

Desert Ramblings

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PROFILE OF PLACE

by Bill Marlett

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Steens Mountain is Oregon's desert jewel. Located in the Great Basin country of southeastern Oregon, Steens Mountain and the Hart Mountain/Warner Lakes area, comprise two of the most ecologically significant, biologically diverse and visually stunning basin and range landscapes in the entire Great Basin province.

Steens Mountain is the largest fault-block mountain in North America, thrusting one vertical mile out of the Alvord Desert. It is a vast and remote mountain tucked away in an austere and addicting landscape. Towering over 9,000 feet, it covers an area several times the size of Crater Lake National Park. Its stirring solitude and unlimited horizons are highlighted by wildflowers, hot springs, hanging valleys, bighorn sheep, and redband trout. The Donner und Blitzen River, beginning on the high Steens, spills out of its canyon into a valley that forms one of the most outstanding focal points for resident and migrating bird populations in the western United States—the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The geography of the Steens landscape includes the Pueblo Mountains to the south—an extension of the same geological heritage that makes up the Steens, the Alvord Desert to the east—a playa lake bordered

by blowing sand dunes and steaming hot springs, and the Sheepshead Mountains—another fault-block mountain rising out of the north side of the Alvord Desert and named for the sheep skulls that littered the mountain following introduction of domestic sheep (and the subsequent demise of the bighorns) in the late 1800's.

Humans have inhabited the Steens for thousands of years. When white men first arrived in the early 1800's, scattered and loosely-knit groups of Northern Paiute Indians were actively hunting and gathering in the desert. Today, it is not uncommon when hiking to find obsidian flakes discarded by these people. Forced dislocation of the Paiute

Indians, led by Major Enoch Steens in the early 1860's, opened the way for anxious, but naive homesteaders. The settlers showed little understanding of the land or compassion for its indigenous residents. Like the Paiute Indians, bighorn sheep, grizzly bear and wolves were forced off the land. Only the bighorns have since been reintroduced. Unaware of the stark realities of living off the land in a desert landscape, most of the homesteaders quickly failed. In

the 1870's, vast cattle empires were established that thrived on the luxuriant native bunchgrasses.

Today, a few tenacious family operations hold onto their ranching heritage while large corporations headquartered in the concrete canyons of cities take over the rest. The legacy of these empires and homesteads is an ecological war zone. Severe overgrazing was already widespread by the turn of the century,

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destroying native vegetation and its compliment of dependent species. Although cows have been banished from a few sensitive areas, the truth is that cattle grazing is still pervasive and in some cases, uncontrolled.

Efforts to recognize and protect the outstanding features of the Steens began in 1971 when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) designated the *Steens Mountain Recreation Lands*. Today, the *Recreation Lands* encompass 194,000 acres. Several Research Natural Areas (RNA) and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) have also since been established. In 1988, Congress designated over 70 miles of the Donner und Blitzen River and its tributaries as Wild and Scenic Rivers, thus protecting the rivers from dams and other activities (but not grazing) that would harm their unique natural features.

The Steens needs a responsible and sensitive steward. The BLM land management tradition has emphasized grazing, mining and the disposal of the public domain, despite efforts by ecologically motivated BLM employees to change the situation. BLM's land management philosophy is deeply embedded in the upper echelons of the agency and until the BLM is reorganized with a new mission, the best interests of the American public will be to replace BLM as stewards of the Steens. The agency that will be most responsive is the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS was expressly established by Congress to manage the natural wonders of the



Whitestem Gooseberry
(*Ribes inerme*)

United States and the people who enjoy them. At the present time, the NPS is the most appropriate American institution that can protect and restore the Steens.

Despite previous efforts to give recognition and protection to the Steens, major problems exist and loom on the horizon. The greatest threat is continued livestock grazing. Cows destroy fish and wildlife habitat, riparian areas, and native plants. The BLM, to their credit, have removed cattle from selected areas, but these efforts have been meager. The resistance of

the BLM to change has BLM and ranchers locked in an ecological death spiral. Public lands ranchers are unable to wean themselves from the public trough. Federal subsidies in the form of below-market livestock grazing fees and range "improvements" on public lands make it difficult for ranchers to change. Fear, momentum, and ignorance are impeding efforts to protect one of America's natural wonders.

