

# Desert Ramblings

the newsletter of the  
Oregon  
Natural Desert  
Association

Volume 6, Number 1

Winter, 1992-1993



## Profile of Place The Honeycombs

by Alice Elshoff

Although the *Honeycombs* may look like the early stages of development in some new theme park, the groundwork for these pock-marked spires and pinnacles was laid back in the mid Cenozoic Era. It was sometime in the Miocene (c. 15 million years ago) that thick sequences of ash flow tuffs, the product of violent volcanic explosions, covered the area. But while ash flow tuffs are common in Oregon, the Owyhee Monuments landscape is uncommon.

This area looks different from the rest of southeast Oregon for two reasons. First, the north-south lineaments of the Basin/Range Province that define most of southeast Oregon come to an end just south of the Owyhee country at the Brothers Fault Zone. Second, although this area receives relatively little precipitation, it has been shaped by powerful stream erosion, due to the steepness of stream flow. As part of the well developed external drainage system, the Owyhee to the Snake to the Columbia, the Owyhee River has downcut through uplands of 5,000 feet on its way to meet the Snake at an elevation of only 2,200 feet. This erosion of multicolored tuffs and other volcanically derived units has given us this unique landscape, listed in the Oregon High Desert Protection Act (OHDPA) as the Owyhee Monuments, area number 32.

This area also boasts six endemic plants of special interest, all under consideration for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. They are sterile milkvetch (*Astragalus sterilis*), solitary milkvetch (*Astragalus solatarius*),



Sterile milkvetch

Packard's blazing star (*Mentzelia packardii*), Ertter's groundsel (*Senecio ertterae*), grimy ivesia (*Ivesia rhypara*) and Owyhee clover (*Trifolium owyheense*). Of these, the groundsel and the blazing star are specific to the soil of the Leslie Gulch tuff and are found nowhere else in the world.

The area supports a large herd of bighorn sheep as well as an unusually varied population of reptiles and lizards, including whiptails, leopard lizards and the beautifully marked collared lizards (see *Desert Ramblings*, summer, 1992).

Dependable access to this area is the all-weather Leslie Gulch road leading to boat launching facilities and a small campground at Owyhee Reservoir. Just driving this road is a wonderful experience and the possibilities of hiking from it in all directions are limitless.

Leopard lizard

Within this general area of the Owyhee Monuments is the smaller area known specifically as the Honeycombs for the sponge-like appearance of the cliffs caused by numerous spherical cavities of various sizes. Some of these have widened into caves with smooth and fragile looking overhanging lips.

One delightful and easy way to experience this area is to plan a five day canoe trip leaving from Leslie Gulch. One caution, canoe in the early morning hours before the wind comes up. Early morning starts will allow you to make camp before noon and hike in the afternoon. Using USGS 7.5 minute quad maps for Pelican Point and Rooster Comb, plan your first camp at Three Fingers Canyon. Be sure and hike up to the Horse Trap area. The second day, canoe to the Honeycombs, (you will know you are there when you come around the corner!). You won't be able to resist hiking here. The next day paddle back to Carlton Canyon and hike up

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## Desert Notebook: Lichens and the Vanished Grassland

by Trevor Goward

If you were trying to select a conversation piece for your living room coffee table, and if the theme were to be British Columbia's native grasslands, your winning choice would surely have to be a dollop of cow dung.

Whether B.C.'s native grasslands have already been called the most endangered of B.C.'s endangered spaces, I don't know. But they should be. Everything you've read about the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest is weak spruce tea in comparison to the native grasslands. While the former are merely disappearing, the latter have already vanished.

This last is a point worth belabouring. And worth belabouring, too, is the fact that the key to the demise of our native grasslands is not just cattle; it's also lichens. Let me tell you what I mean.

In the beginning there were no grasses—and so, perforce, there were no grasslands. Grasses seem to have evolved comparatively recently, the earliest dating from 60 million years ago, or about the time the last of the dinosaurs was busy decomposing. By 25 million years ago, the grasses of western North America had already convened into wide-ranging grasslands. Today, grasslands cover approximately 30 percent of the earth's land surface—not the least of which is probably your front yard.

Broadly speaking, grasses come in two kinds: spreading sod grasses that reproduce partly by seed, but mostly by underground stems called rhizomes; and tufted bunchgrasses that reproduce by seed alone. Sod grasses are especially well developed over much of the prairies (and your lawn). They are said to have evolved in response to dependable summer rains and heavy trampling by grazing animals. In their turn the sod grasses—lush and virtually evergreen—have historically provided food for grazers in the tens of thousands. Hence, for example, the stampeding bison herds of the Great Plains.

