the spires of Leslie Gulch, dark night skies over Three Forks, critical sage-grouse habitat throughout the West Little Owyhee and so much more would be safeguarded forever.

## What's next

The next chapter in the effort to conserve the Owyhee is unfolding now. We're going to keep working hard with our Senators and our community throughout this entire process to help ensure this bill does right by one of our last, best wild places. In the coming months, your advocacy and steadfast commitment will be needed to sustain the progress made thus far.

Together, we'll keep the Owyhee — a stronghold of wild, precious and irreplaceable lands and waters — healthy and thriving. ♦





Lake Abert, as seen from the Oregon Desert Trail. Photo: Vernon Winters

## Oregon Desert Trail Explorers Weigh In

by Renee Patrick, *Program Coordinator*

The Oregon Desert Trail is an imaginative, immersive long-distance route, which connects various forms of quiet recreation to desert conservation issues. Along with a small but mighty cadre of thru-hikers and section hikers, more day hikers than ever before are connecting to the high desert landscapes along this challenging desert hiking route.

Here's a bit of what 30+ survey respondents, who spent a combined 414 days on the trail, had to say about their ODT experience.

### Would you do it again?

88% plan to come back

### Top on the list to visit again?

1. Owyhee Canyonlands
2. Steens Mountain
3. Hart Mountain
4. "all of it"

### What do you want most from your stops in trail towns?

Showers

Laundry

Fresh Vegetables

### Did you learn something new?

91% gained public lands knowledge



Photo: Gabriel Deal

"I know in my heart, when you've spent time walking across a landscape, you are more likely to make the time to show up for and advocate for that place you love." — Lindsay Malone

Whether you plan to head out for a day, a week, or a month, you'll find helpful information by downloading our Oregon Desert Trail Guidebook.

Find it at:  
<http://bit.ly/ODT-Guidebook>

We're excited to see how these explorers become engaged in advocating for desert public lands. Right after a hot shower, of course. ♦





Photo: Stuart Gordon

# Oregon Badlands Revisited

Announcing regular stewardship trips amidst Central Oregon's ancient junipers

by Ben Gordon, *Program Director*

As anyone who's turned compost into a garden bed knows, few things in life are more rewarding than tangibly improving a piece of the earth that you feel connected to.

The Oregon Badlands Wilderness is one such place for the ONDA community. Years of work went into attaining wilderness designation, followed by years of stewarding trails and removing fences. Many people have taken part in preserving and enhancing the rugged and wild character of this favorite Central Oregon place, and grown more deeply attached to it in the process.

For nearly 20 years, the Friends of Oregon Badlands (The Fobbits), an organization composed of volunteers dedicated to keeping the Badlands wild, took the lead on caring for the area. ONDA offered additional support when asked, but in large part relied on this hearty group to look after the Badlands. When The Fobbits decided to dissolve this year, they didn't want to leave the need for stewardship unmet. They asked ONDA to carry their mantle, and we eagerly accepted.

The Fobbits leave big shoes to fill, but we are confident that ONDA volunteers will rise to the occasion, carry on their impressive legacy, and make them proud.

In 2020, ONDA will double down on efforts to give back to the Badlands. With eight single-day projects planned in partnership with the Prineville Bureau of Land Management, volunteers will have the opportunity to maintain trails, remove and retrofit fences, improve signage, obscure illegal vehicle incursion tracks and more. Each month, volunteers will address the area's most pressing need and become introduced to another aspect of land stewardship.

We always approach protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert as work in progress, and the Badlands offers a prime example of this view. When our long campaign to earn wilderness designation for the Oregon Badlands resulted in an important act by Congress, we realized a significant milestone, but our work did not end there. In the Badlands, as elsewhere, that designation marked the start of a new era of ongoing stewardship and care to preserve the area's wild character. ♦



## Hello, Mark Salvo



In February, ONDA welcomed Mark Salvo into the role of program director. Mark launched his conservation career in Oregon's high desert more than 20 years ago, and he is thrilled to be back in his home state and working on behalf of one of his

most beloved natural landscapes.

Just prior to coming to ONDA, Mark served as Vice President of Landscape Conservation at Defenders of Wildlife where he was responsible for multiple programs to protect species and habitat, as well as defending against administrative and legislative policies that would threaten these resources.

## Welcome, Beth Macinko



Hopping into the role of stewardship coordinator just in time for the 2020 field season, Beth Macinko will be responsible for leading ONDA's upland restoration trips in the Oregon Badlands, John Day Fossil Beds, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and other wild scenic locales.

She will also join our tribal stewards crew to work in various culturally significant sites.

Beth's career in stewardship trip started in 2008, when she joined a youth corps trail crew cutting tread on the Continental Divide Trail. She has since worked on trails around the country, most recently with Washington Trails Association.

To learn more about Mark, Beth and everyone on staff at ONDA, visit [onda.org/about-us/our-staff](https://onda.org/about-us/our-staff).

## Preserve the Heart of the Sagebrush Steppe

This spring, the Bureau of Land Management will be updating the Lakeview Resource Management Plan, making decisions about the fate of more than three million acres in the Greater Hart-Sheldon Region. The BLM needs to know there is widespread support for strong, conservation-focused management in this landscape, and this planning process opens a critical window to make our voices heard.

Stay tuned for an alert from ONDA when the draft plan is released and the comment period opens.



