



OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

DESERT RAMBLINGS

FALL + WINTER 2020 | VOLUME 33 • NO.2

WILD WATERS

Preserving the resource
that brings life to the landscape



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Backdrop: Winter Sunrise at the Painted Hills.
Photo: Michael Folland

OVERHEARD

“When I think of the places where my sense of spirituality feels open and free... I think of the Oregon High Desert and the Owyhee Canyonlands. The air has a unique clarity and the vistas quiet the mind. The smell of the rabbit brush after a thunderstorm or just the immensity of the basalt uplift that is the Steens is lodged in the sensory part of my brain and I feel my shoulders relax and my breathing slow and deepen.”



Molly Holt
Washington, D.C.

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WHY ASPEN QUAKE
Learn why these trees earn their Latin name, *Populus tremuloides*. **PAGE 12.**

SEE MORE ONLINE

WILD & UNPROTECTED
bit.ly/WildDesertRivers

RESTORING OREGON'S DESERT
LANDSCAPES
bit.ly/RestoringDesertLandscapes

SUTTON MOUNTAIN DAZZLES
onda.org/2020/08/sutton-mountain-dazzles/

SIX STEADY ONDA MEMBERS
onda.org/2020/08/meet-six-steady-onda-members/

Cover: The John Day River winding by Sheep Rock.
Photo: James Parsons



The Deschutes River near Alder Springs Trail. Photo: Don Gallianza

Dear friend of Oregon's desert,

As the pandemic continues to bring social distancing and home-based sequestration, many of us have had more time to browse our bookshelves. I've found myself moving past Thoreau's contemplative descriptions and Barry Lopez's rich natural histories and landing on the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez. As COVID-19 continues to force surreal changes to how we live, work and play, his books, particularly *Love in the Time of Cholera*, seem a smidge more real.

ONDA has yet to write the final chapter in what we might call *Conservation in the Time of COVID*, but so far our efforts to protect, defend and restore Oregon's high desert have continued as strong as ever thanks to your sustained support.

You are propelling three major landscape protection campaigns that collectively touch every corner of the high desert as efforts to conserve the Owyhee Canyonlands, Sutton Mountain, and Wild and Scenic Rivers together would protect millions of acres of public lands and hundreds of miles of rivers and streams. With these landmark high desert conservation efforts making rapid progress, the year ahead has incredible potential, thanks to you.

In the tributary streams of the John Day River and Crooked River watersheds, your long-term investments in stream habitat restoration continue to pay dividends as fish, wildlife and the mighty

beaver remain blissfully unaware of the COVID-19 pandemic while enjoying the habitat you've restored.

Behind the scenes, and through the now familiar frame of Zoom, ONDA's Board of Directors is deep into the development of a new strategic plan to guide ONDA through 2024. While plot twists will come as we respond to what COVID, the elections and the economy serve up, your enduring commitment to conserving the high desert remains as the firmly rooted foundation for all that we will pursue in the months and years ahead.

Your contributions, be it advocating, volunteering, steadfast giving or all of the above, fuel our continued work and give the desert a much needed voice. Thank you for standing up for Oregon's high desert, now and always.

For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston
Executive Director





Your support allowed ONDA to make a long-term commitment to bull trout recovery. Our perseverance in the courtroom has changed land management and led to ecological recovery on the Malheur National Forest. *Photo: Mac Lacy*

A Desert River Recovery

Thanks to you, bull trout are making a comeback in the Malheur and North Fork Malheur Wild and Scenic Rivers

by Mac Lacy, *Senior Attorney*

Bull trout populations are beginning to recover in the Malheur and North Fork Malheur rivers after two decades of legal pressure targeting Forest Service livestock grazing schemes that had pushed the fish, listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act, to the brink of extirpation — being locally extinct.

Since 2003, ONDA has sought to improve habitat and recover bull trout populations by pressing the Forest Service to enforce chronically ignored Malheur Forest Plan requirements intended to prioritize fish recovery. By 2013 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had determined there were fewer than 50 adult bull trout remaining in each of the two rivers. One agency official described the populations as “blinking out.”