Things are otherwise in the intermountain valleys farther west, including southern B.C. Here, especially at lower elevations, summer drought is more intense, and soil moisture simply too low to support rhizomatous sod grasses. In their place have evolved funnel-shaped, deeply rooted, widely spaced bunchgrasses. These are the signature of the western grasslands.

Because bunchgrasses are quick to go into (relatively) unnutritious dormancy once the summer droughts begin, they provide considerably less sustenance for grazing animals than the sod grasses do. Until recently, less food for the grazers meant—surprise, surprise—fewer of them. This is an important point: different from the prairie sods, the bunchgrass grasslands of B.C. have evolved in the relative absence of large hoofed animals. As you might predict, the plant communities that developed under such conditions were held together by factors other than heavy grazing, which in a vague way explains why they fell apart so abruptly once grazing cattle come on the scene during the mid 19th century. Simply put, cattle in the western grasslands replaced bison that never were.

The damage the cattle industry has visited upon B.C.'s native grasslands over the past 150-odd years is impressive. The net effect is an assemblage of grassland communities so thoroughly denatured that few people realize they have ever been otherwise. This damage has been accomplished partly by the cattle eating their favourite grasses to death, and partly also by their helping to spread and sow a legion of alien invaders, including knapweed, tumbleweed, and tumble mustard—a weed flora today nearly as large as the native grassland flora itself.



Idaho fescue



Needleandthread grass

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(Lichens, continued from pg. 2)

What, you ask, has any of this got to do with lichens?

The answer is that lichens happen to be the bondfast glue that originally held the bunchgrass communities together. Even today they remain an integral part of any healthy bunchgrass grassland. Given a chance, and in company with mosses, hepatics and algae, lichens form a living crust over the otherwise barren soil that separates one bunchgrass tuft from the next.

**So long as that crust remains intact, the grasslands are admirably impervious to the inroads of alien weeds.**

I need hardly describe what effect the trampling of cattle has had on these lichen crusts. At four hoofs per animal, and at God knows how many footfalls per lifetime, the lichens simply haven't got a chance—and neither have the native grasslands the lichens help to maintain. When agrologist tell you that weeds are favoured by overgrazing, they don't really mean overgrazing so much as over-trampling. You could munch the grassland grasses and forbs till the cows come home, but so long as you didn't disturb the soil crusts surrounding them, there would be no opening for the weeds.

**It's the trampling of soil crusts, not the mere munching of grasses, that has contributed most to the denaturing of our native grasslands.**

Lately my work has taken me to the grasslands of the south Okanagan, and here I've had occasion to trample a few lichens for myself. But alas, almost invariably the cattle have got there before me; seldom do I find much worth stepping on.

Yet every so often, perched high on some rocky outcrop above the lowing herds, I have been fortunate to glimpse a patch of grassland as it must have appeared 300 years ago: bunchgrasses tall enough to rub a horse's belly; weeds few and sparse enough to be forgotten; and, at base, the soil still wearing its wonderful, colorful, intricate lichen armour. These things I'd much rather contemplate than cattle dung.

□

(Editor's note: Trevor Goward is a naturalist and lichenologist living in Clearwater, British Columbia. Reprinted from B.C. Naturalist, Nov/Dec 1991.)



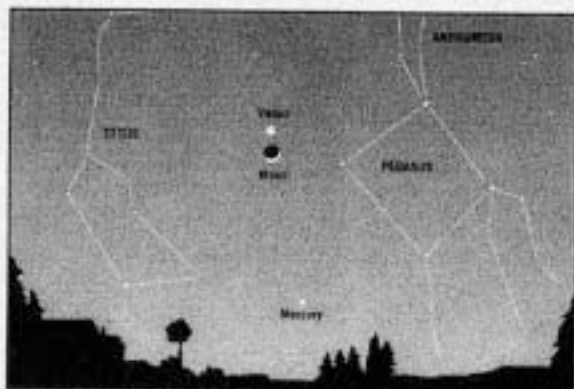
## Desert Skies

Venus is the most prominent object in the evening sky from January to late March. In early January, Venus will appear in the southwest just after sundown. On January 19 it will be at *greatest elongation*. It will, however, appear even brighter and higher in the sky until February 24 since it will move closer to earth.

