OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

DESERT RAMBLINGS

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Awash in Wildflowers

When and where to find wildflowers in Oregon's high desert, and how to help them out



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Backdrop: Rafting the Owyhee Photo: Leon Werdinger

OVERHEARD

"I grew up in eastern Oregon. I love the openness and space in Oregon's high desert. Now that I live somewhere urban, these undeveloped places seem even more beautiful and necessary. I support ONDA because the conservation of this area is important to me."

IN THIS ISSUE

SAGE-GROUSE Employing every strategy to save a species PAGE 4.

LAKE ABERT Seeking lasting solutions for a Pacific flyway reststop in peril PAGE 6.

ANTELOPE

Fence monitoring on Beatys Butte PAGE 7.

WILDFLOWERS

The surprising variety of wildflowers found amidst the sagebrush PAGE 8.

STEELHEAD

Ensuring these fish have the cold, steady water they need PAGE 12.

READ MORE AT ONDA.ORG

DARK NIGHT SKIES IN THE HIGH DESERT

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PROPOSED SUTTON MOUNTAIN NATIONAL MONUMENT

WONDERS BY DAY AND NIGHT

Cover: Arnica on Steens Mountain *Photo: Gary Calicott*

FROM THE OUTBACK



Dear Oregon desert advocate,

Oregon Natural Desert Association is marking our 35th anniversary this year – a milestone that prompts an inevitable bout of nostalgia and reflection.

What were you up to 35 years ago? In 1987, I was a mullet-sporting teenager with a mountain bike. I spent my weekends venturing into the Mission Trails Regional Park in San Diego. At thirteen, I surely didn't think about how much work would have gone into making those few thousand acres of open space beyond my neighborhood available to me. I just rode my bike, stoked when I would come across rattlesnakes or the ripe fruit of a prickly pear cactus.

Today, I have a keen respect for the foresight it takes to preserve public lands and I am grateful to that group of dedicated desert friends who realized, back in the 1980s, that Oregon's high desert needed people looking out for it.

Since joining the ONDA staff, I've heard tales from the barbed wire fence removal projects on Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge at least a dozen times, but I never tire of them. Removing tons of metal from the refuge is an amazing feat that typifies what can be accomplished when everyone "pulls" together. And, I love to think about how all that hard work was done simply because people believed that wildlife deserve safe passage through the landscape and saw a way to help.

I've learned it's not the ONDA way to complete a project and say, "Phew! Glad that's finished!" Instead, milestones are celebrated with this question: "What's next?" All the fence on Hart Mountain may be out of the way, but our dedicated community knew there was more to be done. This summer, we're retrofitting fences outside the Hart Mountain refuge and we're working to conserve the pronghorn migration corridor that crosses over and around Beatys Butte. You're welcome to contribute to that effort, as you'll read on page 7.

Being surrounded by people who share my respect for the natural world is something I truly value. I love being part of a community with a longrange vision, where people are eager to advocate, donate and volunteer to conserve vital desert ecosystems.

With urgent conservation opportunities before us, thank you for ensuring ONDA is as thoughtful, tenacious and effective as ever as we enter into our 35th year.

For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston Executive Director



An All-Hands Approach

Research, landscape conservation and habitat restoration are all key to sage-grouse recovery

by Mac Lacy, Senior Attorney

As many as 16 million greater sage-grouse once ranged from Canada to New Mexico and California to the Dakotas. Over the past 200 years, however, land use and development have reduced this bird's habitat by half and now there may be fewer than 250,000 sagegrouse remaining. The sagebrush ecosystem — including millions of acres across Oregon's high desert — is among the most vulnerable ecosystems in North America. Sage-grouse and hundreds of other sagebrush-dependent species face a long list of dire threats.

