

Desert Ramblings

the newsletter of the
Oregon
Natural Desert
Association

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IN THIS ISSUE:

ONDA'S WILDERNESS RESEARCH & RESCUE PROJECT	1
FEATURE SECTION:	
OWYHEE CANYONLANDS	8-11
MALHEUR/N. FK. MALHEUR WILD & SCENIC MGMT. PLAN	7

Spring 2003

by Bill Marlett

This year, ONDA is undertaking a massive wilderness inventory of the Owyhee Canyonlands, one of the last great wild landscapes left in the lower 48.

Our objective is simple: to document, through an orchestrated effort of motivated and passionate

From the *Outback*

volunteers, that the BLM's 20-year-old wilderness inventory is outdated and in desperate need of a second look.

With some in the Bush Administration hostile to the idea of Wilderness, coupled with certain Republicans in Oregon's delegation less than enthused about designating new wilderness, the outlook doesn't appear rosy. Of course, we hope there will be exceptions this year in Oregon, including our Badlands and Spring Basin Wilderness proposals. But until we can expand the definition of "homeland security" to include protection of our natural heritage by expanding the National Wilderness Preservation System, we must focus on laying the groundwork for the future.

With that goal in mind, we have embraced the BLM's new citizen-based wilderness inventory guidelines, which empowers wilderness advocates to directly participate in the BLM's planning process. The guidelines give the

see *OUTBACK* page 3



Pueblo Mountains reflected in water on Alvord Playa.

Brent Fenty

ONDA's Wilderness Research and Rescue Project

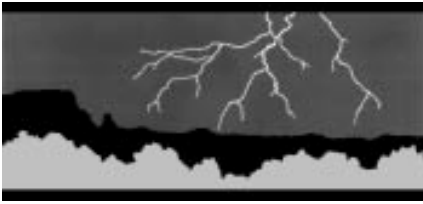
by Brent Fenty

For a number of devoted ONDA volunteers, a good time constitutes trekking around remote and largely unknown areas of Oregon's High Desert. Places like Catlow Peak, Ancient Lake, Grassy Ridge, Quail Creek, Mahogany Rim, Babes Canyon, Coffin Butte, and Ladycomb Peak. Besides being wild, beautiful, and ecologically important, what do all these places have in common? They all meet the BLM's definition of wilderness yet remain unprotected.

In 2002, with the help of a couple dozen dedicated volunteers, ONDA's Wilderness Research and Rescue Project set out to protect these and other areas as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) through an extensive wilderness inventory. Collectively, ONDA's volunteers and staff logged thousands of hours on this project.

**VOLUNTEERS
INVENTORY OVER
750,000 ACRES
OF PUBLIC LANDS
DURING 2002**

see *WILDERNESS* page 4



Oregon Natural Desert Association

ONDA exists to protect, defend, and restore forever the health of Oregon's native deserts.

BEND OFFICE

16 NW Kansas, Bend, OR 97701
541-330-2638 • fax: 541-385-3370
email: onda@onda.org
www.onda.org

PORTLAND OFFICE

917 SW Oak, #408, Portland, OR 97205
503-525-0193 • fax: *please call first*
email: onda@onda.org

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NEWSLETTER

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From the Den

by Lee Christie, President



I would like to take this opportunity to say "thanks" to everyone who responded so generously to our challenge grant appeal in December.

This is an especially hard time for ONDA, because just as dollars are getting scarcer, the needs of the Oregon desert—places like Spring Basin, Sutton Mountain, the Badlands, Owyhee—are greater than ever. No other organization is so dedicated to Oregon's desert, and it's up to ONDA to ensure it receives deserved protection.

At this critical time, we have decided to reorganize staff and priorities in order to stabilize our funding sources—by writing more foundation proposals, seeking new major donors, and increasing our membership. Even though more time will be devoted to fundraising, we are a determined and passionate bunch of desert rats, who will not forget what ONDA is really about: restoring and protecting the Oregon desert!

I have personally been a financial supporter of ONDA for almost a decade because I believe in its mission and tenacious staff. Please join me in supporting ONDA's work!

Announcements

OUTINGS

Due to financial constraints, ONDA made the difficult decision not to host Desert Conference at the Malheur Field Station this fall. However, a coalition of groups has already started making plans for a Desert Conference in spring of 2004. Be there with other desert activists to enjoy spring in the desert. In the meantime, join ONDA this summer for our annual Hart Mountain Barbed Wire Round-up, August 5th -10th. Please contact Patty 541-389-7280 or pattyrosen@coinet.com for more information.

COMMISSION DIRECTS CREATION OF A WOLF MANAGEMENT PLAN

In June 2002, ONDA petitioned the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission to develop survival guidelines and comply with other Oregon Endangered Species Act requirements for wolves. This March, the Commission decided to initiate an open, public process to develop a wolf management plan. The decision came after the Commission directed the Oregon

Department of Fish and Wildlife staff to hold fifteen town hall meetings to hear the concerns of Oregonians. ONDA members were instrumental in providing conservation-minded comment during these meetings. We support the Commission for taking this step and will advocate for a plan that ensures wolf recovery in Oregon.

ADIOS, CHRIS ORSINGER

Chris Orsinger is sadly departing from his duties at the helm of ONDA's newsletter. Having diligently challenged staff in sticking to deadlines, coupled with his surgical editing skills, he helped rally ONDA to produce over forty issues of Desert Ramblings—not to mention special issues on the Steens, John Day, Desert Wilderness, and Hart Mountain. We will sorely miss Chris, but are happy to know that he has taken on new responsibilities in his role as Executive Director of Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah in Eugene, Oregon. Adios, Chris, and happy trails!