See how long you can keep Venus in view until it is no longer visible above the horizon in late March. Try turning a small telescope, a spotting scope, or binoculars on Venus to see if you can observe its phases.

A second, more elusive planet will also be visible low in the western sky in the evening. Mercury, the innermost planet, will make its finest appearance of 1993 in February. Look for it shortly after sunset around February 21 directly below Venus.

Finally, Mars will be visible as a bright, reddish object in the evening twilight to the east. □



(Profile of Place, continued from pg. 1)

Painted Canyon. If possible spend a second night here and hike the other canyon also. The next morning's paddle will take you back to the Leslie Gulch boat ramp.



Grimy ivesia

I was lucky enough to do this trip with Wes and Ilea Jones of Adrian, who shared their thorough on-the-ground knowledge of these labyrinthine canyons and augmented that with a wealth of historical, botanical and wildlife information.

To reach the area, drive south from Adrian on HW 201 for approximately eight miles and follow the sign to Succor Creek State Park. Drive the 15 miles on this dirt road, proceed through the park and watch for the BLM Leslie Gulch sign. If you are coming from the south, drive north from Jordan Valley on HW 95 for approximately 18 miles. Turn left at the BLM sign for Leslie Gulch.

□



## Oregon Senate Committee Debates Grazing Practices

by Kathi and Jim Myron

As a result of efforts of various members of Oregon's environmental community, the issue of grazing practices is finally being taken seriously by state agencies and the Oregon legislature. In the last two and a half years several members of the Oregon Senate and House have toured various areas of the state to review water and land use practices as they relate to the production of domestic livestock. In addition, about a year ago, Kathi Myron representing *Rest the West*, Steve Alf of the *Oregon Wildlife Federation*, and Roy Elicker of the *National Wildlife Federation* made slide presentations to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources showing some of the effects of livestock grazing on public and private lands in Oregon. As a result of this work, Senator Dick Springer appointed a subcommittee to review grazing practices in Oregon.

For nearly a year now, this subcommittee of Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources has been meeting on a regular basis to try to deal with the subject of grazing practices. The subcommittee has consisted of representatives of state and federal agencies along with farming and ranching interests and environmentalists. One of the results of the deliberations has been the drafting of a grazing program for Oregon. This concept bill will be submitted to the 1993 session of the Oregon legislature for further discussion.

Even though the bill focuses on state and private lands, the federal agencies involved have indicated that they may follow the guidelines in the bill on federal public lands much in the same way that the Oregon Forest Practices Act is now administered on federal land.

Major elements of the draft bill include:

### Revisions to existing state law

- a) Create a revised and expedited water right permitting process to allow offstream watering of livestock contingent upon approved management plans.
- b) Reorder water preference statues so that domestic and fish and wildlife needs precede livestock needs.
- c) Review and revise eastside exemptions for confined animal feed lot operations with the goal of improved grazing management and watershed protection.
- d) Clarify and increase the authority of the Department of Environmental Quality to deal with non-point source pollution.

### State Lands Management

Would require the Division of State Lands to work with livestock permittees to educate them about grazing practices that protect and enhance watersheds. Directs the Land Board to adopt policies that encourage uses of state land which improve the quality and condition.

### Coordinated State Grazing Policy

Create a subcommittee of the Strategic Water Management Group, representing a balance of interests, to assess the condition of Oregon's watersheds and to develop a recommended policy on grazing of state and private lands and to make recommendations to the 1995 session of the Oregon legislature on the adoption of a state grazing policy.

### Education

Develop an educational program for the livestock industry with the cooperation of the Oregon Farm Bureau Federation, the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and the Governor's Watershed Enhancement Board. The educational program would be funded by contributions from the livestock industry and from the state through the GWEB program.

The bill certainly will not end all of the abuses caused by the grazing of domestic livestock on public and private lands, but it does offer an opportunity to begin dealing with some of the problems on a statewide basis. Unfortunately, the Oregon Farm Bureau Federation has pulled out of the committee process citing their opposition to any future program to regulate grazing on private lands. The Oregon Cattlemen's Association has also indicated that their members will not support any program to further regulate the industry. This continued denial of the problem by the two largest user groups in the state indicates the real agenda of these organizations. These groups seem unwilling to support the necessary changes to correct abusive livestock grazing practices to give some amount of protection to Oregon's native fish and wildlife. Private landowners have certain rights on private lands, including the right to graze domestic livestock, but landowners do not have the right to destroy and degrade public resources. Oregon's water and its native flora and fauna are public resources that must be protected, even on private land.