Sage-grouse, disrupted

As their name implies, sage-grouse live among sagebrush. They cannot survive without healthy sagebrush habitat to provide food, cover, and seasonal habitats year-round. Open "lek" sites of low grasses allow the males to perform their captivating courtship dance each spring. Taller sagebrush stands then provide food and cover for nesting hens. Nearby meadows support flowering plants and insects that are essential for chicks later in the spring. As summer transitions to fall and then winter, the bird's diet shifts entirely to sagebrush. Then next spring, like salmon returning to their natal creeks, sage-grouse faithfully attend the same leks to perform their mating dance, year after year.

Unfortunately, human activities have fragmented and degraded remaining sagebrush habitat across the West. In Oregon, roads and off-road vehicles splinter habitat and contribute to the spread of invasive weeds, and the Bureau of Land Management allows livestock grazing on nearly 99% of the public lands it manages in Oregon's sagebrush landscapes. Cattle consume native plants, trample fragile soils, and spread sagebrush-replacing exotic grasses, dramatically altering sage-grouse habitat.

Establishing a baseline for recovery

ONDA and other conservation organizations have been working on sage-grouse recovery and sagebrush habitat restoration for decades. We are devoted to improving habitat, pursuing landscape protections, and strengthening innumerable plans and policies to support sage-grouse and hundreds of other sagebrush-dependent species. In 2003, ONDA and its partners petitioned to list the grouse under the Endangered Species Act, and in 2015 the Bureau and other agencies finally unveiled a series of conservation plans to protect sagegrouse and their sagebrush habitats on public lands throughout the West.

These plans limited certain development and land use in breeding and nesting areas, created specially protected habitat strongholds, and provided for science-based management of sagebrush steppe. Importantly, the plan for Oregon reserved 15 small areas — called Research Natural Areas — to support scientific study of sagebrush habitat and, specifically, how uniquely-identified sagebrush plant communities will respond in the absence of livestock grazing. So what has the Bureau learned through this research?

Nothing. Why? Because the research has not yet begun, and it has not yet begun because the Research Natural Areas have not yet been closed to grazing — even though the decision to do so was made seven years ago. Without baseline information on habitat conditions in these ungrazed areas, the agency is hamstrung in its ability to engage in the science-based management the law and its own plans require.

For more than three decades ONDA has stood strong in support of science-driven management and we continue to advocate for effective and timely implementation of the federal sagegrouse plan. Providing for scientific research is an indispensable part of the 2015 plan and we will continue to push — with the Biden administration, with agency staff, in court, and in the halls of Congress — for using baseline research to inform how grazing and other land uses should be managed to protect sage-grouse habitat in Oregon's high desert.

Saving sage-grouse

But success requires more than just research. Conserving and recovering sage-grouse requires a coordinated, all-hands approach.

First and foremost, it is high time for scientists to be able to conduct the research necessary to make informed conservation decisions for the sage-grouse in Oregon and beyond. This spring, ONDA asked a federal court to direct the Bureau to finally complete the closures and begin research in the fifteen key Research Natural Areas as required in the agency's 2015 plan.

ONDA has also jumped into the Biden administration's latest planning process to update and strengthen conservation strategies for sage-grouse in Oregon. Our team identified key measures — like conserving unique winter habitat areas — that, if adopted, could reverse the species' decline in our state.



Greater sage-grouse are dependent on the vast, intact sagebrush landscapes of the West, and their plight touches on every problematic issue in public lands management. *Photo: Tom Koerner*

Our conservation campaigns are also geared to improve management and permanently protect essential sage-grouse habitat on public lands, from the Greater Hart-Sheldon to the farthest reaches of the Owyhee Canyonlands.

ONDA further participates in an array of technical evaluations and efforts to analyze, assess and propose more robust standards by which management should be measured for its benefits to sage-grouse.

And our stewardship team and dedicated volunteers have invested years counting sagegrouse, monitoring conditions, and restoring habitat, greatly adding to our understanding of sage-grouse and providing the bird what it needs to survive and thrive in Oregon's high desert.