FROM THE OUTBACK *continued from page 1*

public direct access to the BLM by allowing citizens to provide new information on wilderness values on our public lands.

ONDA recently put the guidelines to the test by recommending 564,000 acres of new WSAs to the BLM in and around Steens Mountain as part of the Andrews Resource Area planning process. Contrary to what some might think, the Steens Wilderness area remains a work in progress with nearly a quarter million acres of wildlands without wilderness status, compared to the 175,000 acres designated as Wilderness by Congress in 2000.

In part spurred on by ONDA's success on Steens, a caucus of anti-wilderness congressman from the West recently sent a letter to Secretary Norton asking her to repeal the new wilderness inventory guidelines. (Go to ONDA's web page to read the letter.)

Ironically, these congressmen don't want the public to help the BLM manage public land. They have correctly surmised that new citizen-initiated wilderness recommendations will further erode their unbridled grip over management of your public lands.

Once the BLM reviews (and concurs) with our recommendations, Wilderness Study Area status is secured, and then the BLM is obligated by law to protect wilderness values until Congress either designates these lands as wilderness or otherwise releases the lands to other uses.

Of course, given Secretary Norton's 4C's agenda: conservation through cooperation, communication, and consultation, it would be mildly hypocritical for her to cave in to these anti-wilderness congressmen. I predict she won't.

ONDA's next big wilderness inventory will be the Owyhee Canyonlands, which coincides with several other ONDA initiatives in the Owyhee region. To say our effort will be ambitious is an understatement, and we are counting on our cadre of wilderness advocates to persevere in our cause (read more on getting involved later in the newsletter).

Strategically, the Owyhee inventory should dovetail with the BLM's current court-ordered mandate to prepare a new management plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River (see the Winter 1999, Vol. 12, Number 1, issue of Desert Ramblings for a discussion on our wild and scenic rivers victory). Once we complete the inventory this fall, ONDA will forward our new wilderness recommendations to the Vale District BLM as part of its planning effort.

On a parallel track, ONDA is considering its options for a new lawsuit against the Vale District BLM for ignoring our formal protest of its management plan for Southeast Oregon (which includes all of the Owyhee River...again, to view ONDA's protest, please visit our website). While we

don't relish having to embarrass the BLM, don't forget this is the same BLM office that Judge Redden lambasted over its poor management of the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River!

Finally, ONDA hopes to reengage the Owyhee ranchers who expressed interest in a buyout of their grazing permits along the Owyhee Wild and Scenic River. During negotiations over the wild and scenic river litigation several years ago, Rep. Walden drafted a wilderness bill for the Owyhee River, which included a federal buyout of ranchers' grazing permits. Unfortunately, that effort stalled because the ranchers insisted on releasing WSAs that the BLM had not recommended for wilderness. Given that ONDA recommends three times what is currently in WSA status, releasing WSAs is absurd. Giving up what few WSAs we currently have in place (a scant 4 percent of BLM lands in Oregon) is a line we refuse to cross. That said, we would support Rep. Walden's future efforts to secure federal funding for a buyout of ranchers' grazing permits on a voluntary basis.

Unfortunately, Sen. Smith and Rep. Walden seem to think this approach represents

an equitable quid pro quo, where we "give" ranchers a WSA here or there (what's known as "release language" in wilderness lexicon) in exchange for designating wilderness somewhere else. The fundamental problem with this notion is that the BLM's original wilderness inventory was flawed from the get-go. By example, when the Utah BLM went back and redid its wilderness inventory a few years ago, the lands eligible for wilderness nearly doubled from the original inventory. In Oregon, our citizen inventory has identified over 6 million acres as potential wilderness, compared to the BLM's paltry 2.6 million acres currently in WSA status. Clearly, we have a deep canyon to cross. And with over 13 million acres of BLM lands in Oregon's High Desert, a balanced solution would support the notion that half of our public lands might eventually end up as wilderness. For the benefit of future generations, let's hope it does!



The definition of "homeland security" should include protection of our natural heritage.

ONDA File Photo

ONDA's Wilderness Research and Rescue Project

WILDERNESS *continued from page 1*

Sometimes the work represented a desert rat's idea of glamour: scanning the Alvord Desert for desert-horned lizards, kit fox, badgers, and pronghorn, or scampering up the slopes of the Pueblo Mountains in search of bighorn sheep, Mojave collared lizards, and blooming hedgehog cactus. At other times, the work was less romantic: driving and documenting the quality of brain-jogging ways and roads, snapping hundreds of photos, shuffling through thousands of pages of BLM wilderness documents, completing photo and road logs, and, at long last, writing lengthy reports.

Yet amidst the challenging days, volunteers found refreshment and self-fulfillment in their efforts. Volunteer

Anne Sexton commented, "sights such as the moon rising over Steens Mountain, a high desert sunrise or sunset, a flushed sage grouse, or a herd of pronghorn

hidden in a draw reinforced how important it is to preserve and restore portions of the Oregon High Desert—ensuring survival of these and other species for the enjoyment of future generations of Oregonians. I'm proud of the contribution I made toward this goal in 2002, and I'm looking forward to returning to the field in 2003 to continue the effort."

Protecting our wilderness for generations to come

In 1976, the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act directed the BLM to inventory federal lands for potential wilderness protection. Since the BLM's original inventory in the 1980's, only 2.6 of Oregon's 13.4 million acres managed by BLM have been given interim protection as Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs); a scant 4.2 percent of the state of Oregon. Countless roadless areas of outstanding quality were eliminated from wilderness consideration for subjective reasons and some areas have never been inventoried at all.