Representatives of the livestock industry continue to refer to the problem of abusive grazing practices as being caused by the "2% of the industry that are bad apples." If that is the case, why are the majority of all public and private grazing lands in such bad condition? It's time for the livestock industry to move beyond their denial and admit to the ecological problems that their actions have caused. Only then can Oregon begin to address the restoration of our watersheds in a comprehensive manner. Hopefully, the efforts of the Senate Grazing Subcommittee will result in the adoption of some of the required changes that are so long overdue.





## ADC Update

by Barbara Butler

**O**ND A is waiting to hear from the Regional Office of USDA-APHIS ADC on the status of the Oregon predator control EAs and EISs. The National Forest Service may be handing over the completion of these to Animal Damage Control themselves.

Predator Project of Montana suggests other options for predator control by lethal means, including increased law enforcement, required herd protection by ranchers, and accepting the increased cost of doing business in the wilderness and passing the costs on to the customer. Predator project has also documented many unprofessional results of ADC work. These include fabrication of records of requests for ADC services and illegal placements of cyanide baits over a period of eighteen months. In addition, records of the New Mexico ADC obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club revealed educational and past work experience of ten ADC district field assistant employees. They were not professional wildlife biologists which is how they are identified by ADC. ADC cannot insure effective and humane animal control by trained professionals. In light of this investigation in New Mexico, a Sierra Club member received a death threat as well as a personal visit from a lower-level ADC employee who indicated he wanted to "see what she looked like."

The Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund filed suit in May in federal district court against ADC for violation of the ESA. Various organizations were involved. ONDA gave input to join with the groups filing suit, but was apparently too late, having learned about the situation after the deadline. The suit is in response to ADC's lack of consultation with FWS since 1979. ADC did not have any "incidental take statements" to authorize injury or killing of T&E species. The intent of the suit is to get ADC to reinstitute consultation with FWS. Requested also is cessation of ADC activities in known habitat of T&E species until the consultation process is completed and ADC comes into compliance with other ESA requirements.

The suit challenges ADC's failure to comply with two sections of the ESA. USDA-APHIS-ADC was confronted with failure to: 1) comply with Section 7, requiring the identified consultation before initiating actions detrimental to imperiled species; 2) ensure their activities do not jeopardize continuing existence of federally listed T&E species; 3) comply with Section 9 which requires permits before action which may result in accidental death or injury of a T&E species. You can

request a copy of the biological opinion from John Turner, Director, USFWS, Washington, D.C. 20240. Perhaps some biologists might review this on its biological integrity.

ADC is also planning extensive recommendations for the futures. They are planning a name change, for one. Their planning covers personnel management and development, program delivery, cooperative relationships, research, and information management (internal communication). All this seems to mean that ADC feels some threat and needs to regroup for public approval. It would be great if they also improved their work.

□



## Field Trips

by Mary Garrard

**I**n May, 1992, ONDA and Portland Parks and Rec inaugurated *Oregon High Desert Adventures*, a series of outdoor trips designed to introduce wet-siders to the far reaches of Oregon's dry side. The inspiration for the series was the idea that in order to win lasting protection for the desert, the base of support needed to be broadened from the relatively small number of desert activists. What better way to build a constituency than to bring people to the desert and let its magic take over? The trips were an instant and unqualified success, filling immediately with adventurers eager to experience the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Oregon's high desert. Clearly, the series tapped into a keen interest in the east side and provided an opportunity for about two dozen folks to find their own piece of it.

Each trip was blessed with a unique blend of highlights and minor annoyances. What they had in common was a van full of congenial people, a roof rack full of assorted gear, knowledgeable, entertaining guides, and a smorgasbord of new experiences.

The first trip, an expedition to Jordan Craters, was challenged by heat and the constant throb of a water pump installed at Cow Lake. But just over the first rise in the lava, the quiet and solitude of the desert returned. Ilea and Wes Jones, local residents and long time desert rats, ably interpreted the natural history and geology of the landscape. Surface water in the vicinity, although much depleted due to the drought, attracts a variety of birds and other wildlife, and a highlight of the trip was hearing the call of the resident sandhill cranes as they circled camp each morning and evening.

