

Desert Ramblings

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PROFILE OF PLACE

by Linda Craig

The Trout Creek Mountains: Haven for Wildlife

Why should the Trout Creek Mountains be designated Wilderness? Many reasons, but one of the finest reasons is to protect the abundance of wildlife. The BLM has called the Trout Creek Mountains one of the richest and most diverse areas for wildlife in eastern Oregon. Only Steens Mountain rivals the Trout Creeks for diversity of habitat and number of ecosystems represented.

The Trout Creek range lies to the south of Whitehorse Ranch Road, which connects the blacktop between Fields, Oregon and Denio, Nevada with U.S. 95. The proposed Wilderness of 300,000+ acres includes low-elevation wetlands at about 4,000 feet and high ridges rising above 8,000 feet.

Like Steens Mountain, the scenic highlights of the Trout Creeks are the views from high parts of the range, and the canyons, chiseled by 13,000 years of spring runoff to depths of 1,600 feet. Unlike Steens, however, canyons in the Trout Creeks were not rounded by glaciers. Most are

steep and rugged with rimrock, spires, boulders, and tortuous water courses.

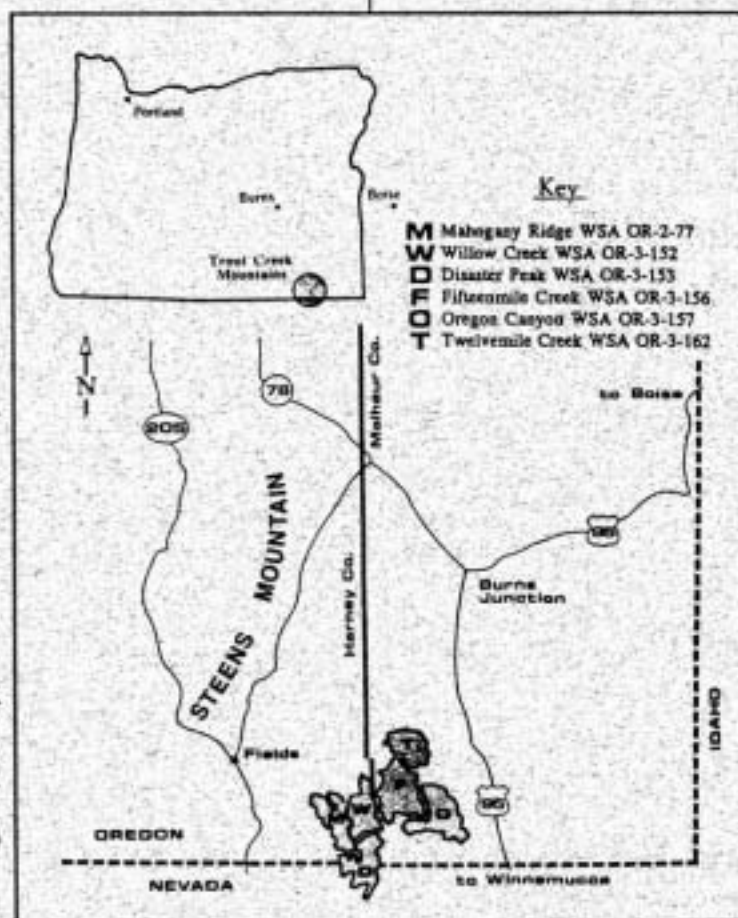
The Trout Creeks offer something for every kind of Wilderness visitor. Certainly there are great backpacking opportunities. The area is prized by deer hunters; it has been managed by Oregon Fish and Wildlife as a special hunting area for trophy bucks for some years. Anglers enjoy catching the Rainbow hybrids in Oregon Canyon Creek and Trout Creek. Photographers revel in fall colors. And bird-watchers can choose from more than 100 species during breeding season.

The Wilderness proposal includes three units divided by roads to allow easy access to the high country for visitors, but one of the roadless units includes almost 220,000 acres, an area large enough to assure that wildlife populations can avoid human intrusion.

The Trout Creeks have received special attention from the BLM because two of the drainages are home for the Willow/Whitehorse cutthroat trout, either a Lahontan cutthroat trout, federally-

listed as endangered in Nevada, or a unique subspecies. The BLM designated the two drainages an Area of Critical Environmental Concern because numbers of the fish were declining, but they allowed cattle

(continued on pg. 3)





MINING

by Mike Sequeira

Mining is moving into the hands of our legislators, both nationally and in Salem. On the national front, two bills have been introduced calling for reform of the 1872 Mining Law. Senator Dale Bumpers' bill (S.433) is a better bill than Rep. Nick Rahall's (H.R.918), though both are much improved over last year's versions. Details will be published in *Clementine*, the publication of the Mineral Policy Center, Rm. 550, 1325 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. We hope readers will study the bills carefully and write to your Senators and Representatives urging them to support real reform. Expect to hear from "People for the West," a group funded by the mining industry who will very likely support a "sham" bill that may sound good but will have very little in the way of true reform.