Other threats to the Steens include: *geothermal development* (Recent test drilling in the Pueblo Valley has shown commercial grade geothermal potential.), *cyanide heap-leach strip mining* (Over 10,000 mining



Little Sunflower
(*Helianthella uniflora*)

claims have been filed in recent years in Oregon, many in and around the Steens.), *off road vehicles* (ORVs continue to run loose, destroying native vegetation and displacing wildlife.), *oil and gas development* (Many WSAs were deleted from further consideration as wilderness because of possibilities for future oil and gas developments.), *snowmobiles* (BLM is currently trying to open the high Steens to snowmobiles in spite of their own regulations closing the area due to its sensitive nature.), *overcrowding* (More people are "discovering" the wide open spaces of the Steens and high desert; BLM is underfunded to deal with increased visitor use and ill-equipped philosophically to manage people and landscapes of national significance.), *private landholdings* (The Steens is dotted with old and abandoned homesteads that need to be acquired to enhance wilderness management and landscape restoration. To their credit, BLM has made several key land acquisitions. Until we receive a national designation and the commensurate budget, acquisition will continue at a snail's pace with many lost opportunities.)

The challenge is enticing. To provide the best care for the land, an alternative must accomplish several main objectives:

- ✓ Respect the ecological integrity of the land.
- ✓ Respect the needs of future generations.
- ✓ Respect the heritage and dignity of local residents.

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We can meet these objectives by creating the *Steens Mountain National Park Preserve*. The Park would:

- ✓ Recognize the national significance of the Steens.
- ✓ Define a landscape that reflects ecologic reality.
- ✓ Pull together the management problems and opportunities under a single, comprehensive plan for an ecologically defined landscape.
- ✓ Provide management by an agency that specializes in land restoration, natural lands preservation and management of people.

Basic goals of the Park could be to:

- ✓ Restore and protect the scenic character of the landscape.
- ✓ Restore and protect the ecological processes and biological diversity of the landscape, including displaced plants and wildlife.
- ✓ Integrate appropriate ranching and Native American livelihoods as cultural elements of the landscape.
- ✓ Expand on the educational opportunities to increase awareness and sensitivity to our desert heritage.

Concerns by conservationists over a national park designation (and the attendant images of *Jellystone Park*) fall into the following categories:

Hunting: Hunting would continue within the Preserve. Preserves were created in Alaska where subsistence hunting is common. While hunting would be prohibited in areas frequented by visitors, hunting quality would actually improve. Removing livestock means more forage available to game animals thereby increasing game populations.

Solitude: While there would be a substantial increase in visitors, most visitors would not venture into the backcountry. Experience in other national parks shows that 98% of park visitors use only 2% of the park lands. In fact, opportunities for primitive recreation would be enhanced by acquisition of private inholdings and closing of roads.

Overcrowding: We cannot "hide" the Steens from the public. Visitor use on the Steens has seen a steady increase. Harney County and BLM are aggressively advertising the natural values of Steens Mountain to visitors to generate local income.