Recently, the BLM adopted a wilderness inventory policy that provides citizens with an amazing opportunity to present new information on lands that are currently unprotected. ONDA is taking advantage



ONLY 2.6 OF OREGON'S 13.4 MILLION ACRES MANAGED BY BLM HAVE BEEN GIVEN INTERIM PROTECTION AS WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS; A SCANT 4.2 PERCENT OF THE STATE OF OREGON.

of this new policy with our Wilderness Research and Rescue Project which, with the help of dozens of volunteers, will ultimately inventory over 4 million acres of roadless BLM land in Oregon's High Desert that we believe merit consideration as wilderness but currently have no interim protection of wilderness values.

The Wilderness Research and Rescue Project organizes and coordinates citizen inventories of publicly owned lands throughout Oregon's High Desert. These inventories document wilderness qualities (outstanding geologic features, cultural values, rare plants and animals, road conditions, man-made obtrusions, and recreation and solitude opportunities) on lands throughout central and eastern Oregon.

The project provides the organizational framework, training, and equipment (computers, cameras, maps, and GPS units) to enable volunteers to collect substantive, standardized information that meets the BLM's wilderness inventory criteria. This information is then compiled by ONDA and submitted to the BLM in the form of recommendations for designation of new WSAs; the first step on the way to congressional designation as Wilderness.



Brent Fenty

Wilderness inventory volunteers in the field.



ONDA File Photo

Protected Wilderness Study Areas provide habitat for species such as pronghorn.

ONDA's Wilderness Research and Rescue Project



Gary Tepfer

Owyhee inventory trips are held in May and July of this year.

ONDA's volunteers are making a difference


The first year of this citizen-led wilderness inventory effort focused on lands throughout the Andrews Resource Area, which spans nearly two million acres and includes treasures such as Steens Mountain, the Alvord Desert, the Pueblo Mountains, the Sheepsheads Mountains, and the Trout Creek Mountains. Over two dozen volunteers spent their weekends or vacation bumping over rough roads and hiking through wide expanses of sagebrush documenting wilderness qualities.

Volunteers and staff exceeded expectations by inventorying over 750,000 acres of BLM lands during 2002. ONDA submitted recommendations to the BLM for over 564,000 acres of new WSAs, which the agency is currently analyzing. The complete report, which spans over 400 pages and contains over 1,500 photos, is available on ONDA's website at www.onda.org/library/comments.

ONDA's effort received local, statewide, and national media attention, and in a recent article regarding ONDA's recommendations, BLM Burns District Manager Tom Dyer told the Bend Bulletin that "the public is one of our best information-gathering sources." Volunteer

Gordon Baker summed up the project this way: "This type of work is a win for ONDA, the BLM, and the citizens of this nation who are the owners of public lands."

Trip volunteer Shinann Earnshaw commented, "I enjoyed the research and rescue operation immensely, not only because of the camaraderie with some great people...but because the work also made me feel I was really doing something for the protection of Oregon's beautiful, remote areas."

This year, the Wilderness Research and Rescue Project will focus on the ecologically rich Owyhee Canyonlands. The Owyhee is home to rare fish, plants, wildlife (including the world's largest herd of California bighorn sheep), unique geologic features, and innumerable archeological and historical sites. We hope you will join us! 

(SEE **THANK YOU TO OUR 2002 VOLUNTEERS** ON THE BACK PAGE)

OWYHEE WILDERNESS INVENTORY TRIPS

May 15-May 21, 2003

July 17-July 23, 2003

Explore a remote corner of Oregon, meet other desert rats, and brush-up on your map-reading skills!

The focus of ONDA's Wilderness Research and Rescue Project for 2003 is the Owyhee Canyonlands area in southeastern Oregon. We will be inventorying wilderness values on public lands that are currently unprotected by the BLM.

Inventory work involves a variety of activities from camping, hiking, and driving to photographing and writing about an area. No prior skills are needed. ONDA's staff will provide the training and tools (cameras, GPS units, field guides, and maps); you just need to show up.

The trip is free of charge.

Please go to www.onda.org/events for details.

If you have any questions, or would like to register, contact Laurel Hickok at lhickok@onda.org or call 541-330-2638.

PROTECTING WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

by Mac Lacy

As ONDA continues to employ legal means as one strategy to effect change on Oregon's desert wildlands, we have addressed a wide variety of BLM and Forest Service proposals in recent months. One such research project involved an investigation of four Oregon wild and scenic rivers that lack comprehensive management plans. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires the managing agency to prepare such plans within three years after a river's designation by Congress. The Squaw Creek, Crescent Creek, Wenaha, and Elkhorn Creek wild and scenic rivers are all well overdue, having been designated in 1988.

ONDA requested natural resource information on these river corridors from the Forest Service via the Freedom of Information Act, to assess whether any of the rivers required immediate preparation of a management plan to address significant threats to their "outstandingly remarkable values." ONDA's assessment of Squaw Creek, for example, included reviewing watershed assessments, the corridor's initial resource assessment, and various grazing management documents, as well as a day in the field to walk representative reaches of the river. Our review uncovered no immediate threats to the river's values, and the corridor looked to be in generally excellent condition. As a result, ONDA has decided to save litigation on this wild and scenic river as a "defensive measure," should the Forest Service propose any actions that would adversely impact the river's outstanding scenic, recreational, fish and wildlife, and cultural values.