Closer to home, much is happening in the state legislature. Space does not permit a detailed description of the many presentations and panel discussions at the Mining Conference last month in Salem. Much of the focus was on legislation. There are several bills now being worked on by legislative committees. DOGAMI supports HB2244 which falls short of protecting Oregon's resources. Legislative Council's bill, LC1756, is a comprehensive, tough alternative. We believe that key parts of any bill adopted must require mine operators to 1) Evaluate the cumulative and comprehensive effects of their operation, 2) Assume *all* environmental and social costs associated with their activities, including adequate bonding on *total* reclamation costs, 3) And, as Russell Sadler says, "clean it up and put it back the way they found it when they're done."

Think about that proposed pit at Grassy Mountain: 2000 feet across and 800 feet deep. Step that off in your local community to get a sense of just how bad that will be. And the industry states bluntly that they *cannot* put the land back to anything like its original condition. That's *your* land. Isn't it more important than *their* gold and *their* profits?

It is **critical** that you contact your local legislators and Martha Pagel, Governor Robert's Natural Resources Assistant, State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310, to urge them to support real reform. □

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GRAZING

ONDA and The Wilderness Society are coplaintiffs in a suit filed against Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in an attempt to prohibit grazing. We allege that the grazing program on the refuge violates the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) as well as other laws. No EIS was ever prepared prior to issuance of grazing permits. We believe that grazing practices are in direct conflict with the charter which established the Refuge in 1936. The purpose of the refuge is "as a range and breeding ground for antelope and other species of wildlife," not cows.

We are seeking a permanent injunction against further grazing until an EIS is prepared that can demonstrate that grazing is compatible with the major purpose of the refuge.

As we go to press, the Department of the Interior has ruled to suspend grazing for the coming season due to drought conditions. Thus, our request for a preliminary injunction against grazing becomes moot. The ruling seems to be a move to avoid confronting the issue, but it does give Hart Mountain a temporary reprieve.

We are still pursuing a permanent injunction in the courts. Hopefully this case will be decided in our favor by the next grazing season, thus ending once and for all grazing on the Refuge. Please report any sightings of livestock on the Refuge to ONDA since this would be a violation of the current ruling. □



ANNOUNCEMENTS

The tenth Annual John Scharff Migratory Waterfowl Festival will be held in Burns on April 5-7. Lots of events on the program. For information, call 573-2636.

A special mining conference is planned for May 11 in Bozeman, MT. For information, call Bob Solter, (406) 585-9009

Don't forget to renew your membership to ONDA. Check the mailing label for your expiration date.



CONSERVATION CORNER

by Eric Schulz

One of the first species of salmonid to be listed as threatened and endangered in the USA was the Lahanton Cutthroat Trout, indigenous to Nevada and California. Recent DNA studies by Dr. Rick Williams have proven a family grouping between the Lahantons in Northern Nevada and Southeastern Oregon.

The two strains of Lahantons in Southeastern Oregon live in streams in the Trout Creek Mountains. Those that reside in Sage Creek, a tributary of McDermitt Creek, are "pure" strains of Lahanton, and those in Willow and Whitehorse appear to be separate subspecies of the Lahanton.

There are only 250 individuals in Sage creek. Two years ago, there were 50 individuals in Indian Creek, another tributary to McDermitt Creek, but last year, according to the ODFW, the combination of drought and extreme cold eradicated this population.

The dynamics of riparian vegetation and the stream are fairly well known. The riparian zone is the green area characterized by the presence of vegetation that needs free water to survive. The vegetation functions on many levels to maintain the stability of a stream channel.

Roots keep the soil from eroding and scouring laterally. This maintains a deep, narrow channel rather than a wide, shallow one. During the winter the deep channel prevents excessive mixing of colder surface waters with warmer deeper waters and thereby allows for flows to continue below an ice cap. Summer dynamics are reversed.

Roots also help schedule the flow of water in the summer. They provide a hydrostatic barrier to flows coming underground through the aquifer and release water to the stream as flows in the stream diminish.

Riparian zones with vegetation in climax condition benefit from older alder and willows both along the stream and in it. When large, woody material falls into the stream, it helps form pools. These pools are essential winter habitat. In degraded systems, they are absent.

Pools also disappear from degraded riparian systems because such systems lack the filtering mechanism which vegetation provides during high flows.

Sediment which would otherwise drop out in a mat of riparian vegetation drop out in the slower pools and fill them.

Along the stream, shrubbery provides shade and helps maintain a deep narrow channel. Both of these functions reduce evaporation and control the temperature. The cutthroat of SE Oregon cannot sustain extended periods of high water temperature.