## MEET ELISSA PFOF

DEDICATED TO CREATIVE CONSERVATION

by Corinne Handelman, *Outreach Coordinator*

Elissa Pfof discovered ONDA at a 2005 film event when she was working in Portland as a freelance writer and artist. It wasn't long before she was regularly volunteering on longer stewardship trips and making it a priority to spend more and more time east of the Cascades.

"Finding ONDA was one of the most pivotal experiences of my life," she writes, "It was through my work with them that I discovered the Oregon wild places that continue to feed my soul to this day. When I'm immersed in this expansive landscape, I feel totally alive, happy and whole."

The pull of Oregon's high desert was so strong that in 2012, Elissa made the move to Bend where she lives and works today.

"I hope my art and writing ignites the love of wild places in others, so that they feel inspired to protect it," she reflects.

*If you renew your ONDA membership at an event and receive our new sage-grouse bandana, you'll see Elissa's creativity at work. Or, check her out on Instagram @elissa.pfof. Photo: Robert Curzon*

## OUR NEXT SPOTLIGHT?

Know an ONDA member with a great story? Introduce them to us! Email [corinne@onda.org](mailto:corinne@onda.org).



### Lake Abert – Oregon's Avian Treasure

By Craig Miller, *GIS Specialist*

Located in south-central Oregon, Lake Abert is 15 miles long by 7 miles wide, just 11 feet deep at its deepest point, with a salinity 3.5 times higher than the ocean.

While fish cannot survive in this salty environment, the brine shrimp and brine flies that thrive in the lake's particular composition provide a critical food source for a staggering number of birds. Birders have counted up to 40,000 American Avocets and 20,000 Eared Grebes here, and, on July 4, 2013, Oregon birder Christopher Hinkle tallied 330,000 Wilson's Phalaropes — about 20 percent of the world's population of this species.

Many of the birds that depend on the lake's ecosystem begin to show up in early April, such as Eared Grebes, American Avocets, Wilson's Phalaropes, and Willets, with the main action occurring from late June through mid-September. Species you are likely to encounter in large numbers during the summer months include Northern Shoveler, Black-necked Stilt, Red-necked Phalarope, Ring-billed Gull, California Gull and Ruddy Duck. Of note, Lake Abert hosts up to 350 individual Snowy Plovers, which is one of the largest populations of breeding plovers in Oregon.

Black-necked Stilts. Photo: Wyatt Houston



## UPCOMING EVENTS

For all details and our full list of events, visit [onda.org/events](https://onda.org/events)

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| March 13    | Hiking Oregon's High Desert   Salem, OR                        |
| March 16    | Restoring Wildlife Habitat on Tribal Properties   Portland, OR |
| April 13    | Discover the Wild Owyhee   Portland, OR                        |
| April 14    | Badlands Wilderness Stewardship   near Bend, OR                |
| April 17-19 | Annual General Meeting   Fossil, OR                            |
| April 27    | New Hikes in Eastern Oregon   Bend, OR                         |

Learn more about the **High Desert Speakers Series** at [onda.org/speakersseries](https://onda.org/speakersseries)





Photo: Lace Thornberg

### TRIP DETAILS

**Drive time:** 2 hours from Bend, OR;  
4 hours from Portland, OR

**Season:** spring through fall

**Spring highlights:** waterfalls

## Cycling Around Sutton

by Ben Gordon, *Program Director*

Stalwart *Desert Ramblings* readers will know about the terrific opportunities to hike and explore Sutton Mountain on foot. Located just north of the small town of Mitchell in Wheeler County, this wilderness study area is a 29,000-acre plateau of basalt, canyons, creeks and other intriguing geological features near the Painted Hills portion of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

In this issue, we're offering up something for the road and gravel cycling enthusiasts among us — turn-by-turn directions for exploring this area by bike.

While Sutton Mountain's interior is closed to cycling, a 37-mile loop of pavement and gravel around the mountain offers up-close views of Sutton Mountain and the John Day River from every angle. While there are many miles of smooth pavement, the complete loop includes thirteen miles of gravel surfaces and is best ridden on a mountain or gravel bike.

Riders attempting the complete loop can expect approximately 3,000 feet of elevation gain and loss, mixed riding surfaces with the potential for some deep gravel, depending on how recently the roads were maintained. Looking for extra credit? Park your bike at one of the many discreet entry points to the Sutton Mountain Wilderness Study Area and take a short hike.

**DRIVING DIRECTIONS:** Start from the Painted Hills and ride the loop clockwise. Take Burnt Ranch Road to Twickenham/Bridge Creek Cutoff Road (3.3 miles) and turn right. Take Twickenham/Bridge Creek Cutoff Road to Girds Creek Road (10.1 miles) and turn right. Take Girds Creek Road to Highway 207 (6.4 miles) and turn right. Take Highway 207 to the Old Logging Road (4.4 miles) and turn right. Take the Old Logging Road to Burnt Ranch Road (4 miles) and turn right. Take Burnt Ranch Road back to the Painted Hills (4 miles).

**For more desert outings, check out our Visitor's Guides at [onda.org/guides](http://onda.org/guides).**





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## COMING UP ON INSTAGRAM

tips for identifying native wildflowers



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Photo: © Greg Burke

Protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert since 1987. Learn more at [onda.org](https://onda.org).