On the Steens Mountain front, ONDA recently commented on two BLM proposals that would affect the Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA). One proposal would amend a decade-old allotment management plan for the LaVoy Table Allotment, which encompasses the public lands immediately west of Frenchglen. The proposal suffers from significant legal and ecological shortcomings, including a failure to present and discuss key baseline resource information; a failure to consider non- or reduced-grazing alternatives; a failure to even mention the Steens Act requirements (part of the allotment lies within the CMPA); and a failure to consider or mitigate for the effects of grazing on the number of sage grouse leks present in the area. Because of these crucial shortcomings, ONDA asked

the BLM to amend the proposal or prepare a detailed Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in order to comply with all applicable laws before issuing a final decision.

A second Steens-area proposal involves the Hollywood Field of the South Steens Allotment, near where the South Loop Road meets Highway 205. The BLM proposes to fence the pasture along the east side of the highway and to construct a 1.3-mile long pipeline and livestock watering trough in an area proposed by ONDA for wilderness designation. Although ONDA presented the BLM in September with a 300-plus page report detailing ONDA's wilderness inventory effort in the Steens area, the proposal fails to consider this information. One of the additions contained in the ONDA report is the West Blitzen River Proposed WSA

Addition. The report contains maps, road logs, photographs, and written assessments for each proposed addition,

describing the

addition areas, their wilderness characteristics, and any new information available. The BLM is required by law to consider the effects of its proposals on potential WSA additions—and constructing a pipeline, watering trough, pond, and dam within a WSA or potential WSA would clearly impair the suitability of that area for designation as wilderness. The proposal also suffers from a failure to discuss potential impacts to several nearby sage grouse leks and archaeological resources, and a failure to consider alternatives that would eliminate, reduce, or otherwise limit livestock grazing in the Hollywood Pasture. As always, ONDA hopes that raising these important issues with the BLM will result in improved environmental analyses that are fully supportable, both legally and ecologically.

THE BLM IS REQUIRED BY LAW TO CONSIDER THE EFFECTS OF ITS PROPOSALS ON POTENTIAL WSA ADDITIONS.

MALHEUR AND NORTH FORK MALHEUR WILD & SCENIC RIVER MANAGEMENT PLAN

by Mac Lacy

On February 18, 2003, ONDA and the Center for Biological Diversity filed suit against the Malheur National Forest for the Forest Service's failure to implement the Malheur and North Fork Malheur wild and scenic river management plans. The lawsuit claims that the Forest Service's repeated authorization of status quo livestock grazing practices in the decade-plus since the plans were adopted has resulted in a failure to "protect and enhance" the "outstandingly remarkable values" for which the rivers were designated. ONDA also alleges violations of the National Forest Management Act, which supplies additional grazing, riparian vegetation, fish and wildlife habitat, and water quality standards that the Forest has failed to satisfy.

The Malheur and North Fork Malheur rivers flow south out of eastern Oregon's Blue Mountains, with headwaters at approximately 8000-feet in elevation. Each river's wild



George Wuerthner

Malheur River

and scenic reach is characterized by rugged, steep canyons ranging from 250 to 1,000 feet deep, which expose colorful layers of Miocene- and Pliocene-epoch volcanic rock deposited twelve to fifteen million years ago. The corridors span a wide range of vegetation, from old-growth ponderosa and lodgepole pine and other mixed conifers, to grassy meadows and hillsides accented by western larch, to riparian areas characterized—under normal, healthy ecosystem conditions—by grasses, sedges, and hardwood species such as willow, dogwood, alder, quaking aspen,

and cottonwood. A large majority of the riparian areas, however, have been heavily degraded by livestock grazing, which has reduced grasses to mere stubble and stunted or virtually eliminated the hardwood component of these riparian vegetative communities.

The Malheur and North Fork Malheur are particularly unique in that they sit at a physiographic crossroads at the junction of the Blue



North Fork Malheur River

George Wuerthner

Mountains and the Basin and Range geographic provinces. As such, the rivers and their associated aquatic, riparian, and upland habitats serve as a significant geographic link for an incredibly wide variety of plant and animal species. The rivers and their tributaries provide important spawning, rearing, and migratory habitat for threatened bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), as well as redband trout and several minnows, suckers, and sculpins. The corridors also provide habitat for mountain lions, black bear, antelope, Rocky Mountain elk, bald eagles, osprey, sage grouse, gray wolves, river otters, beaver, spotted frogs and other amphibians, and an astounding number of woodpecker species.

The lawsuit took well over a year to develop and involved key contributions from volunteers in the field who monitored grazing management and resource conditions on the Forest Service grazing allotments at issue. ONDA's data, as well as that of the Forest Service and other federal and state agencies, demonstrate a repeated and continuous failure to meet riparian vegetation, bank stability, and water quality standards for grazing practices, and indicate a chronic and systemic failure to protect and enhance the rivers corridors' outstandingly remarkable values. Excessive forage utilization, bank damage, and shrub use are also causing severe impairment of water quality, as evidenced year after year by water temperatures well above state standards, sometimes for 120 days or more in a single year. The complaint asks the Court to order the Forest Service to implement the wild and scenic river management plans and to comply with the agency's own grazing management standards, and to enjoin the agency from authorizing grazing within the corridors until the riparian areas have recovered from decades of overuse and abuse.



Gary Tepfer

The Owyhee is some of the wildest country remaining in the lower 48.

Owyhee SANCTUARY OF

By Al St. John

The startling buzz of the rattlesnake broke the quietude of my surroundings. The message was as clear as the intensely blue desert sky above: “Don’t tread on me!”

I nearly stumbled over the reptile while walking around the edge of a dome-shaped, tuffaceous sedimentary rock outcrop. Typical of the often mild-mannered western rattlesnake, this individual did not strike at my nearby boots. It merely retreated into a shallow, bowl-like depression in the side of the rock. When the snake realized that it was cornered, it snapped into a defensive coil with the head and front third of the body alertly raised, ready for action.