These benefits of a healthy riparian system were missing on Indian Creek. They are reduced in many streams in SE Oregon. They were sacrificed to the comfort of cattle. By subjecting these streams to the stress of overgrazing, land managers have brought indigenous fish populations to a dangerous brink. Four years of drought, three years of extreme cold and a history which resulted in loss of riparian vegetation along most of these streams has resulted in at least an 89% reduction in populations.

Bill Hosford, S.E. Oregon ODFW District Biologist, observes that the only areas which didn't freeze in the last two years were those with good riparian areas. Because the upper reaches of the streams have fair to good riparian areas, he suspects that sufficient populations exist to reseed the lower streams. However, in Indian Creek, this suspicion was sadly mistaken.

1991 promises to be the fifth and worst year of drought in the area. Having been reduced in vigor by the previous years of drought, the vegetation is in worse condition than during "the dust bowl years."

The ODFW has designed a plan for securing a safe haven-clean of viruses and other diseases with plenty of water-for the identified populations of Lahantons in Sage Creek to see them through the summer of 1991; however, it does *not* plan to secure the same protection for those in Willow and Whitehorse Creeks. There are areas of good riparian growth and fair stream condition in these two creeks which should secure the populations in these bodies.

After this year, the ODFW is seeking to sterilize the upper stretches of McDermitt Creek of exotic implants and their hybrids and to reintroduce the original Lahantons to this healthier system. To protect the populations ODFW has closed the season on harvesting out of Sage creek for the last two years.

In order to address historical abuse of the 70,000 acre parcel of public land, BLM has begun to change its grazing policies. The majority of the mountain has been rested for three years before reintroducing cattle. However, there are no measurable criteria in place for gauging the reintroduction.

(*Conservation Corner, continued from pg. 2*)

Cattle will be grazed seasonally so they do not impact riparian areas by getting them off the land in the critical summer months. However, in 1989, the Whitehorse ranch was cited for allowing cattle in an enclosure that had kept cattle from the stream bank since 1972: a *supposedly* inviolable area.

45% utilization levels will be the objective for riparian area forage; however, the monitoring schedules have not been established, nor does 45% leave much room for error. After 45% forage on grasses, cattle typically begin to munch on the current year's growth on shrubs. This means that young willows, aspen and alder become the menu of choice after 45% of the grasses have been eaten. What happens if 45% is reached a week *before* the vegetation is monitored? What happens if all the cattle are not rounded up by the buckaroos?

Recognition of the Trout Creek Mountain Lahantons by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency in charge of Threatened and Endangered species, will have several notable effects. Instead of managing for multiple use (meaning the cattle business on public range as usual) which the present state "sensitive" status requires, the BLM would have to manage to restore the habitat and the populations. In the words of Randy McNatt, USF&WS Reno, all Allotment Management Plans would have to include quantifiable criteria and objectives focusing on the species and its habitat where it exists. Interim management plans would have to pass the muster of the USF&WS. The goal of "good" stream and riparian condition would be a minimum objective.

When asked for an update on the fisheries in the Trout Creeks, Bob Kindschy, Vale BLM Wildlife Specialist, recognized the devastation caused by several years of drought. Bob reports that keeping cattle off critical portions of the Mountain has resulted in a comeback of the vegetation. However, in the lower pastures, wild horses and jackrabbits have taken their toll on the sprouting riparian vegetation.

In addition to 14 riparian transects, Bob expects to have color infra-red photographs to study before advising on the return of cattle. The EA for Whitehorse Butte indicates that allocation levels and grazing systems will be based on monitoring data.

When asked about the possibility of sterilizing McDermitt Creek and reintroducing Lahantons, Bob reflected on the constraints to recreation (no fishing over T&E) and to grazing. He also questioned the

feasibility of sterilizing a stream with many beaver dams on it.

It is clear that the drought has ravaged this typically arid corner of Oregon. Dependent as they are on precious moisture, the salmonids of the area have been severely stressed.

ONDA members can help by becoming familiar with the predicament which multiple-use management may have on desert fishes. Once armed with a familiarity of the area, an understanding of the motivation of the various resource managers and land owners and sympathy for native inhabitants, one can become a critical voice in management which favors restoration of wildlife habitat. Remember, these are *your* public lands. □

(*Editor's note:* For more information contact Eric Schulz, 382-0450.)

(*Profile of Place, continued from pg. 1*)

grazing to continue at near historical levels, and now the trout may be in serious trouble.

The Willow/Whitehorse cutthroat trout is another reason to designate the Trout Creeks as Wilderness. Low-elevation areas drained by Willow Creek, dropped from wilderness study by the BLM, are included in OHDPA to protect the entire drainage so that the trout can recover through the full extent of its range.

