



OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

DESERT RAMBLINGS

FALL + WINTER 2022 | VOLUME 35 • NO.2

35 Years of Desert Care

Steadfast for Oregon's desert through every twist and turn



STAFF

Barksdale Brown, Finance and Operations Director
Claire Cekander, Donor Relations Manager
Allison Crotty, Development Director
Karina Diaz, Development Coordinator
Karly Foster, Campaign Manager
Sami Godlove, Hillis Intern
Gena Goodman-Campbell, Stewardship Director
Ryan Houston, Executive Director
Jefferson Jacobs, Riparian Restoration Coordinator
Mac Lacy, Senior Attorney
Beth Macinko, Stewardship Coordinator
Craig Miller, GIS Specialist
Renee Patrick, Program Coordinator
Mark Salvo, Conservation Director
Hana Sant, Membership and Engagement Coordinator
Lace Thornberg, Communications Manager
Anne White, Conservation Coordinator
Joanna Zhang, Conservation Fellow

ADVISORY STAFF

Bill Marlett, Senior Conservation Advisor

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gilly Lyons, President
Bob DenOuden, Vice President
Jim Stratton, Treasurer
Natasha Bellis, Secretary
Terry Butler
Elisa Cheng
Erin Gaines
Scott McCaulou
Monica Tomosy

OFFICES

Oregon Natural Desert Association
50 SW Bond Street, Suite 4
Bend, OR 97702
(541) 330-2638

2009 NE Alberta Street, Suite 207
Portland, OR 97211
legal: (503) 525-0193
outreach: (503) 703-1006

www.onda.org

DESERT RAMBLINGS is published twice annually (spring-summer and fall-winter) by Oregon Natural Desert Association.



Backdrop: Burrowing owl
Photo: Tara Lemezis

OVERHEARD

“The quiet beauty of the high plateau as it changes through the seasons is an undervalued resource both ecologically and for its opportunities to experience the solitude and grandeur of immense open spaces. ONDA and others work to preserve this is invaluable.”

IN THIS ISSUE

GROUND-TRUTHING

A complete survey of Steens
PAGE 4.

COUNTING WILDERNESS

Involving the public in wilderness surveys
PAGE 5.

PIVOTAL TIMES

Thanks to you, over a million acres stand to be protected permanently
PAGE 6.

ONDA'S 35TH ANNIVERSARY

An all-too-brief look at your accomplishments, era by era
PAGE 8.

SUPPORTER SPOTLIGHTS

A Q&A with Tribal steward Alyssa James and a profile of member Ellen Mendoza
PAGE 13.

READ MORE AT ONDA.ORG

THE ESSENTIAL PRONGHORN
CORRIDOR IN GREATER HART-SHELDON

WHERE ARE THEY NOW: INTERNS &
CLERKS MAKING THE WORLD BETTER

WHERE TO ENJOY ASPEN

Cover: Aspen tree near Fish Lake, Steens Mountain
Photo: Dan Hawk

FROM THE OUTBACK



Trout Creek Mountains. Photo: Peter Bray

Dear Oregon desert advocate,

Whenever Oregon's desert needs something, ONDA is there. We've been there the past 35 years and this summer has been no exception.

Pick a day in June and you might have found us boots on the ground in the Badlands, improving trails. Or in the marble halls of Congress pitching conservation opportunities to decision-makers. In the cockpit of a Cessna over the McDermitt Caldera to survey potential mining threats. In a federal court making our case for science-based management of public lands. Or catching up with you in a park in Portland, around a campfire, at our office in Bend, or in a backyard in Lake County.

And there are only 30 days in June. Imagine what we packed into that extra day in July and August.

In this Fall+Winter issue, we update you on recent progress while also reflecting on more than 35 years of organizational achievements since our founding days in the late 1980s.

What's held this group of desert advocates together for three and a half decades? A pure, enduring love of place, for one. A deep respect for the rights of wildlife, rivers and natural landscapes to thrive. And a sense of hope that, by coming together as a community, we can bring real, lasting conservation to more than 12 million acres of Oregon's high desert.

In our feature story, we'll take you through the different eras of ONDA, with additional reflections appearing in other stories. And, we're running a wildlife profile straight out of our April 1988 edition. While our world has changed since 1988, much about the western rattlesnake has not. In fact, not much about the western rattlesnake has changed for millions of years.