Yet, over the course of this complex litigation ONDA’s tenacity paid off. The Forest Service began closing areas to grazing one at a time as ONDA field surveys and expert reports, and the agency’s own record, illuminated how livestock had stripped streambanks and meadows of native plants, leaving channels too wide and shallow to maintain the clean, cold water bull trout need to survive.

Today, the Forest Service no longer authorizes grazing along more than 64 miles of bull trout critical habitat on the two rivers and nine important tributary creeks. Spanning more than 36,000 acres of national forest, this is nearly 90% of the stream miles ONDA sought to protect in court. These areas have shown remarkable resiliency, rapidly revegetating and re-stabilizing streambanks. In 2017, agency scientists found for the first time

that bull trout numbers were increasing in the two rivers.

This upturn comes despite an adverse legal ruling in the final phase of the case. A federal appeals panel in the Ninth Circuit held this spring that the Forest Service need not explain whether site-specific grazing authorizations are consistent with Forest Plan standards intended to improve habitat and recover fish populations — even though the court’s prior cases require this for other activities, like logging projects.

ONDA’s long-term commitment to bull trout recovery has led to changed land management and ecological recovery on the Malheur National Forest, and other restoration and conservation opportunities. ONDA volunteers have replanted willow and cottonwood along Summit and Wiwaanyatt creeks in the Malheur River watershed. Many of the now-ungrazed bull trout streams along the Malheur and North Fork Malheur rivers have been nominated for protection in Sen. Ron Wyden’s proposed Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation. And, ONDA established important Ninth Circuit legal precedent earlier in the case — still binding today — that citizens have a right to challenge Forest Service grazing decisions as “final agency actions” subject to court review.

ONDA will build on these successes by monitoring these critical bull trout streams to ensure continued recovery of bull trout populations and by continuing to engage supporters in stream restoration projects and campaigns to conserve the most compelling wildlands in Oregon’s high desert. ♦

Watershed Moments

Frequent volunteer Chris Cheng and new board member Elisa Cheng (see bio on pg. 13) take on habitat restoration along the South Fork Crooked River, a key waterway where ONDA has made a long-term commitment.

Photo: ONDA archive



A behind-the-scenes look at how ONDA narrows our focus to expand our impact

by Jefferson Jacobs, *Riparian Restoration Coordinator*

Oregon's high desert may be known as the "dry side," but this vast landscape is still home to thousands of miles of streams, springs and rivers. And, in this dry landscape, each of these sources of water and the surrounding late-summer greenery they support, is of critical value to wildlife. While only about 2% of the high desert landscape is covered by these ecosystems, more than 80% of the wildlife in the region depend on these oases to survive.

Sadly, most of these systems are far from being in the best shape they could be and they need our help. And with the impacts of climate change bearing down, the situation becomes increasingly dire and time-critical.

In the face of the large need and given limited funding and time, how does ONDA make a meaningful positive impact on the landscapes we treasure most?

To ensure that our streamside habitat restoration work has the greatest possible impact, ONDA develops new projects based on the following criteria: ecological and physical landscape, opportunities for collaboration, inspirational value and restoration potential.

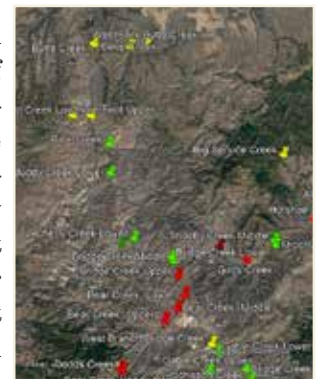
Think of each of these categories as checkboxes that count as votes for restoring a particular desert creek.

Ecological and Physical Landscape

We start by selecting portions of watersheds within the high desert region which meet ecological priorities, such as providing habitat for endangered or threatened species.