The Trout Creeks also have high archaeological values. The Northern Paiute used the low elevation areas for base camps while hunters looked for bighorn sheep and mule deer above. Obsidian, also found at higher elevation, was used for making tools.

To further justify Wilderness, rare plants, scenic values, vegetation diversity, and recreation opportunities could be described, but visitors will no doubt find their own reasons for wanting to support the Trout Creeks Wilderness proposal.

BLM maps, available at the State Office, for Trout Creek and Oregon Canyon cover the Oregon portions; the 13,200 acres in Nevada are shown on maps in the BLM's Final Wilderness EIS. The best times to visit are June, when wildflowers are most spectacular, and September, when the aspen turn to gold. □

(*Editor's note:* Reprinted from Portland Audubon, *Warbler*, February, 1991, with permission.)



DESERT NOTEBOOK

by Dick VandeSchaff

Portland Nature Conservancy

Protecting endangered species and threatened and unique natural habitats is what *The Nature Conservancy* (TNC) has been doing for years. However, across the landscape there has been a continued decline in naturalness (or as it is now called, *biodiversity*) so that new methods are needed to preserve a sustainable environment.

To address this growing problem, TNC is embarking on a program called the *Bioreserve Project*, aimed at identifying 100 bioreserve sites in the Americas and beginning protection efforts on these areas over the next decade. The selected sites will represent a cross-section of ecosystems in North and South America with the goal being to design bioreserves that will not only protect rare and endangered species and natural communities, but will also contain buffer areas where sustainable economies can flourish.

The project is modeled after the United Nations Biosphere Reserve Program which was begun in the late 1960's. Over 150 biosphere reserves were identified in the UN project with 28 of the sites in the U.S. The problem of managing man's role in these reserves has been the greatest difficulty, especially in third-world economies. Since site selection, little has been done on most of the biosphere reserves.

The TNC's Bioreserve Project in Oregon expects similar problems. Defining acceptable economies in buffer areas that surround the core preserves is a subject with which the organization has little experience. What sorts of enterprises are environmentally responsible, especially in the more remote regions of the state which have been traditionally dependent upon natural resources for their economic base? How do these enterprises fit into the population base that currently exists in these regions?

One of the founding principles in the TNC project is that to protect biodiversity on the landscape level it will no longer be possible for TNC to own outright preserves big enough to accomplish the task. This is a radical departure from the traditional TNC way of doing business, but a not so radical departure from the way the TNC has been pursuing partnerships with public agencies in the western states for over a decade. Therefore, for the Bioreserve Project to succeed, TNC will have to cultivate cooperative arrangements with all public agencies as well as with private landowners within bioreserves to achieve the specific goals of the area. The project will tax TNC far beyond its normal

resources, requiring levels of fund raising that were never deemed possible a short time ago.

Bioreserve Selection: Site selection of potential bioreserves is based on the newly developed EPA Ecoregion Map which identifies 77 ecoregions in the U.S., of which eight occur in Oregon. These are: Coast Range, Willamette Valley, Cascades, Sierra Nevada, Eastern Cascades Slopes and Foothills, Columbia Basin, Blue Mountains, Snake River Basin/High Desert.

Representative sites in each ecoregion have been chosen by the Oregon Field Office of TNC based on the following guidelines: 1) Each potential reserve should have one or more core protected areas that contain threatened species or communities. 2) The potential bioreserve should contain a considerable amount of the biodiversity present in the ecoregion. 3) The site should be highly defensible and viable over the long term. 4) The site should show a net benefit from TNC's bioreserve activities. There was no recommended size for a bioreserve, but sites typically were of a watershed scale or larger.

One of the potential bioreserves in Oregon that has attracted prominence on a national scale is the Oregon High Desert Bioreserve. TNC's acquisition efforts coupled with the BLM's designation of the Warner Potholes ACEC provides a firm foundation for this bioreserve that stretches from the Warner Valley to Steens Mountain and the Alvord Desert. The site encompasses a significant amount of the diversity present in the High Desert Ecoregion that we generally refer to as the Northern Great Basin. The High Desert Bioreserve is made up of approximately 80% federal lands that include two USFWS Refuges as well as a dozen special management areas on BLM holdings.

Bioreserve Management: Each bioreserve will require individually tailored management plans that respond to both the needs of the element-based, core protected areas as well as to the surrounding buffer areas. One of the most established TNC sites is located on the Atlantic seaboard, the Virginia Coast Reserve (VCR). This area has been a focus of TNC activity for twenty years. The TNC will attempt to duplicate the VCR experience in some form at the proposed sites across the Americas. Western sites with their high percentage of public lands will require very different protection strategies than eastern sites and bioreserves in Latin America. The TNC success in Virginia cannot be held as a strict blueprint for strategy for other bioreserves. Strategic planning has just begun for most potential bioreserves, but efforts are underway to insure cooperation from all the players in this monumental project.