Immediately, I gazed back in the direction I had come from, hoping to spot my hiking companion, Jim Riggs. He was nowhere to be seen. Hastily, I retraced my steps and descended into a nearby gully, where I found Jim investigating a cave-like rock overhang. I said, “You’ve got to see the nice rattler I just

found.” Returning to the site, the snake resumed rattling at our approach.

I commented, “Look at this scene. A defiant rattler coiled on a picturesque rock formation, with the wild Owyhee River Canyon in the background. I’m taking some pictures of this!” Laconically, Jim said, “Yeah, it’s great...especially when you notice there’s a petroglyph on the rock directly above the snake.”

Entirely focused on the rattlesnake, I’d overlooked this ancient Native American environmental art. Untold ages ago, a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer had carefully carved into the stone a narrow furrow that was about a quarter-inch deep. It formed a perfect circle that was ten inches in diameter,

A rattlesnake coils beneath a petroglyph in the Owyhee country.



Al St. John

and within it was another smaller circle. After a photography session, we left the rattlesnake in peace and investigated the rock overhang in the gully. Jim's skills as an expert on aboriginal lifeways allowed him to immediately unearth some fragments of charcoal and bone that spoke of the meals that were eaten in this primitive shelter. The rock ceiling was heavily smoke-blackened from many long-ago fires. Had the person who created the petroglyph lived here?

deafening thunderclaps, and lightening flashed nearby. Then it was suddenly over. Silence prevailed once more, punctuated by the distinctive, downward-spiraling call of a canyon wren. A perfectly succinct commentary from nature about its own powerful extravagance. Small specks in an immense panorama, Jim and I felt both humbled and renewed.

Wilderness experiences of this type greatly enrich my life in ways that can't be fully expressed. And I know I'm not alone in this need. Besides the persistent faint odor of sagebrush lingering on their hiking boots, desert enthusiasts all seem to share one trait—a soul-deep love of solitude and

nature's wide-open spaces. For those of us who have these inclinations, the Owyhee Canyonlands region of Oregon is tailor-made. Situated in the far southeastern corner of the state, known as the "ION country" (Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada all meet there), the Owyhee River runs north, closely paralleling the Idaho line. This is an exquisitely lonely, little-traveled land. In fact, it is probably some of the wildest country remaining south of the

The Owyhee Canyonlands feature dramatic cliffs of volcanic tuff.

the Canyonlands

SOLITUDE

There was an almost palpable presence of a vanished prehistoric people and their way of life. For several minutes we squatted there in silence, sensing the long shadows of a lost era being cast into our present day. To the south, was the Owyhee River flowing through this remote section of canyon. Up the gully, to the north, was the lofty bulk of Red Butte. We had negotiated nearly 50 miles of rough jeep roads to reach this site, twice having to rebuild sections with fill-rocks where there had been recent wash-outs in arroyos. The pervasive clamor of human civilization was far distant. An hour or so later found us scrambling up the final steep slope below the entrance to a fairly large cave, near the summit of Red Butte. The ominous blue-black clouds of a rapidly advancing thunderstorm had pursued us with ever more threatening rumbles during our ascent. By the time we entered the mouth of the cave and threw ourselves down on the rock floor to rest with relief, the warm air was supercharged with electricity.

The former quiet was obliterated with the elemental drama that assaulted the butte. From our lofty, protected vantage point in the cave, we witnessed the storm from almost within it. The roaring wind blew dust into our eyes, the stone walls and ceiling of the cave seemed to shake with



Gary Tepfer

Owyhee Canyonlands

Canadian border, certainly much less visited than many heavily used, officially designated wilderness areas. When I first began exploring the Owyhee back in the 1960s, it was not uncommon to spend a week or more in this backcountry without seeing another human. Although now more rock hounds and river-runners may be encountered, the feeling of isolation from the outside world is still quite pronounced.

In many ways, with its “badlands” of multicolored spires, arches, and balanced rocks, the Owyhee is reminiscent of the sandstone canyon country of Utah. After

Oregon. They never came back from the wild canyon and it was named in their honor, using the south-sea pronunciation for their home islands, “Owyhee.” As more whites came to the area, eventually followed by settlers, Indian conflicts became numerous. In the 1860s, U.S. Army troops established several military camps in southeastern Oregon to quell the Paiute hostilities. Reading Mike Hanley’s book, *Owyhee Trails*, provides an in-depth history of this period.

The natural history of the Owyhee drainage is equally fascinating. Especially the intriguing geology, which has been exposed, layer by layer, through the persistent erosive work of the river. Like most of eastern Oregon, there are many volcanic features, such as hot springs and extensive lava beds. Most notable, though, are the dramatic reddish and yellowish cliffs composed of volcanic tuff, many of which resemble the ruins of castles or coliseums. Although usually not considered a true part of the land-locked Great Basin (the river flows outward to the Pacific Ocean via the Snake/Columbia drainages), the Owyhee’s ecosystems exhibit a definite Great Basin Desert influence. Typical saltscrub plants, such as shadscale, greasewood, saltbush, and spiny hopsage are to be seen there. In the uplands are sagebrush steppe/bunchgrass prairie habitats. The native plant communities, however, have been significantly distorted by long-time overgrazing practices and the introduction of exotic grasses.

A number of interesting animals that are associated with the deserts of the American Southwest reach the northern limits of their ranges in southeastern Oregon and can be observed along the Owyhee. Examples are the black-throated sparrow, white-tailed antelope squirrel, chisel-toothed kangaroo rat, and the rare kit fox. The dry, sunny climate is especially conducive to a variety of “creepy-crawly-critters”: giant hairy

*I*N THE
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ONDA File Photo

The Owyhee is a lonely, little-traveled land.

visiting this area once, most people are hooked and will be drawn back to explore. There is a wild, beguiling beauty to these desert chasms that entices one further and further into their depths to see what may be hidden around the next bend of the river.