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(Field Trips, continued from pg. 5)

In contrast to the relaxed, focused pace of the first trip, the second was a whirlwind lighting at many places. This time around, the van looped five days from Bend through Fort Rock, Summer Lake, Abert Lake, and up Hart Mountain, where the group mutinied and refused to budge for two days. Steens Mountain, Diamond Craters, and Malheur Refuge were next, and the group crawled exhausted but exhilarated back to Portland. Alice Elshoff enthusiastically shared her love of geology and natural history, and Mike Smith of Hart Mountain gave up his Sunday morning to talk with the group about the refuge. Highlights of this trip included the discovery of a bowling ball half buried on the rim of Hole in the Ground, a truly awesome thunderstorm just to the north of our camp at Summer Lake (although the swarms of mosquitoes drove us early into our tents), and the snow, wind, fog, sun and rain that graced our visit to Steens Mountain. This group had such a good time that they have already planned another trip together for next summer.

The third trip was based at Malheur Field Station during the full moon in October, and focused in on Steens Mountain and Diamond Craters. Although disappointingly the aspen had already dropped their leaves, Steens Mountain was warm and windless. We spotted a dozen bighorn from the summit, a rare treat. Again, Alice opened our eyes to the secrets of the landscape. Three nights we sat on Coyote Butte to watch sunset and moonrise and listen to coyote in the moonlight.

Many thanks go out to all who supported this effort: Tim Braun and Bob Gandolfi of Portland Parks and Rec; resource people Alice Elshoff, Wes and Ilea Jones, Bob Kindsche of BLM, Mike Smith of Hart Mountain; Malheur Field Station; ONDA; and of course the trip participants, who cheerfully pitched in to do what needed to be done. Gratitude is also due to Howard Zinn, author of *The People's History of the United States*, who would undoubtedly be pleased to know that a serendipitous meeting of an ONDA board member and the director of the outdoor program at his lecture in Portland in October, 1991 was the beginning of the partnership that produced the series.

In 1993, the series will continue with trips tentatively planned to canoe the John Day River, backpack on Steens Mountain, and day hike or backpack on Hart Mountain. Portland Parks and Rec is very pleased with the success of these trips, and feel they can fill at least five. Leaders and ideas are needed; please contact Mary Garrard at (503) 235-2972 for information or to volunteer. □



## Announcements

Jan. 26: 7:00 P.M. Central Oregon Environmental Center. Native Plant Society meeting of interest to ONDA members. Dr. Rick Miller will talk on "The Great Basin of the Last 12,000 Years."

Mark your new 1993 calendars now for some great coming attractions. As part of our *Winter Gathering Series*, ONDA is bringing two speakers to town in February:

Feb. 17 7:30 P.M. Central Oregon Environmental Center. John Crawford, PhD from OSU will present the findings of his in-depth research on Sage Grouse conducted at Hart Mtn. National Wildlife Refuge. ONDA participated in a field day regarding this important research on one of the desert's most important bird species. This is new information straight from the scientists in the field and will be a combined meeting with Central Oregon Audubon Society.

Feb. 23 7:00 P.M. Central Oregon Environmental Center. Joy Belsky, PhD will talk on "The Ecology of Oregon's Grasslands: What we don't hear from our land managers." Dr. Belsky received her Ms. degree in forest ecology at Yale, and her PhD in plant ecology at the University of Washington. She has worked the last twelve years on range and savannah ecology in Tanzania and Kenya.

More details in the Spring issue of *Desert Ramblings*, but mark April 25 for a reading and book signing with William Kittredge whose new book, *A Hole in the Sky* has just been published.

Save the weekend of April 30 to May 2 for the annual Desert Conference at Malheur.

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**ONDA** shirts, short-sleeve and long-sleeve t-shirts and sweatshirts, just in time for Christmas. Colors available are *grey, navy, peach, or white*. Sizes available are *small, medium, large, and extra-large*.

Prices:	Sweatshirts	\$22.00
	Short-sleeve t-shirt	\$12.00
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	Boycott Beef T-Shirt	\$12.00

In addition to **ONDA** logo shirts, we are offering some very special books to members. *The Sagebrush Ocean: A Natural History of the Great Basin* by Stephen Trimble is available for \$34.95. Forward by Barry Lopez.

*This is the best general introduction to the ecology and spirit of the Great Basin, a place where the desert almost seems to mirror the sky in size, where mountains hold ravens, bristlecone pines, winter stillness and unseen, but satisfying, the possibility of bighorn sheep.*

Other books: *Waste of the West*, Lynn Jacobs: \$28.00  
*Sacred Cows at the Public Trough*, Denzel Ferguson: \$9.00

**NEW!!** High Desert Poster (18x28) \$15.00—stunning high desert poster by **ONDA** Board Member, Ron Cronin  
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