I'm inspired by your vision, dedication and commitment whenever I have an excuse to revisit those early editions of Desert Ramblings. Of course, I appreciate the time-capsule effect that looking at the graphics and layout has. I marvel to see public lands issues we're still addressing. Most of all, I enjoy the palpable passion for the desert that has endured in the people who are still active in the ONDA community today and infused many new people over these years.

In the words of longtime member and rattlesnake profiler Alan St. John, "So 35 years have gone by. Time flies when you're having fun, eh?"

I expect the next 35 will fly, too. Thank you for keeping this deep spirit of desert appreciation alive!

For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston
Executive Director





The Northern Paiute name for Steens Mountain is Tse'tse'ede, meaning "The Cold One."

This mountain is home to at least six endemic plant species — four wildflowers, a thistle, and a bluegrass. It is one of only two places in southeastern Oregon where the imperiled American pika live, and it contains the only corridor for greater sage-grouse that connects the bird's western and eastern populations in the state. *Photo: Greg Burke*

Ground-truthed vigilance for Steens

ONDA delivers hefty tome to the Bureau of Land Management

by Anne White, *Conservation Coordinator*

In July, ONDA submitted a comprehensive analysis of "routes" on and around Steens Mountain to the Burns District of the Bureau of Land Management in preparation for their forthcoming travel management planning process.

Motorized travel can be destructive to wilderness values and wildlife habitat. The question in any travel management plan is whether a "route" is, in fact, a road or not. We documented hundreds of miles of routes that should be allowed to fade into the sagebrush and not be available for motorized use.

Our final report — which topped over 1,000 pages — is a labor of love by ONDA volunteers and staff who spent thousands of hours hiking and photographing route conditions on Steens between 2007 and 2021.

Our work together covered more than 500,000 acres, as depicted in more than 5,000 photographs, and recommends that BLM close 180 miles of routes on Steens Mountain to protect this incredible landscape.♦

Counting Wilderness

Since its founding, ONDA has urged land management agencies to use publicly generated wilderness surveys to protect public lands

by Mac Lacy, *Senior Attorney*

"This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore," observed Thoreau as he contemplated solitude at his pond, a wooded little kettle hole carved by ancient glaciers. I might have said the same thing as I ambled across a sage-scented hillside one summer sunset near Hart Mountain. Having allowed the road to dip below my horizon, it was easy to relish the wildness of this place.

Which, of course, is the same reverence of place that stirred ONDA into being 35 years ago. In 1976, Congress directed the Bureau of Land Management to identify roadless areas with wilderness values across the Western public lands. By 1987, the Bureau had identified about 2.7 million acres of such lands in Oregon. As the decade drew to a close, however, the Secretary of the Interior recommended less than half those lands for permanent preservation.

The desert lovers who founded ONDA knew that the agency had grossly undercounted. And so ONDA members walked the lands, marked up quadrangle maps, organized field trips and, ultimately, drew up their own Sage Proposal. The Bureau was unmoved and, by the time George W. Bush took office, decided to altogether abandon inventorying wilderness lands.

So ONDA got even more organized, systematically inventorying seven million acres of public land in Oregon's high desert — and identifying more than 4.5 million acres of wilderness. The Bureau still opted not to consider ONDA's

reports but, in 2008, a landmark court decision established that the agency has not just the authority, but the obligation, to identify and manage wilderness values on public lands. After all, wrote the court, Congress had identified the conservation of wilderness lands as a "national priority" in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

As a result, the Bureau reinstated its previously abandoned wilderness inventory policy. Over the next decade, the Bureau updated its wilderness surveys across eastern Oregon. More often than not, the agency agreed with ONDA's findings — especially in places like the Owyhee Canyonlands. But there is one gaping exception: in the greater Steens Mountain area, the Bureau has never revisited its Bush-era decisions and has largely not considered ONDA's surveys.

It is past time to fix this. These spectacular wildlands provide critical fish and wildlife habitat. They increase resiliency against wildfire and other threats stemming from earth's changing climate. And they preserve millennia-old cultural values. This is why ONDA has now petitioned the Secretary of the Interior to direct the Bureau to update its wilderness inventory using current guidance, evaluate new and more accurate public-generated information, and update its land use plans for these important public lands.