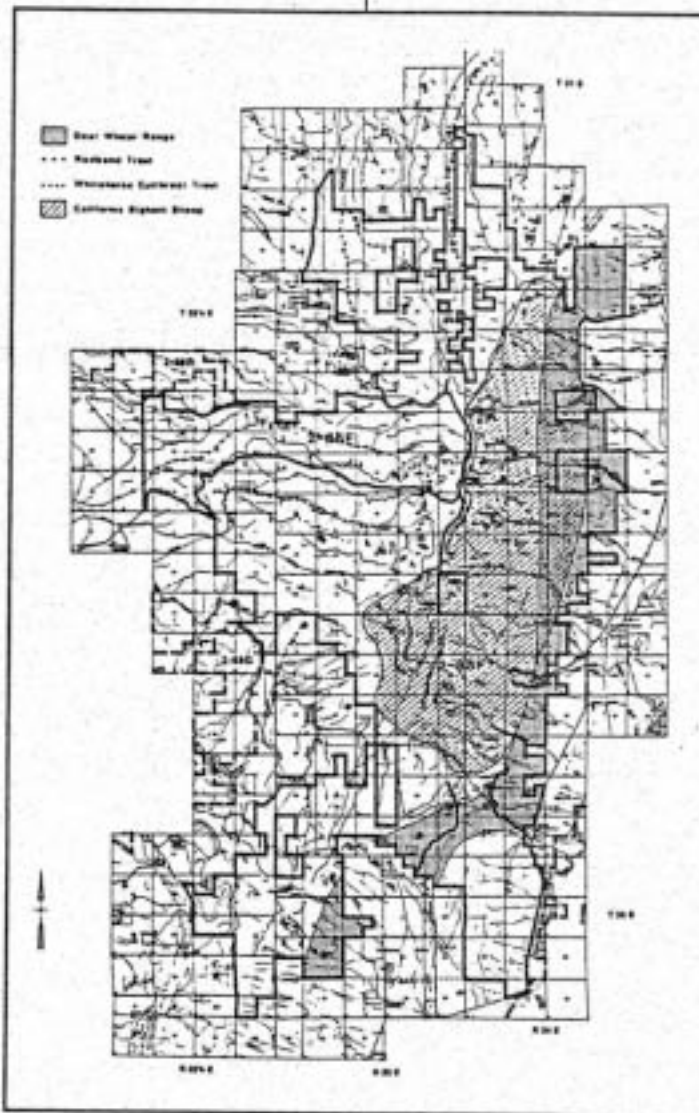
These are valid concerns and there are undoubtedly others. Oregonians are justified in fearing the loss of one of Oregon's last "empty" places. The NPS has

demonstrated they can maintain the character and quality of the landscape. Canyonlands National Park in southern Utah and North Cascades National Park in northern Washington testify to the NPS's ability.

In 1976, the BLM was directed by Congress to inventory all its lands to determine their suitability for wilderness designation. Although nearly half of the Steens was inventoried as possessing wilderness characteristics, the BLM will only recommend a small percentage of the Steens to become wilderness. Wild lands were deemed unsuitable primarily to accommodate livestock developments, range "improvements", off road vehicles, and commodity development (mining, geothermal, minerals etc.).

Regardless of the outcome on the wilderness debate, a national park preserve designation would pull the wilderness and non-wilderness lands together

under one management plan. A fragmented wilderness landscape threatens the very existence of future wilderness designations by allowing BLM to promote its multiple-use philosophy on adjacent lands.



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Wilderness hearings on Oregon's high desert lands, including those of the Steens, may begin in the next session of Congress (1992). Ideally, Congress could authorize a *Steens Mountain National Park Preserve* Study Bill this year. Doing so would allow discussion of a *Steens Mountain National Park Preserve* to coincide with the Congressional action on Oregon's desert wilderness lands.

And let us not forget the other unique desert areas of southeastern Oregon. Both the Hart Mountain/Warner Valley and the Owyhee River areas are likewise nationally significant landscapes that deserve recognition and protection. Perhaps the responsible action is to ask Congress to look at all our options for the future?

Oregonians can pass on to future generations the crown jewel of Oregon's wild desert lands by asking our Congressional delegation for a *Steens Mountain National Park Preserve*: a wilderness park that captures the vast expanse and subtle beauty of Oregon's high desert.

If you are interested in the *Steens Mountain National Park Preserve*, there will be a meeting held at the Desert Conference at the Malheur Field Station, May 4 and 5. If you would like to contribute time or money to ONDA's efforts to create a National Park, please write or call. Specific questions can be directed to Bill Marlett at 389-0613 or by writing ONDA.



Rydberg Pentstemon
(*Penstemon rydbergii*)



DESERT SKIES

The morning skies in March and April will be host to three planets: Venus, Mars, and Saturn, with Venus the brightest object. Jupiter will be the most brilliant evening "star", very high in the SW to W. Mercury will be visible to the naked eye by the end of March low in the W to WNW at evening twilight. It should continue to be visible through the first three weeks of April.

The biggest event to look for is the appearance of Comet Austin, discovered in December, 1989. If predictions hold, it could be the most impressive comet since Comet West in 1976. Look to the NE from April 15 to May 5 as the comet will gradually move higher in the morning sky. The best time to view Austin is about an hour and a half before sunrise. It will be at its closet approach to the earth (21 millions miles) on May 25.