The first humans to explore and inhabit the Owyhee were, of course, Native Americans. Like the aboriginal artwork that Jim Riggs and I discovered, innumerable other petroglyphs and pictographs on rocks throughout the area also bear testimony to the former inhabitants, who were largely Paiute bands. In 1818, the first white explorers entered the area. This was a party of Northwest Fur Company trappers that was led by Donald McKenzie. From the headwaters of the river, in what is now southwestern Idaho, he sent three Hawaiian members of his crew westward down this unknown watercourse into

Owyhee Canyonlands

scorpion, long-nosed leopard lizard, Great Basin collared lizard, desert horned lizard, western whiptail, and the uncommon ground snake with its bright orange and black markings.

Except where Highway 95 crosses the river at Rome, just a few, mostly unmarked jeep trails penetrate the upper Owyhee drainage. Only those outfitted with good maps, extra gas and water, and a four-wheel-drive vehicle should venture into this rugged backcountry. A passing thunderstorm can quickly turn these dirt tracks to sticky gumbo mud, and resulting flashfloods can obliterate a road where it crosses a formerly dry wash. A hopelessly mired auto could mean a 50- to 75-mile walk out from some locations. Therefore, self-reliance is the key to safe exploration and camping there. Access by boat is possible along Lake Owyhee, where the lower river has been impounded behind the Owyhee Dam. River-running trips are common along the free-flowing upper sections during springtime high water. A shady, grassy state park with showers is located near the dam and can be reached by a paved road from the Vale/Nyssa area. Other interesting locations that can be easily accessed by good gravel roads are Leslie Gulch (south of Adrian), and the dramatic Rome Ruins formations near Rome.

However, it is the wilder, inaccessible portions of the canyon that offer the truest flavor of the Owyhee Canyonlands. The refreshing silence and “elbow room” afforded there makes the rigors of reaching the more remote sites worth the effort. In our current hurry-scurry “information age,” we experience an ever-increasing



A sanctuary of solitude.

Steve Bly

bombardment of news reports and advertisements from multiple sources, piled on top of tight schedules, and the ever-present noise of modern civilization. A general sensory overload often results and this unhealthy trend shows no signs of lessening. In the future, blessed quietude may become one of our most cherished natural resources. It is imperative that wild places like the Owyhee Canyonlands be set aside to protect not only their intrinsic natural values, but also to provide sanctuaries of solitude. 🦎



Desert horned lizard by Al St. John

Livestock Grazing's Contribution to Fire Hazard

By George Wuerthner

In recent years, historic blazes have scorched much of the West. Congress recently reacted by creating a National Fire Plan, which attempts to address some of the factors contributing to the increasing costs of fire fighting as well as loss of life and property. Included in the plan are funds for increased fire-fighting capacity, home-owner education, and prescribed burning to reduce fuels. Nevertheless, the contribution of livestock production to fire hazard is often overlooked, and the practice continues unabated on public and private lands throughout the West. While climatic conditions like extreme drought and high winds are the key ingredients in any large blaze, past management practices—including logging, fire



ONDA File Photo

suppression, and livestock grazing—have exacerbated the situation by creating densely stocked timber stands that may be more vulnerable to high intensity fires.

Throughout the lower elevation forest and grass ecosystems of the West, fires historically burned stands with frequent, low intensity blazes—although high intensity fires may have always existed, even prior to the intervention of European Americans. Young seedlings and saplings of common tree species like juniper and ponderosa pine are extremely vulnerable to even moderate levels of heat. As a consequence, low intensity blazes tended to thin forest stands to create open timber stands dominated by a few widely spaced, large trees.

Livestock grazing is frequently overlooked as an important factor in changing forest stand conditions and fire regimes. There is a substantial body of scientific literature that identifies livestock grazing as a major factor in the alteration of historic fire regimes and a contributor to fire hazard.

First, livestock grazing removes the grasses that compete with tree seedlings for water and nutrients. This favors the establishment of deep rooted trees and allows them to dominate the site. Study sites in several ponderosa pine dominated ecosystems have found that in the absence of both fire and livestock grazing, ponderosa pine forests remain open with few thickets of young trees. The reason: existing grass cover cloaks the forest floor and prevents pine seedlings from establishing by outcompeting for soil moisture.

Second, most tree species require bare soil for successful germination. By removing the grassy understory of many forest sites and creating the bare, disturbed soil sites that favors tree establishment, heavy grazing has led to greater tree-stocking density.

Third, grazing removes fine fuels, such as grasses, that historically helped carry light intensity fires that once burned at regular intervals throughout much of the lower elevation forest ecosystems of the West. This has permitted young saplings and trees to become established in forest stands.

Fourth, by permitting a large number of small saplings to become established, competition for water among existing living trees is increased—making trees more vulnerable to insects and other pathogens. Under extreme drought conditions, such trees are actually more flammable than dead trees. Internal water content is often less than kiln-dried lumber, and due to the flammable resins found in living trees, such drought-stressed trees often explode into flames upon contact with fire.

Fifth, by contributing to the spread and persistence of fire-prone, weedy species like cheatgrass, livestock production has created far more acres of highly flammable plant communities in many parts of the West.

Despite its contribution to the on-going and growing fire hazard in the West, livestock grazing on public lands continues unabated and is seldom altered to reduce the incidence or intensity of western fires.