Oregon's high desert is awash in sagebrush habitat — what we affectionately call the Sagebrush Sea — and we need to continue pressing for effective, timely, focused and scientifically-based management of this fragile landscape.•



Saving Lake Abert

This Pacific Flyway rest stop is in peril. ONDA is seeking lasting solutions.

by Anne White, Wilderness Specialist

Before January 2022, many Oregonians were unfamiliar with the 15-mile-long shimmering saltwater lake that stretches before Abert Rim in southeastern Oregon. Ground-breaking investigative reporting in The Oregonian changed that, drawing the entire state's attention to this ecological gem in Oregon's high desert.

Lake Abert is a remnant of ancient Lake Chewaucan, a large freshwater lake that once covered 460 square miles. As the climate warmed over the last 10,000 years, Lake Chewaucan dried up, resulting in a smaller salt-concentrated lake that exists today. This hypersaline oasis now fed by waters from the Chewaucan River provides irreplaceable food sources and nesting habitat to hundreds of thousands of migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. Approximately one-third of Oregon's population of snowy plover breed at Lake Abert. Onefifth of the global population of Wilson's phalarope stop at the lake to replenish food stores on their passage to the equator.

ONDA has long been concerned about the increasingly dry conditions of the lake, exacerbated by upstream

water diversions, drought and other factors. In 2014 and 2021 the lake went dry, resulting in last year's lowest number of birds ever documented at the lake. This prompted ONDA and six other organizations to press Oregon's Governor Brown and state agencies to take immediate, urgent action to restore the lake. And, more than 550 ONDA members and supporters amplified these concerns, resulting in an unprecedented hearing in the state legislature.

On February 21, the Oregon House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use and Water conducted an hourlong informational hearing on Lake Abert, kicking off further investigation into the questions raised by The Oregonian and discussion of what actions the state can take to better protect the lake. While these are important steps toward a long-term solution, ONDA is now, more than ever, committed to taking every measure necessary to protect this vital ecosystem.

Please be on the lookout for upcoming opportunities to share your voice in support of Lake Abert.

Let Antelope Roam

Take Part in Fence Monitoring on Beatys Butte

by Gena Goodman-Campbell, Stewardship Director

Looking for silence, solitude and endless vistas? You can find it by participating in an independent stewardship project in the Beatys Butte region of southeastern Oregon, where volunteers are mapping barbed wire fences to improve an important migration corridor for pronghorn antelope.

Beatys Butte lies directly between Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge and Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, in the expansive public lands known as "The Land Between" that are just as crucial to pronghorn as the two refuges. Between 2011 and 2013, biologists with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service observed the movements of 32 female pronghorn in the Greater Hart-Sheldon and found that this expanse encompasses both important migration corridors and critical yearround habitat for the regional pronghorn population.

Unfortunately, barbed wire fences throughout this landscape pose risks to pronghorn and other wildlife. Low-flying sage grouse are known to collide with unmarked fence, while pronghorn and other ungulates may be unable to cross fences, which limit both their daily movement and their seasonal migrations. ONDA has removed hundreds of miles of unneeded fence from key areas of Oregon's high desert over the past twenty years, dramatically improving wildlife habitat. At Beatys Butte, over the past three years ONDA has mapped and documented the condition of over 100 miles of fence through this project, and we're not done yet!

Volunteers participating in the Beatys Butte fence monitoring project in 2022 will hike from 2 to 6+ miles per day across open sagebrush, using smart phones or tablets to take geolocated photos and complete digital survey forms about fence conditions. This work will pinpoint where obsolete fences can be removed and where functional fences can be made more wildlife-friendly during future stewardship trips ONDA will lead in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management.

To learn more about ONDA's campaign to conserve habitat in this region, explore our Greater Hart-Sheldon: Sagebrush Stronghold story map. And, to sign up for stewardship work, visit ONDA.org/beaty-butte-fenceline-monitoring.

Abundance & Rarity

The array of wildflowers in Oregon's high desert might surprise you

by Lace Thornberg, Communications Manager

As far as states go, Oregon serves wildflower admirers quite well.

Along its Pacific coast, sand dunes come dotted with beach evening primrose and sand verbena. The old-growth forests of the Willamette Valley perk up with calypso orchids and glacier lilies. And the plateaus in the Columbia River Gorge practically explode yellow and blue when the balsamroot and lupine come into bloom.