FIELD TRIP NOTE

Special note on an upcoming field trip to *Jordan Crater Wilderness Study Area*, on May 6, 7, and 8:

Day hikes are planned into the lava beds to see pot-holes with many waterfowl, islands of uncommon vegetation, and the area's young volcanic features. The hikes will range from easy to moderate. The Cow Lakes Campground is near the boundary of this WSA and is situated between two lakes — great for birding. The campground is suitable for trailers, campers, tents, etc., and can be reached by traveling a dirt road out of Jordan Valley, Malheur County, Oregon.

Participants will be responsible for their own day-packs and camping equipment. Two group dinners will be served (Sunday and Monday). Each person will be responsible for all of their other food needs. Plan to arrive by Saturday evening for a full day of hiking on Sunday, May 6. Cost, including the dinners, will be \$25.00. Contact Wes and Ilea Jones, 2259 Adams Road, Nyssa, Oregon 97913. Phone: (503) 372-2843.



ANNOUNCEMENTS

All meetings are held at **The Natural Resource Center**, 1005 N.W. Newport. Refreshments at 7 P.M., meeting at 7:30 P.M.

NOTE TO FIELD TRIP PARTICIPANTS

Weather is often severe and terrain rough, so proper dress and footwear are essential. Bring water and lunch. Please contact trip leaders for difficulty, mileage, etc. You participate at your own risk. Unless otherwise noted, all one-day field trips leave from the parking lot at the horseshoe pits at Juniper Park, on East 7th and Franklin Ave. at 8:00 A.M. It is always a good idea to call ahead (Alice Elshoff).

- Mar 15: Lecture on the *Marbled Murrelet* by Kim Nelson, Oregon Research Biologist, at 7:00 P.M., Rm 155, Boyle Education Center, COCC campus.
- Mar 20: **ONDA MEETING.** No program. This will be a work meeting.
- Apr 14: 3rd annual *Evening for The Environment*, sponsored by Natural Resource Council (NRC). Speaker, art show, raffle, hors d'oeuvres, dessert. Call Resource Center for information 385-6908.
- Apr: 17 **ONDA MEETING.** Slide presentation on the *Malheur Country* by Bob Buscher.
- Apr: 19 Lecture on *International Resource Management* by Dan Edge, OSU Wildlife Specialist, at 7:00 P.M., Rm 155, Boyle Education Center, COCC campus.
- April 20 *Little Known Wildlands and Wildlife of Eastern Oregon*, a special slide show presentation by naturalist/herpetologist and author of *Eastern Oregon*, Al. St. John. 7:00 P.M., Hitchcock Auditorium, COCC campus.
- Apr 21: Native Plant Society field trip to "The Island", near Cove Palisades State Park on Lake Billy Chinook. Call 389-6981.

- Apr 22: **Earth Day**, 20th anniversary celebration. April is Earth Month. Educational activities, an Earth Fair, and special events are scheduled throughout the month. Earth Month Events Calendar: Mary Ellen Deckelmann, 385-5614. Other information: 385-6908.

What On Earth Can You Do?

- Apr 28: ONDA field trip to the South Fork, Crooked River WSA. Call Greg Burke, 389-6105.

If you can't make the field trip, Barbara Butler is teaching a one-day course on wildlife tracking. Call Parks and Rec. for information.

- May 4-6 12th annual *Desert Conference*, Malheur Field Station. Join conservationists from around the Northwest to enjoy the enchantment of the desert and participate in field trips and presentations by scientists, natural resource experts, artists, and conservation leaders. Panels and workshops will focus on cyanide leach mining, grazing, protection of threatened wildlands, and more. There will be slide shows, a banquet, entertainment, and birding, all set in the magnificent high desert. Registration brochures will be mailed out April 1. Contact Randy Morris (208) 587-4326 or Steve Jakubowics (208) 343-8614.

- May 6-8 Jordan Crater WSA field trip (see article on page4).

- May 17 Lecture on *Soil Biodiversity of Northwest Forest Ecosystems* by Dave Perry, OSU Forestry Sciences Department, at 7:00 P.M., Rm 155, Boyle Education Center, COCC campus.

Check your date to renew ONDA membership on the mailing label.

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