We are particularly interested in looking at distributions of "umbrella species" such as sage-grouse or salmon. In the case of salmon, we can also prioritize creeks that have historically supported salmon because that lets us know that, despite their current degraded condition, at some point these creeks had cold, flowing water year round. We then narrow our focus again to find smaller headwater streams because this habitat is often the most limiting in the salmonid lifecycle, and the improvements we create here, such as more and cooler water, can literally flow downstream.

By doing what is right for umbrella species, we can "cover" (like an umbrella) the needs of many other species and address many ecological, and environmental quality issues all at once.



Pinpointing key creeks

Opportunity for Collaboration

Within this set of headwater salmonid-bearing creeks, our next step is to find opportunities to work with our two most important collaborators: land managers and beavers. Questions we ask at this stage include:

- Is the land manager or property owner amenable to removing the stressors from the project site, such as grazing, that caused the habitat degradation in the first place?
- What levels of beaver activity and dynamic change would the land manager be comfortable with?
- Is the area's topography suitable for establishing a beaver colony? And, are there beaver present or near enough to move into the project site?

Collaboration with beaver is the keystone in our strategy for expanding the impact of any ONDA riparian restoration project. When we recover conditions on a creek sufficiently to allow beavers to take over, beavers can then begin building dams, which stores and cools water underground and increases the acreage of moist ground where healthy riparian plants can grow. When we can establish a safe location for a colony to operate out of, beavers can spread their positive impact far beyond the boundaries of the original restoration site.

Inspirational Value

Just as we look to beaver to establish colonies and really make our restoration work take hold, we're also counting on humans to further spread the impact of any restoration project. As we zoom in from a regional to a local scale, we can judge whether a restoration success at a particular project site by asking:

- Would this project convince neighboring landowners and land managers of the benefits of this style of restoration work?
- Can we shine a light on problems with nearby management practices, or laws or regulations?
- Does this work demonstrate "proof of concept" for novel approaches to restoration?

Answering these questions enables us to identify individual stream sections to work on.

Beaver dams are an incredible tool for preserving water in the desert. Thanks to the inspiring commitment and innovation of this community, ONDA's riparian restoration program can recover conditions on a single creek to the point where beaver can take over and improve the entire watershed.

Photo: Jim Davis.



Restoration Potential

Now, we reach a scale of meters and begin to assess an area's restoration potential. Given the unique techniques and tools available to ONDA, what would a restoration project "here" look like? This gets us into the nitty-gritty of project design, and requires answers to practical questions such as:

- Where, how many, and what type of native plants does the site need?
- Do we need to build beaver dam analogs here to irrigate those plants?
- Is the ground too rocky to dig holes here?

As we assess an area's restoration potential, we're taking that hard final look to assess if what we can do is sufficient to truly change that small reach of creek enough to allow beavers to move in permanently.

By thoroughly answering questions like these throughout the entire process, we can leverage individual restoration projects in order to change conditions within entire watersheds, and even regionally over time. ♦

FEATURED PROJECTS

Now that you know how ONDA determines where we'll lead our riparian restoration work, head to onda.org/our-approach/restore/ to learn more about these special places: Pine Creek Conservation Area, South Fork Crooked River, Burns Paiute Properties and Cottonwood Canyon State Park.



Outstandingly Remarkable

Oregonians jump in to protect vital desert waters

by Gena Goodman-Campbell, *Public Lands Coordinator*

Last year, on the 51st anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Sen. Ron Wyden asked the audience gathered at ONDA's Wild and Scenic Film Festival to help him protect the most treasured wild waters in the state by nominating rivers and creeks for protection as part of statewide legislation. As the crowd rose to their feet in appreciation, Sen. Wyden bounded off the stage to put his vision of "river democracy" into action.

Thousands of Oregonians responded to Sen. Wyden's call with a flood of nominations for rivers, streams, creeks and lakes across the state, including over a thousand miles of waterways in Oregon's high desert. Now, a year later, we are looking forward to introduction of historic legislation that would secure Wild and Scenic River designation for hundreds of the most important desert waterways in the state.