This is all before we cross the Cascade crest and saunter into the high desert where the varied terrain produces plenty of its own impressive wildflower displays.

While it is true that sagebrush and other shrubs and grasses are the predominant forms of plant life in the desert, a rather astonishing variety of wildflowers thrive here, too.

What you might see blooming in Oregon's high desert depends on many factors. Your elevation. The month. The winter's snowpack, or lack thereof. Slope aspect. Whether you are near a river, or in the middle of a salt flat. What plant biome and which geologic province you're in.

Geologic provinces in Oregon's high desert

Each of the areas within the high desert that ONDA looks after through conservation campaigns, policy advocacy and restoration holds its own unique blend of native wildflowers.

Central Oregon Backcountry

Situated at the transition zone between the coniferous forests of the Cascade Mountains and shrub-dominated sagebrush steppe, the Central Oregon Backcountry holds many of Oregon's most recognized wildflowers. As part of what's known as the High Lava Plains, the relatively "young" lava flows, scattered cinder cones, lava buttes, and dry lake beds make for a diversity of soils and associated plant life.

On the east side of this area, in the Oregon Badlands Wilderness, a succession of blooms unfolds each spring with wildflowers including desert parsley, dwarf monkeyflower and mariposa lily adding color among the lava formations and ancient juniper.

On the west side of this area, in the ponderosa pine country outside Sisters, Oregon, you'll encounter Deschutes monkeyflower, Modoc sulfur buckwheat, bitterroot, Lewis' blue flax, panicled death camas and many others as you travel beside Whychus Creek and other creeks.

John Day River Basin

Flowers from the Blue Mountains and Columbia River Basin provinces meet and mingle in the John Day River Basin.

Hedgehog cactus delight visitors to the Spring Basin Wilderness and Sutton Mountain, while prickly pear cactus appear near the Painted Hills.

The area around the John Day Fossil Beds offers a long and fairly steady wildflower viewing season, stretching from April to October. The wildflower bloom at the Painted Hills Unit will vary more dramatically from year to year, with some years offering plentiful flowers and some years virtually none.

Steens Mountain

Steens Mountain is the highest point in southeastern Oregon, and its elevation is certainly one key to the plant diversity here, where over 1,000 vascular plant species have been recorded. At the low end, adjacent to the Alvord Desert, it's a salt scrub plant community, dominated by shrubs and grasses — a story for another day. In the glacier-carved gorges, expect a subalpine mix much like you would see in the Rockies and the Cascades, with lupine, penstemon, paintbrush, pussytoes, cinquefoils, and gentians all found in large quantities. Up toward the 9,738' summit, you're in alpine territory, with low-lying clumps of phlox, sedum, and saxifrage, and cheery clusters of cutleaf daisies and sulfurflower buckwheat, as well as some of the mountain's rare plants.

But its height is just one of the factors that makes the plant displays on Steens interesting. In the *Flora of Steens Mountain* author Don Mansfield describes how the combination of isolation, extensive alpine topography, extreme climate, and unusual subalpine characteristics give the mountain such unique flora.

The lanky Steens Mountain thistle, a preferred source of nectar for butterflies and goldfinches, lives only here and in the Pueblo Mountains. And only on Steens, and only on slopes above 6,500 feet, you can find the Steens Mountain paintbrush, which comes in a distinctive yellow-green hue, while paintbrush species are more often shades of red.

Greater Hart-Sheldon

At the northern terminus of the Great Basin, the Greater Hart-Sheldon is part of the largest cold desert in the United States. Dominated by a series of fault-block mountains separated by lowland basins, the region encompasses a broad spectrum of wildflower species and is considered one of the most intact and healthy sagebrush plant communities left on earth.