Reptiles of the Pacific Northwest

by Alan St. John

Reviewed by Alice Elshoff

Just before sleep do you find yourself pondering those age old questions such as, "Now just what is the difference between reptiles and amphibians or just exactly what does it mean to be warm or cold blooded?" Relax, help is at hand. Just pick up a copy of Alan St. John's recently published *Reptiles of the Pacific Northwest*.

In this little gem of a book, the author invites you to become a co-observer. First, an easy pictorial guide directs you toward the correct section of the book. Once the wriggling critter in your gentle and respectful hold has been identified, an entire page is devoted to its habitat and behavior. This is followed by the author's personal experiences with the species in the field. These are wonderful stories.

The science is authentic, the photography is beautiful, and the layout is well conceived. This book was obviously a long time in the making and represents a genuine labor of love. It is small enough to fit in your backpack, and I guarantee it will increase the enjoyment of your next excursion into the natural world.



Drawings by Al St. John

Excerpt

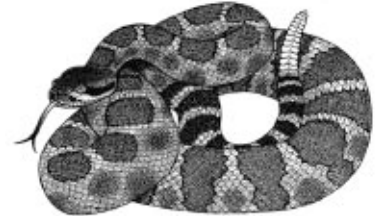
FIELD NOTES:

28 September 1997.

After sleeping under a cold, starry sky, I crawled from my sleeping bag at dawn and marveled at the view from my campsite above the Alvord Desert in southeastern Oregon. The crystal clarity of the air and the intensely blue sky were typical of autumn in the High Desert. Turning to gaze behind me at the lofty bulk of Steens Mountain, I noted the fresh dusting of snow

at its summit and ruminated on the fact that within a couple of weeks reptiles would

begin to vanish for the winter. My goal today was to visit a rattlesnake denning site. In these waning days of the season, I knew that reptiles would be out soaking up the warm sunshine at every opportunity. My assumption soon proved correct ... Driving roads on sunny mornings and evenings is a reliable method for finding this species and has proved successful for me on many occasions throughout the Great Basin Desert region.



Daniele McKay

ONDA BIDS FAREWELL TO OUR MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

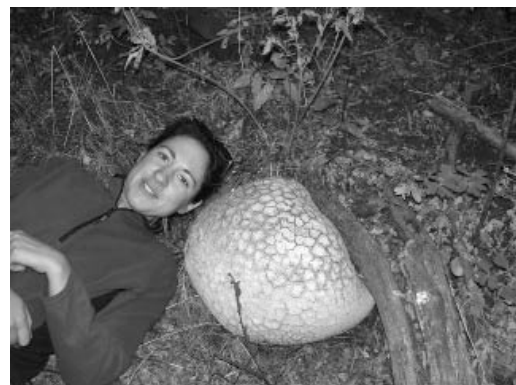
Anyone calling the ONDA office over the last few years has heard the cheerful voice of Daniele McKay. Daniele came to work for ONDA in May of 1999.

One of her duties was the very important but often thankless (I hope we thanked her enough!) job of keeping ONDA's membership rolls up-to-date. Somehow, all the long computer hours necessary to accomplish this task never seemed to dim her smile.

Some of you will remember Daniele best from the camping work parties she planned; she always made it seem fun to take down ugly, old barbed wire fences at Hart Mountain or to improve riparian habitat at Pine Creek. However, your fondest memories of those work parties will probably be of the incredible food

she brought to the pot lucks. Her skill as a gourmet cook was legendary. Yet cooking is just one of Daniele's many creative talents. Her original ideas and her flare for the artistic all came into play in the planning and execution of several Desert Conferences.

Daniele is leaving ONDA to pursue geology and psychology, and we all wish her well as she goes back to school and in all her future endeavors.



Brent Fenty

Daniele McKay with giant puff ball.

by Alice Elshoff

In Memoriam | **Homer Campbell 1920-2002**

The natural world lost a great friend with the death of Homer Campbell on July 30, 2002. He was eighty-two. Homer will long be remembered for his tireless work to protect and restore the environment.

During his long career as a fisheries biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), Homer never shied away from the frustrating work of protecting our finned friends from the ravaging effects of unscreened irrigation ditches, grazing, logging, mining, and dams.

After serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II, Homer married Marguerite "Meg" Wright in 1947, and together they raised five children.

In 1957, the Campbells moved to Corvallis, and as coordinating fishery biologist with the Cooperative Research Unit at Oregon State University, Homer was instrumental in creating the fishery research section in ODFW, which put fisheries management in Oregon on a solid scientific footing. This department became known as one of the finest state research groups in North America.

Along with authoring and co-authoring more than a dozen papers, and serving on boards of all the major professional fishery biologist organizations, he also found time to mentor younger biologists, giving them a solid ethical and professional foundation and encouraging them to become involved in important conservation issues. He was always involved in both global and local issues and after "retirement" served with the United Nations on a fisheries development project in Peru's inland waters.

Homer had a great love for the desert landscapes of southeastern Oregon, spending countless days camping with his family at Hart Mountain and working to protect the public lands of the desert from cattle grazing.

He did all of this with such a positive attitude and infectious joy that it was always a pleasure to work with him. Our hearts go out to Meg and their family as we acknowledge that Homer's life made a difference. His contributions gave much to making the world a saner, safer, and more livable place for us all.

by Alice Elshoff



OUR APOLOGIES

ONDA would like to thank the Peradam Foundation for contributing to the Joy Belsky Fund.

The contribution was accidentally not noted in the Fall 2002 newsletter in the "Remembering Joy Belsky" piece. We apologize for neglecting to identify Peradam as the lead foundation contributing to Joy's fund. We are grateful that Peradam decided to donate in Joy's memory and to help further her conservation vision.