A Precious Resource Under Threat


When you think of the high desert, water probably isn't what jumps to mind first. And yet, everything you love about this landscape, from beautiful native fish and wildlife to significant cultural touchstones to backcountry recreation, depends on its rivers, creeks and lakes.

Unfortunately, desert waters also face numerous threats. Climate change, drought, mining, energy development and livestock grazing all put pressure on the desert's vulnerable and sensitive waters. Even small earthen dams pose a grave threat to free-flowing waterways. All that is required to dam a small desert stream is a backhoe; a reservoir can be created in a matter of days, effectively killing a stream and jeopardizing all life that depends on it.

For the important and sensitive streams of Oregon's high desert, Sen. Wyden's legislation can't come soon enough. Wild and Scenic River designation will ensure that free-flowing waterways remain that way forever. It will sustain sensitive fish and wildlife in the era of climate change and bolster ecosystems against an array of current and future threats.

"...All Rivers Will Go This Way Unless Somebody Acts Now..."

When the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act passed in 1968, the United States was in the midst of a dam building mania, with 70,000 dams already constructed across the country and 10,000 more in the works. Upon sign-



Willow Creek, with its headwaters in the Trout Creek-Oregon Canyon Mountains area. Photo: Jim Davis

ing the Act, President Lyndon Johnson remarked, “An unspoiled river is a very rare thing in this nation today. Their flow and vitality have been harnessed by dams and too often they have been turned into open sewers by communities and by industries. It makes us all very fearful that all rivers will go this way unless somebody acts now...”

The primary purpose of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is to keep our remaining wild and free-flowing rivers dam-free forever. Importantly, it also directs public land managers to protect the “Outstandingly Remarkable Values” of each designated Wild and Scenic River. These values can include fish and wildlife habitat, cultural sites and artifacts, scenic beauty, recreation, and wildness.

Once a river is designated as Wild and Scenic, a public process commences to create a unique plan for how land managers will balance protecting values like fish and wildlife habitat with other activities, such as grazing. A Wild and Scenic River Management Plan can be the catalyst for improving habitat for sensitive and endangered species like steelhead, greater sage-grouse, golden eagles, and bighorn sheep. The effectiveness of this designation depends on people who care about des-

ert waterways speaking up for them during the planning process and keeping watch over these rivers in the long term to make sure their outstandingly remarkable values are prioritized.

Wild and Scenic River designation is not only about protecting rivers and streams in their current state; it is a future-focused designation that can unlock the wild potential of a free-flowing waterway.

Building Oregon’s Wild and Scenic Legacy

Oregon is currently second only to Alaska in miles of rivers protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Past legislation has protected some of our most treasured desert rivers, including the Owyhee, the Deschutes, and the John Day — one of the longest undammed rivers in the lower 48.

Yet many of the tributaries to these mighty desert rivers remain unprotected, including Lower Whychus Creek, the South Fork Crooked River, and nearly 40 miles of the North Fork John Day. ONDA members leapt at the chance to nominate these precious waterways, and hundreds more across the high desert, for Wild and Scenic River protection.

Whether or not you were among the thousands of Oregonians who participated in the nomination process, you can play a vital role in ensuring the long-term protection, management, and restoration of these desert waterways. Right now, you can voice your support for designating every last mile of deserving desert waters in Sen. Wyden’s impending legislation. And, once that protection is secured, you can help restore these life-giving waters and protect the qualities that make each one so remarkable. ♦

**VISIT [ONDA.ORG](https://onda.org)/TAKE-ACTION TO
SPEAK UP FOR WILD & SCENIC WATERS**

Sen. Ron Wyden made an exciting commitment before a cheering crowd at the 2019 Wild and Scenic Film Festival in Bend: to make Oregon the nation’s leader in Wild and Scenic River miles.