Our aim is to preserve these fragile lands, so that future generations can find in them the same kind of inspiration and renewal that Thoreau found at Walden.♦

Pivotal Times for ONDA’s Conservation Campaigns

by Mark Salvo, Conservation Director

ONDA is working overtime to advocate for both legislative protections and administrative initiatives to conserve Oregon’s high desert. Thanks to your steadfast commitment and support, we have four major proposals in play in the region this autumn.



SUTTON MOUNTAIN
Senator Merkley’s bill to designate Sutton Mountain as a national monument is pending in Congress. Sutton Mountain features one of the richest concentrations of geological and paleontological resources in Oregon and is well known for its stunning vistas and diversity of plants and wildlife. *Photo: Charyn McDonnell.*



OWYHEE CANYONLANDS
Senator Wyden’s landmark proposal to conserve over one million acres of public lands in the Owyhee Canyonlands is on the move again. This epic region is renowned for its rugged terrain, expansive wilderness and essential habitat for the imperiled greater sage-grouse, endemic plants, herds of pronghorn, and countless other native species. *Photo: Bruce Couch*





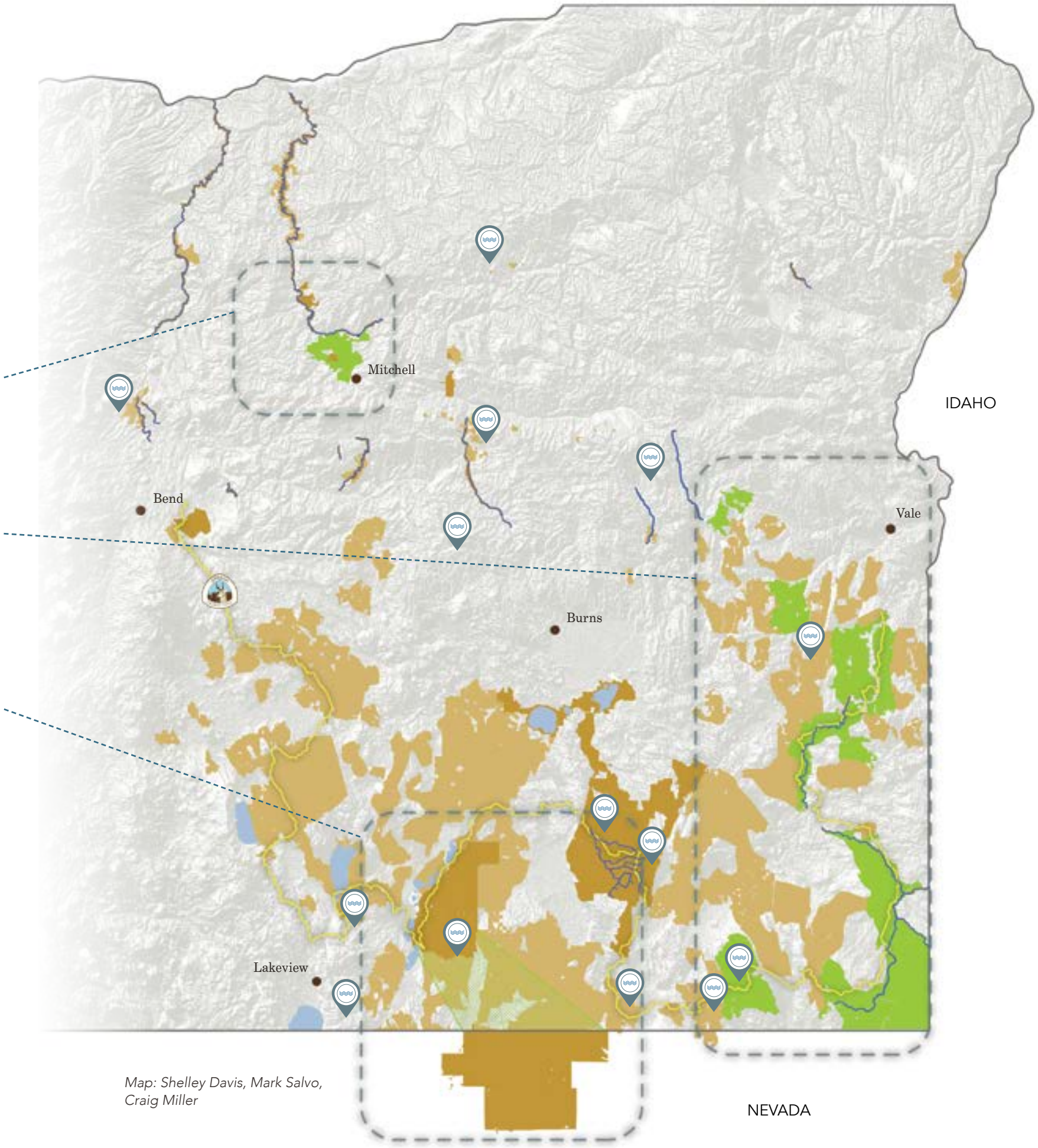
GREATER HART-SHELDON
Among the most important wildlife corridors in North America, this region can support more than 8,000 pronghorn. ONDA is working to protect pronghorn migration and sage-grouse conservation through multiple planning processes in the Greater Hart-Sheldon. *Photo: Greg Vaughn*