Equipment Donations Needed!

Got a new GPS for Christmas and don't know what to do with the old one? Donate it to ONDA and get a tax deduction!

ONDA needs GPS units, digital cameras, memory storage cards for the cameras, and a lamination machine for inventory fieldwork as part of our Wilderness Research and Rescue Project. This equipment will allow our volunteers to collect important data on wilderness values in unprotected BLM lands. If you've ever done inventory work with us, you know how essential this gear is!

Please contact Brent Fenty about any equipment donations: bfenty@onda.org or (541) 330-2638.

Marketplace

CLOTHING

ONDA T-shirts (short sleeve only)

Specify size (M, L or XL) and color (sage or natural) ----- \$12

Desert Conference T-shirts

(100% organic cotton by Patagonia, Natural color only)

Specify size (M, L or XL) and style (short or long sleeve)

Short sleeve ----- \$12

Long sleeve ----- \$15

OTHER ITEMS

"Cows Kill Salmon" bumper stickers ----- \$1

"Boycott Public Lands Beef" bumper stickers ----- \$1

BOOKS

Netting the Sun: A Personal Geography of Oregon's Desert

by Melvin Adams ----- \$15

Flora of Steens Mountain

by Donald Mansfield ----- \$30

Sacred Cows at the Public Trough

by Denzel and Nancy Ferguson ----- \$9

Oregon's Outback: Auto Tour to Southeast Oregon

by Donna Lynn Ikenberry ----- \$15

ITEM DESCRIPTION	COLOR (1st & 2nd Choice)	SIZE	QTY	ITEM PRICE	TOTAL
			X		=
			X		=
			X		=
GRAND TOTAL					=

Yes! I Support the Oregon Natural Desert Association

Contribution:

\$35 Individual \$60 Family \$100 Advocate \$250 Patron \$15 Living Lightly

This gift is a: Special contribution New membership Membership renewal

Automatic Withdrawal Option:

Automatic bank deductions are convenient and cut down on paper use and mail solicitations. Deductions from your account may be stopped at any time simply by sending a written notice or by phoning ONDA at (541) 330-2638.

Please enclose a voided check or deposit slip. Monthly amount to deduct: \$ _____

Charge my Credit Card: Visa MC Card # _____ Exp. Date _____

Add my name to the Sage Net (ONDA's Action Alert listserve):

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Email address (for electronic action alerts): _____

Mail this form with check (or voided check for automatic withdrawals) to ONDA, 16 NW Kansas, Bend, OR 97701

OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION
 Desert Ramblings
 16 NW Kansas Street
 Bend, Oregon 97701
 Address Service Requested

Thank you 2002 Volunteers!

GORDON BAKER
 CONNIE BATTAILE
 JULIAN BATTAILE
 ALEX BERLIN
 EDIE BLACK
 TERRY BRYAN
 PAMELA CARPENTER
 KAREN COULTER
 SHINANN EARNSHAW
 ALICE AND CAL ELSHOFF
 LISA FAIRMAN
 KATE GLASSOCK
 FRED GOFF

Special thanks to our volunteers who contributed to the Wilderness Research and Rescue Project in 2002. They spent hours on dusty dirt roads, did important data entry work, and shared their computer expertise. We couldn't have done it without you!

JIM GORDON
 HELEN HARBIN
 JOE HESSLER
 CHARYN McDONNELL
 ERIN MCKAY
 JOHN NANGLE
 TOM PONTE
 DAVE PREDEEK
 ELAINE REES
 TOM SEDGWICK
 ANN SEXTON
 KAREN SIEGEL
 DIETER STARGARD
 GEORGE WILSON
 DAVE WORTHINGTON
 MIKE ZIELASKOWSKI

"Contributing money and renewing my membership is fine, but being able to participate at the grassroots level makes me feel like I really am an ONDA member."

JOE HESSLER, 2002 WILDERNESS INVENTORY VOLUNTEER



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Action Alert

Speak out against Senate Bill 418!

Recently introduced in the Oregon State Legislature, Senate Bill 418 was referred to the Water and Land Use Committee, and thus far, has had two public hearings. As introduced, this bill would broaden the definition of a public or private school, thereby expanding allowable non-agricultural uses in exclusive farm use zones.

If SB 418 were approved, the bill would specifically allow a proposed resort on Steens Mountain to proceed. Two years ago, this proposed development was recast as a "private career school" in order to take advantage of a provision in state law that grants exceptions to schools on lands zoned as exclusive farm-use. The so-called school included a fourteen-room lodge, restaurant, and nineteen permanent cabins on Steens Mountain. The development was initially approved by Harney County, but ONDA petitioned the decision to the Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA). LUBA overturned Harney County's decision and ruled that "career schools" do not qualify as "private schools" as defined by state statute. SB 418 would overturn the Court of Appeals decision by amending state law to allow career schools in exclusive farm-use lands.

Make yourself heard in Salem. Ask your legislators to oppose SB 418. Go to the state legislature's web site to find contact information:

www.leg.state.us.findlegsltr/findset.htm
 or call (800) 332-2313.

To keep this bill from reaching the floor of the Senate, it is important to contact the following legislators on the Water and Land Use Committee. In particular, we strongly encourage anyone in Sen. Metsger's District to make a quick call or send an email to his office.

Sen. Ted Ferrioli, Chair (30 th District)	541-575-2321
Sen. Charlie Ringo, Vice-Chair (17 th District)	503-643-7500
Sen. Jason Atkinson (2 nd District)	541-955-0911
Sen. Rick Metsger (26 th District)	503-668-4378