What Wild & Scenic Looks Like

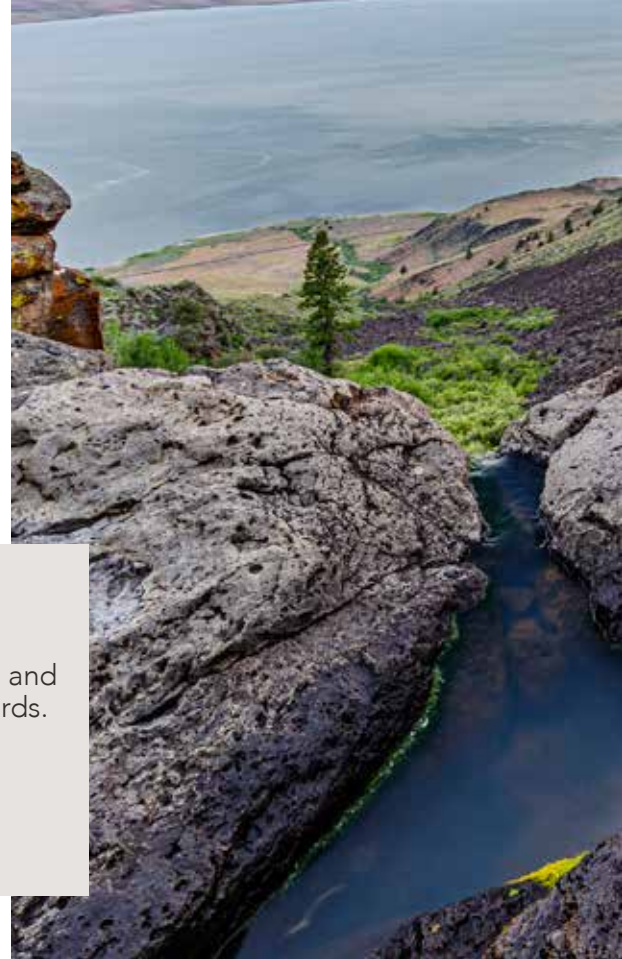
Did you know that, in addition to rivers, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act also protects streams, creeks and lakes?

Wild and Scenic desert waters take many forms and each type of free-flowing waterway serves an important role in the desert ecosystem. From mighty salmon-bearing rivers, like the North Fork John Day, to seasonal streams high in the Pueblo Mountains, the hundreds of waterways nominated for protection in Sen. Wyden's Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation highlight both the diversity and importance of these waters.

DESERT LAKES

Quintessential of the Basin and Range landscape, Lake Abert and other desert lakes provide vital habitat for an astounding diversity and abundance of wildlife, including tens of thousands of migratory birds. Lake Abert and its sources, like the Chewaucan River and Poison Creek, which pours off the dramatic Abert Rim, are threatened by climate change and upstream water diversions for agriculture.

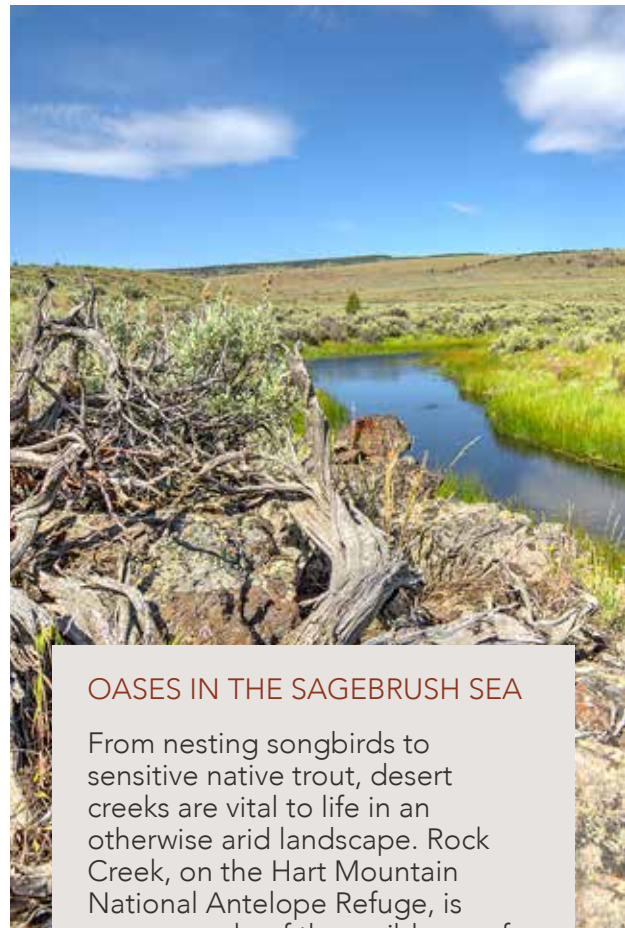
Poison Creek and Lake Abert. Photo: Jim Davis