Along the flanks of places like Hart Mountain and Beatys Butte, spring blooms of buckwheat, wild onion, and desert parsley last late into the summer. With some luck and good timing, dry playas like Desert and Shirk Lakes fill with the golden petals of tansy-leaved primrose. And as the sun goes down and calm descends upon the desert, the sweet aroma of granite gilla fills the air, trickling over the lava rock and attracting nighttime pollinators.

Owyhee Canyonlands

Three plant biomes — Great Basin, Columbia River Basin, and Rocky Mountains — converge in the Owyhee Canyonlands, which means that many common Western plant species flourish here. In the Owyhee Uplands, wildflowers like lupine, larkspur, biscuitroot, phlox, and penstemon can be found in abundance all through spring and summer.

And, thanks to the region's unique geologic history, ash deposits, and microclimates, Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands is also home to 28 endemic plant species. The canary-hued Packard's blazing star, fluffy Owyhee clover, and diminutive grimy mousetail are three of the endemic species found in the Leslie Gulch area — and nowhere else on Earth.

From Appreciation to Activism

Once you know where in Oregon's high desert to look, you can find sweeping plateaus of balsamroot that rival those of the Columbia River Gorge, plus broad meadows of camas, cliff bands spotted with bitterroot, and summits graced with purple sage. You can help these native wildflowers flourish by urging your elected officials to protect wildflower-rich public lands. The proposal to establish Sutton Mountain National Monument, the River Democracy Act, and legislation to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands would all protect rare and endemic species. And, you can donate to support ONDA's desert-wide efforts to conserve the variety of habitats that give Oregon's high desert a great richness and variety of wildflowers.

- tumblemustard

- gilia
- Bruneau mariposa lily

High Desert Wildflowers

Every region within Oregon's high desert holds a mix of native wildflowers.

For each trail or area highlighted, we've listed one or more of the flowers you can expect to see in some abundance at that point in the season, and there will certainly be other species to enchant you as well. We've left shrubs and grasses off this list entirely, but in many places you can also expect excellent displays from bitterbrush, snowbrush, ceanothus and the like. Note that these recommendations are based on previous years' reports and subject to change.

threadstalk milkvetch

early

late

11

ONDA.org/submit-your-photos or email your photos with location information to communications@onda.org.

DESERT FISH & WILDLIFE

Species Spotlight: Steelhead

By Scott Bowler, ONDA Volunteer Are you surprised to learn that the fish we call steelhead and the fish we call rainbow trout are the same species? They are both *Onchorhynchus mykiss* — with different life histories. Who becomes what depends primarily on two factors: genetics and habitat. If the fish is spawned by an ocean-going (anadromous) mother, it will likely also grow up to migrate to the ocean, and be called a steelhead. If its mother stuck to streams, it will likely become a rainbow trout.

Rainbow trout can grow to 15-21" long or so, weighing up to a few pounds. A sought after game and food fish, rainbow trout are generally pretty easy to catch. Steelhead can grow to 32" or more, and weigh up to 35 pounds, although most these days are much smaller.

Juvenile steelhead, Bridge Creek.

Bridge Creek is federally designated critical habitat for steelhead, and a good place to go if you want to see the excellent results of several years of volunteer work and happy, productive beaver. This creek is proposed for overlapping protection in the Sutton Mountain legislation and the River Democracy Act.

Photo: Ben Goldfarb

You can learn more about steelhead and rainbow trout on ONDA's blog. Steelhead are difficult to hook due to the fact that they don't actually feed after they reenter freshwater and begin to migrate back upriver to spawn — you basically have get their attention, and make them mad, to trigger an attack on your lure. Once on the line they are renowned for their spectacular fighting ability. They are thus perhaps the most sought after (and least likely landed) game fish in our state waters.

Both forms of *O. mykiss* inhabit several of our eastern Oregon rivers, notably the Deschutes, and especially the John Day, living and spawning throughout these river systems. This relatively pristine and diverse John Day River watershed, with its many tributaries, is absolutely vital to the success of both steelhead and rainbow trout.