DESERT WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS
We’re pushing to ensure that Senator Wyden’s River Democracy Act, an unprecedented proposal that would protect more than 800 miles of desert waterways, will attract the votes needed to pass this year. Desert rivers, streams and creeks provide essential habitat for fish and wildlife, endless recreational opportunities, and clean water for local communities. *Photo: Mark Lisk*

LEGEND

-  ACTIVE CONSERVATION PROPOSALS
-  PROTECTED LANDS
-  WILDERNESS-QUALITY LANDS
-  PROPOSED WILD & SCENIC RIVERS
-  WILD & SCENIC RIVERS
-  PACIFIC FLYWAY WATERS
-  OREGON DESERT TRAIL



Map: Shelley Davis, Mark Salvo, Craig Miller

35 Years of Desert Care

By Jeremy Austin, Mac Lacy, Gena Goodman-Campbell and Lace Thornberg

An energetic group at a River Rendezvous in 1991. *Photo: ONDA archive* • In 2012, volunteers declared victory, at last, after pulling the last strand of obsolete barbed wire from the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. *Photo: Jesse Laney* • Trygve Steen at the 2004 Desert Conference. *Photo: ONDA archive* • The momentous day in 2000 when Steens Mountain became the first designated wilderness in Oregon's high desert. *Photo: ONDA archive*



This is a story about people who noticed a problem and chose to act.

It starts in 1987, in a tavern in Bend, Oregon, where a hodgepodge collection of 20 or so folks – some students, teachers, doctors, naturalists and others – gathered one Thursday evening. A shared love of wild desert spaces had drawn them together, and the realization that the high desert lands and waters they loved had no group dedicated to their protection was spurring them to action.

They could have ignored the call and hoped that someone else would come to the desert's aid. Instead, these public lands enthusiasts mobilized, brimming with moxie and bravado. As founding ONDA member and current staff member Craig Miller put it: "So what if we were up against some political obstacles, including our President (Regan), our Congressman (Denny Smith), and the Oregon Cattlemen's Association? Who cared if we didn't have money or experience? What was it to us that most people didn't even know Oregon had a desert, and those who did considered it a wasteland?"

Dubbing themselves the "Oregon Natural Desert Association," this group of people – which you are a vital member of today – became the heart and soul of Oregon's desert conservation movement.

As we offer this brief look back at ONDA's origins and ongoing evolution, decorated with stanzas from "The Ballad of ONDA" authored by founding ONDA member Alice Elshoff, we hope you'll be impressed by this small sample of what the organization has undertaken so far and excited as you think about what can be accomplished next.

Late 80s – early 90s

It was back in the winter of 88; when the BLM began to celebrate; they'd finished their study; they'd seen the wild land; all they could see from a government van... and they'd never heard of ON-DA! 🎵

ONDA formed as the Bureau of Land Management undertook a congressionally-directed inventory of wilderness lands in eastern Oregon. Concerned that much of Oregon's high desert had been overlooked by the agency's inventory, the founding members of ONDA set out to conduct one of their own.

This ad-hoc group of desert advocates hit the ground, hiking and mapping their way through eastern Oregon public lands, documenting the wilderness and other values of the high desert. Their "Sage Proposal" recommended five million acres for Wilderness designation in Oregon

– more than double the acres that the bureau identified as having wilderness character. Not bad for a bunch of rookies.