SALMON-BEARING RIVERS

Salmon and steelhead journey hundreds of miles deep into northeastern Oregon to spawn in the North Fork John Day and its tributaries. Stretching nearly 40 miles through spectacular scenery, the last unprotected stretch of the North Fork John Day also provides wild water and rare solitude for boaters willing to make the trek to enjoy its remote canyonlands.

North Fork John Day River. Photo: Greg Burke



OASES IN THE SAGEBRUSH SEA

From nesting songbirds to sensitive native trout, desert creeks are vital to life in an otherwise arid landscape. Rock Creek, on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, is one example of these ribbons of green bursting with life.

Rock Creek. Photo: Jim Olechea



MOUNTAIN STREAMS

High up on desert peaks like Steens Mountain, streams that arise as a trickle can transform into a raging torrent with spring snowmelt. As ONDA member Julie Weikel fantastically described, "for brief weeks or even just days each spring, the jubilant celebrating streams move boulders, rip out tree roots, and raise a little canyon hell." These small but mighty creeks sustain populations of rare Lahontan cutthroat trout and wildflower-filled meadows that provide critical habitat for sage-grouse and other desert species.

Cottonwood Creek, Steens Mountain. Photo: Mark Darnell



CANYON-CARVING CREEKS

Boasting stunning scenery and exposing millenia of stunning geology and rocky spires, these powerful waterways are a refuge for sensitive wildlife such as California bighorn sheep, golden eagles, and redband trout. Many desert canyons are also sacred and traditional sites for the Northern Paiute people and other indigenous communities who continue to live and gather food and medicine in Oregon's high desert.

Succor Creek. Photo: Sean Bagshaw



Photo: Chris Friend

Why Aspen Quake

By LeeAnn Kreigh, *Naturalist and ONDA Volunteer*

For more about aspen and LeeAnn's fondness for them, visit onda.org/about-us/blog.

Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is especially beloved this time of year, in September and October, when the leaves turn a brilliant yellow-gold or red-orange. The East Coast is spoiled with such autumnal richness from the many maples, oaks, sycamores, hickories, and other deciduous treasures. Out West, we're blessed with evergreens but only the occasional splash of fall color, the brightest of which comes from quaking aspen.

Part of the appeal of these trees in Oregon is that they're a little hard to find, especially in western parts of the state. They grow in far more profusion east of the Cascades, where you can have a picnic under the groves in remote places like Steens and Hart mountains, or seek out small patches along waterways, including many where hardy ONDA volunteers have planted them as part of stream restoration efforts.

When people ask why quaking aspen leaves flutter and chatter in their particular way — the novelist Richard Powers says they “repeat the wind’s gossip” — the answer is usually that the leaf stalk, or petiole, is long, flattened, and turned 90 degrees. Imagine how your hand would flop if it were attached in such a way, not flat to your forearm but perpendicular.

But that matter-of-fact response doesn’t answer the more interesting question of why aspen leaves have evolved to attach in such a singular way. Among the possibilities are that their quivering keeps insects from attaching or helps the leaves hang on through high winds. All that trembling also allows more dappled sunlight to reach the interior leaves and trunk (when young, trunks have a greenish tinge because they contain chlorophyll for photosynthesis).