Any number of streamside activities — including water withdrawals, widening channels, construction, agricultural chemical use, and vehicle use — can have a negative impact on these fish. To head these issues off at the pass, ONDA campaigns for enduring land and water protection and weighs in on policies and plans in key fish habitat. And, to address impacts that have occured, ONDA has designed and implemented several projects to restore streamside habitat in high-priority desert locales. In particular, our expansive riparian tree planting efforts not only provide direct improvements to desert waterways for fish but also attract one of the most valuable and prolific improved fish habitat creators: beaver.

Consummate hydrologic engineers and once nearly eliminated from the landscape, beaver are vital to maintaining and diversifying healthy waterways. Today, beaver are increasing their range throughout the John Day River Basin, thanks in part to ONDA-led habitat restoration projects. At the same time, ONDA advocates are making sure that the desert creeks and rivers that are important to steelhead are protected, through measures like the River Democracy Act. Whether with a shovel or a pen, getting involved is the key to ensuring these fish have the cold, steady water and diverse habitat they need. Thanks for looking out for these mighty fish.•

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Curious about birds?

This spring, ONDA is seeking volunteers to work alongside trained wildlife biologists to survey and monitor nesting birds in the Warner Wetlands.

Located in Lake County in the Greater-Hart Sheldon region, the Warner Wetlands encompass more than 50,000 acres of wetland habitat managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). One of BLM's primary goals for the area is the conservation of a diverse community of birds dependent on wetland habitats, including several species of ducks and sensitive species including yellow rails, long-billed curlews, tri-colored blackbirds, and Franklin's gulls.

This project is a partnership with the Institute for Wildlife Studies (IWS) and Lakeview BLM District, and IWS plans to have two staff biologists stationed at Warner Wetlands for the entirety of this project performing nesting bird surveys and research.

Volunteers will help conduct nesting waterfowl surveys to inform research assessing the status of breeding birds, and also to help BLM determine whether they are meeting the objectives laid out in their habitat management plan for the area and whether future changes are needed to improve habitat conditions for waterfowl and wetland birds.

All training and tools needed to assist in the research will be provided by IWS staff biologists, making this an exciting opportunity for volunteers to assist with a scientific study, even if they have no previous experience with field research.

To register for this independent stewardship project, visit ONDA.org/warner-wetlands-bird-monitoring-2/.+

If you need an excuse to visit the Warner Wetlands, ONDA has one for you. *Photo: James Parsons*

MEET KEENAN & OLIVIA SULLY

WILLAMETTE VALLEY PARENTS PRESERVING A DESERT CONNECTION

by Karina Diaz, Development Coordinator

Olivia and Keenan Sully discovered ONDA while attending an event in Portland three years ago. Olivia's introduction to the high desert had been years earlier, as she visited her grandparent's cabin near Sisters. That experience grounds her desire to keep the desert wild, protected from development, and thriving for future generations. Living in the Willamette Valley with three sons to keep them busy, Olivia and Keenan stay active in desert conservation by donating monthly.

"We unfortunately can't be over there to help physically support the desert as frequently as we'd like so donating monthly hopefully helps the community who can be there," said Olivia, adding, "Being members helps us make a bigger impact than we ever could on our own."

When they do make it east, their favorite desert activities are rafting the John Day River and visiting Smith Rock. They are also building a small cabin on land outside Prineville so their sons will grow up with the beauty of the desert and have it inspire them, just as it did for Olivia.•

To make a steady contribution to high desert conservation and restoration, visit ONDA.org/givemonthly.

SPRING + SUMMER EVENTS

To learn more or register for any of these events, visit ONDA.org/events.

Wildlife Migrations in the West Tuesday, April 19 | 5:30 p.m. virtual event Wrapping up ONDA's 2022 virtual High Desert Speaker Series, Dr. Arthur Middleton will cover the basic ecology of ungulate migrations in the western United States. He'll then profile threats to these migrations, including climate and land-use change, as well as barriers to migration like roads and fences. Arthur will also discuss some emerging models and opportunities for collaborative conservation of important migrations — all relevant to the species that move through the Sagebrush Sea.