With that effort underway, the group began looking at how to address one of the most widespread impacts to desert habitat: livestock grazing.

They began by urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove livestock grazing from the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, where grazing was endangering sensitive populations of pronghorn antelope and sage-grouse. In 1994, the Service determined that livestock were incompatible with the Refuge's purpose and were removed, initiating one of the most important passive restoration experiments and scientific research initiatives ever conducted in the Great Basin.

As further evidence of a willingness to tackle thorny – or shall we say barbed – issues, ONDA soon launched into another major effort to help desert wildlife: removing all of the now unnecessary barbed wire fence from Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. These "barb wire round ups" became a tradition that brought desert-loving people together each year for the next two decades. The end result – one of the largest fence-free landscapes in the American West – was worth every drop of blood and sweat.

The late 90s – 2010

Not a wolfy grass in sight, the streams all dead; wasn't nothing growin' in the watershed; cows in the basins, cows in the streams; there were cows in the uplands, even shittin' in the Steens...looked like a job for ON-DA! 🎵

In this era, ONDA focused on securing Wilderness designation for the most significant public lands within Oregon's high desert and expanding our hands-on habitat restoration work to include stream restoration, trail maintenance, and more.

After years of ground work, ONDA led a historic collaborative effort to establish the Steens Mountain Wilderness, the first wilderness area in Oregon's high desert.

The process of garnering wilderness protection for Steens was, according to ONDA board president Gilly Lyons, "a long one! It took grassroots advocacy, thoughtful policy work, strategic political outreach, and hours and hours spent poring over maps."

After Steens, ONDA led two more successful efforts to establish the Oregon Badlands Wilderness and Spring Basin Wilderness.

Thousands of people and many major Central Oregon employers participated in ONDA's grassroots campaign to protect the Oregon Badlands. *Photo: ONDA archive*



Another major milestone during this era occurred when ONDA overturned a Bush-era "no more wilderness" policy and won a landmark case that required the Bureau of Land Management to acknowledge wilderness values across 7.8 million acres of public lands and to assess future management to protect these areas (see page 5).

ONDA also protected 200 miles of the Wild and Scenic Owyhee River system when successful legal work led to the removal of livestock that were damaging redband trout streams and streamside areas that today are rich with willows and birds.

And, we began to sink our teeth into riparian restoration in the John Day River Basin. We launched into a longterm partnership with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs to complete intensive restoration at Pine Creek, and worked with partners to install beaver dam analogs and restore habitat for salmon and steelhead on Bridge Creek, transforming the stream into resilient habitat with thriving populations of fish and wildlife over the course of just a handful of years.



Asked to create structures that mimic beaver dams, ONDA volunteers Emily Abreu and Elisa Cheng pretend to take us literally. *Photo: ONDA • Julie Weikel, Helen Harbin and Alice Elshoff hiked from Sheldon to Hart to raise awareness of the migration corridor between these refuges, as highlighted in the film "Sagebrush Sisters." Photo: Jim Davis*

2011 – 2019

ONDA won't be stopped, we're in it to the end; we've got a great campaign to save our desert friends; and we're working all together with other desert rats; and you will definitely be seeing a Big Protection Act...oh they haven't heard the last from ON-DA! 🎵

In this era, ONDA engaged in numerous creative ventures to raise awareness about the Owyhee Canyonlands, Sutton Mountain, the Greater Hart-Sheldon, and the high desert as a whole. Thanks to this work, Oregonians from across the state and Americans around the country went from saying "the Ah-wah-what?" to "We need to save the Owyhee!"

After thousands of hours devoted to compiling route information, creating maps, gathering GPS tracks and waypoints, the Oregon Desert Trail opened for exploration in 2011. ONDA established this audacious, aspirational 750-mile route to introduce people to the spectacular natural areas of the Oregon's dry side and invite them to take part in its conservation and care.

In 2016, ONDA successfully blocked a proposed industrial energy development atop Steens Mountain in an area crucial to over-wintering sage-grouse, and pulled the last obsolete barbed wire off the mountain in 2017.

ONDA launched the Oregon Desert Land Trust in 2017 to complement our public lands work with private lands conservation. And, in 2019, after a decade-long challenge, ONDA secured a court order barring more than a hundred miles of roads that would have sliced across Steens.