As for the deeper question of why we humans are so drawn to quaking aspens and the gentle melody of wind passing through their leaves, I’m afraid I don’t have an answer. I only know that for me it’s the sound of home in the high desert. ♦

ONDA Welcomes New Board Members



As a digital consultant, **Elisa Cheng** helps small businesses and non-profits expand their digital presence through search engine optimization, marketing, web design, social media, and digital strategy. Along with bringing this tremendously helpful professional experience to our board, she's

also intimately familiar with ONDA's stewardship program, after being an active restoration project volunteer for years.

After growing up in California and Hawaii, Elisa moved to Bend, Oregon in 2010 and loves all of the trail running, biking, hiking and camping right out her door. With "so many beautiful places to explore with not so many people," Oregon's desert holds a special place in her heart.

Jim Stratton grew up in Oregon, but his career unfolded in Alaska.

In 2019, he was inducted into the Alaska Conservation Hall of Fame, in recognition of his four decades of tireless work for Alaska's wild places. He has held leadership roles with the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, National Parks Conservation Association and the Alaska Conservation Foundation, and served as the Director of Alaska State Parks.



Upon retiring, Jim returned to Oregon and now lives in Eugene. As a lifelong public lands and wildlife enthusiast, Jim was eager to stay involved in conservation and we are delighted to have his experience turned to Oregon's desert.

We also recognize departing members **Ray Hartwell**, **Allie Mace** and **Kirsten Blackburn** and thank them for their years of dedicated board service and thoughtful leadership.

Desert Hiking during COVID-19

As COVID-19 lingers on, you may have questions about how to recreate responsibly. When in doubt about your desire to visit certain public lands, please contact the land managers directly for guidance. Before you visit a town along the Oregon Desert Trail, you can give the business or service a call to inquire about their comfort with outside visitors, changes to services, and changes to business hours. You'll find contact info for many trail town businesses at onda.org/discover-oregons-desert/trail-towns.



MEET MARCY JACOBS

CREATIVE GIVING, FOR THE BIRDS

by Caelin Weiss, *Development Coordinator*

After moving to Portland in the mid-1970s, Marcy Jacobs found herself drawn to wider, wilder places east of the Cascades.

Her passion for cross-country skiing, cycling and hiking brought her to Central Oregon. Later, it was her interest in birding and eco-trips with Portland Audubon that led Marcy to the landscapes of the Malheur region, Steens Mountain, the John Day and other, more remote high desert areas.

"I was very inspired by the vastness and variety of the high desert, and especially its importance to wildlife and bird migration. That is how I learned about the work of ONDA and became a contributor," Marcy writes.

"The best way for me to contribute is through my Donor-Advised Fund. Contributing in this way allows me to time a larger contribution to my fund, which make sense from a tax standpoint, and distribute the funds over time to the causes that I support, many of which are environmental."

Photo: Marcy Jacobs

A SIMPLE WAY TO SUPPORT CONSERVATION



To learn more about Donor-Advised Funds, visit onda.org/give.

COMING UP



NEW FORMS, SAME GREAT COMMUNITY

Successful high desert conservation depends on dedicated people willing to speak up for lands, waters and wildlife. In short, it depends on you!

There's little that we at ONDA love more than getting desert advocates together face-to-face to learn about conservation issues and swap tales about desert adventures. While the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the in-person part, we're still as eager as ever to educate and inspire this community. And, we've been so encouraged by the tremendous response to our online events! Thank you for showing up for the desert.

This fall, don't miss our lineup of the year's best conservation films! The **2020 Wild & Scenic Film Festival** will be totally virtual this year, streamed in HD to your living room. Registration is free, or donate to be entered into a stellar giveaway. Tickets are available at onda.org/event/wsff.