Sagebrush Sippers

June 8, 2022 - Bend June 28, 2022 - Portland in-person events Save the date! Join fellow ONDA members and staff for these casual in-person community gatherings and catch up on desert conservation efforts. More details to come.

A WARM WELCOME & A FOND FAREWELL

In January, **Scott McCaulou** joined ONDA's board of directors, bringing a wealth of water conservation experience and technical expertise with him. Currently, he is the director of the water stewardship project portfolio at Bonneville Environmental Foundation. Prior to this role, Scott spent more than two decades working on river restoration throughout the Pacific Northwest. He has established some of the nation's first streamflow restoration projects, built a host of collaborative conservation partnerships with cities and irrigators, and managed regional efforts to restore streamflow throughout the Columbia and Klamath River Basins.

Scott McCaulou

To meet the rest of the board and staff, visit ONDA.org/about-us.

Shots of wilderness study areas, winter scenes, desert plants and animals, and people appreciating desert beauty are particularly helpful. Submit at ONDA.org/submit-your-photos.

This April, we bid farewell to **Jeremy Austin** who is departing from our staff after nine years with ONDA focused on protecting and restoring Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, public lands planning and sage-grouse conservation on millions of acres of habitat. As our policy manager, Jeremy every day brought the latest science, a keen understanding of public lands management and a delightful sense of humor to his work conserving desert wildlands, waters and wildlife. We offer our best wishes to Jeremy as he continues in his career in conservation advocacy.

Great horned owl. Photo: Emilie Chen

Drive time: 5 hours from Bend, Ore.; 8 hours from Portland, Ore.

Wapinitta

Spring-Summer highlights: rafting, hiking, camping, angling

The Owyhee Canyonlands is one of the most remote, untouched and wild places in the Lower 48.

Found on the far eastern edge of Oregon, the Owyhee shows up as mostly blank on the map, but there's more than a lifetime of adventure to be found here if you're willing to make the trek. For

those who love hiking, camping and other forms of backcountry recreation, and are hoping to find somewhere without any crowds to speak of, the Owyhee Canyonlands is the place to go.

Rafting the Owyhee River is a popular spring activity, with the window running from April to late May. However, the Owyhee River is rather temperamental, and given the low snowpack we've seen over the last few years, water levels have often been too low to raft. Since it's difficult to predict what exactly the rafting season will look like, it's always good to have a backup plan.

If you find yourself wanting to visit the Owyhee and rafting is out of the question, there are numerous alternatives to explore. Prime fishing season begins mid-summer, and the five miles of tailwater downstream from the Owyhee dam are famous as one of the best and most accessible trout streams in the West. There are countless miles of great hiking trails throughout the Owyhee, as well, with Leslie Gulch, Painted Canyon Loop and Jordan Craters topping out our recommendations. These trails range from 1 - 8.5 miles of hiking, offering something for everyone. For the perfect end to a day spent outdoors, visitors might enjoy a relaxing soak in Snively or Three Forks hot springs.

Camping is the best option for spending the night, as no lodging options exist within the Owyhee Canyonlands. There are many dispersed camping options throughout the region, and a few limited-service campgrounds available, including Slocum Creek Campground and Succor Creek State Natural Area. Communities, including Jordan Valley and Rome, offer the closest lodging and other services.

ONDA is working to protect wildlands, provide for climate adaptation and preserve flows in the Owyhee by advocating for Wild and Scenic River protection for tributary creeks and streams, participating in improved public lands planning and management and promoting wilderness designation across the region.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS: From Bend, Ore., take Highway 20 east for approximately 240 miles. From Vale, visitors may head south on Lyttle Blvd or continue onward on Highway 26, and head south on Highway 201.

MORE INFORMATION: Contact the Vale District Office at (541) 473-3144, or the Rome Launch Site at (541) 586-2612, for current information. River information at Rome is available daily from March through June between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. (Mountain Time Zone).

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

50 SW Bond Street, Suite 4 Bend, OR 97702

Celebrating our 35th anniversary of protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert.

Learn more at **ONDA.org.**

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