And, to mark the 20th anniversary of Steens Mountain protection, we're introducing **#SteensWeek** — a weeklong series of online events and activations. Follow ONDA on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook and watch for opportunities to join in the fun. Visit onda.org/event/steensweek.



UPCOMING EVENTS

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Sept. 21 | New Hikes in Eastern Oregon w/ Bill Sullivan |
| Sept. 23 | 2021 Wild Desert Calendar on sale now |
| Oct. 2 | Wild & Scenic Film Festival |
| Oct. 3-9 | #SteensWeek |
| Oct. 5 | Steens Rivers w/ Gena Goodman-Campbell |
| Oct. 8 | Twenty Years of Steens Stewardship w/ Corinne Handelman & Sage Brown |
| Nov. 16-20 | Wild Desert Calendar exhibit members only preview |




Watch for details about these events, or visit onda.org/events.

AN EVEN GRANDER VISION

Two of the largest national wildlife refuges in the lower 48 states — Hart Mountain in southern Oregon and Sheldon in northern Nevada — anchor the Greater Hart-Sheldon Region.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established both refuges, but his vision was even grander — a single expansive refuge which extended south from Hart Mountain across the border into Nevada. This "Hart Mountain Game Range" protected the important seasonal habitats and migration corridors for pronghorn and dozens of other sagebrush denizens. Had FDR's original vision prevailed, the Oregon portion alone would be larger than the sum total of both refuges today, providing a rare example of a landscape-scale high desert conservation reserve. *Photo: Jon Musykens*





A Fall Trip to Steens

by Beth Macinko, Stewardship Coordinator

Photo: Dan Hawk

TRIP DETAILS

Drive time: 3.5 hours each way from Bend; 6.5 hours each way from Portland

Season: Steens Mountain Loop Road closes annually for snow-fall, usually November through June

Fall highlights: aspen, star gazing, wildlife

Known to the Northern Paiute as Tse'tse'ede, the Cold One, the mountain commonly called Steens is an ideal fall destination if you're seeking golden groves of aspen and dark night skies.

Aspen are the most widely distributed native North American tree species and form large stands by sprouting new trees from their roots. In fact, the largest single living organism in the world is a clonal colony of aspen in Utah that covers over 100 acres! On Steens Mountain somewhat smaller, but still impressive stands are found between 6,000 and 7,000 feet in elevation. The Fish Lake and Jackman Park campgrounds along Steens Mountain Loop Road are both within the aspen belt and make good base camps. For peak aspen color, plan your trip for late September to early October. There aren't designated trails near the campgrounds, so bring a topo map and wander in search of deep fall colors. If you're up for some bushwhacking, venture down the Fish Creek drainage. Aspen groves provide habitat for birds and wildlife, keep your eyes and ears open and enjoy the rustle of aspen's quaking leaves.

The sights don't end when the sun sets, as Steens Mountain lies in the middle of Oregon's largest dark sky area and two interesting astronomic events occur this fall. Mars will be especially bright between September 29 and October 28 due to its proximity to Earth this year as our orbits are at opposition. Mars will rise in the east in early evening and be visible until sunrise; it's brightness and reddish glow make it distinct. The Draconid meteor shower is also occurring in early October, peaking October 7. While a modest show is predicted this year, occasionally more robust showers occur and the remote skies of Steens are ideal for spotting the Draconids. Look for meteors starting just after nightfall, this shower is best viewed in the early evening and the waning gibbous moon will be rising later in the evening.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS FROM FRENCHGLEN, OR: Turn east off 205 onto Steens Mountain Loop Road, and continue up for 15 miles to Fish Lake Campground or 16 miles to Jackman Park Campground. Plan on driving back the way you came unless you have a high-clearance 4WD vehicle for completing the loop.

For more desert outings, check out our Visitor's Guides at onda.org/guides.



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Protecting, defending and
restoring Oregon's high desert
since 1987.

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LEGACY GIVING

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with a simple, impactful legacy gift.

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Photo: © Greg Burke