Governor Kitzhaber recognized ONDA's wilderness stewardship program as an Outstanding Volunteer Program in 2011, and the amount of hands-on restoration ONDA completed grew significantly in this era, with the help of as many as 500 volunteers each year who planted thousands of trees and restored dozens of miles of desert streams throughout Central Oregon and the John Day River Basin.



2020 – today, tomorrow, and beyond

There is work ahead, but the stakes are high, the world is gonna hear our battle cry. ON-DA! 🎵

At this moment, over one million acres in the Owyhee Canyonlands and hundreds of miles of waterways across the high desert are set up for enduring protection thanks to active campaigns and introduced legislation (see page 6 for an update).

Across the desert, ONDA volunteers are surveying stream conditions on the Malheur wild and scenic rivers, pushing the Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to maintain grazing restrictions that have been secured, after decades of legal pressure, along nearly 70 miles of bull trout streams.

Looking ahead, we know we will adopt the latest technologies, improve our techniques, involve different constituencies and pursue new avenues to gain desert protection. However our work evolves, one thing will certainly remain true: ONDA will be successful thanks to the generous support of passionate, principled people. Many of the same founding members from 1987 are still with ONDA today (Thank you!!) and, thanks to many initiatives, including our Tribal Stewards project (see page 13) and the Hillis Internship, we are actively engaging the next generation of desert advocates.

Over the past 35 years, this community has met each new challenge with ingenuity and persistence. As an ONDA supporter, you are an integral member of a dedicated community that can be counted on to ask "What's the next challenge?" and then set out to solve it. ♦



ONDA volunteer Craig Terry holding one of the last coils of barbed wire pulled out of the cow-free Steens Mountain Wilderness. *Photo: Sage Brown • ONDA volunteers respond to the new challenge of a proposed large-scale mine while meeting with members of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Tribe at McDermitt Caldera. Photo: Gary Calicott*



LOOKING BACK AT 35 YEARS

It wouldn't be possible in a single article to list out every conservation win this community has achieved in the past 35 years, nor begin to account for the many people and countless stories behind the volume of work completed. For more highlights from the past 35 years, see [ONDA.org/accomplishments](https://onda.org/accomplishments) and, for more stories and accounts of the work as it was happening, we have posted the past editions of Desert Ramblings at [ONDA.org/desert-ramblings](https://onda.org/desert-ramblings).



FALL + WINTER EVENTS

To learn more or register for any of these events, visit [ONDA.org/events](https://onda.org/events).

Wild & Scenic Film Festival

Friday, September 30, 2022 | 6:00 p.m.
Tower Theatre, Bend, OR and live-stream

Enjoy an evening of short films showcasing our earth’s natural wonders and the amazing stories of activists working to conserve the environment.

2023 Wild Desert Calendar Release Party

Friday, November 4, 2022 | 5:00 p.m.
Immersion Brewing, Bend, OR

Come to the release party to meet the photographers behind the latest edition of our Wild Desert Calendar, admire great photography and enjoy a convivial evening with fellow desert advocates. All of the photos from the 2023 edition will also be exhibited in a virtual gallery that will be viewable through early 2023.



Photo: Shane Davila

“A High Desert Year” Virtual Exhibit

November 4, 2022 - January 6, 2023
Online at [ONDA.org/a-high-desert-year](https://onda.org/a-high-desert-year)

Celebrate all the conservation successes you achieved this year. Hear highlights from this year’s habitat restoration, advocacy and community-building initiatives and learn about what’s to come in the year ahead!

High Desert Hootenanny

Friday, November 4, 2022 | 5:00 p.m.
KEEN headquarters, Portland
Friday, December 9, 2022 | 5:00 p.m.
Aspen Hall, Bend

FAREWELL, CORINNE! THANK YOU, SAMI! WELCOME, CLAIRE AND KARLY!



Claire Cekander



Karly Foster

At the end of June, we said good bye to *Corinne Handelman*, whose enthusiasm for the desert had, for the past six years, encouraged many supporters in Portland and beyond to get more involved with ONDA. We wish her all the best in her next adventure engaging the hiking community in Washington state.

In July, *Sami Godlove* joined us as our summer 2022 Hillis intern. A Central Oregon local and long-time ONDA supporter, Sami jumped right into preparing a conservation prospectus for the John Day River Basin, then returned to Lewis and Clark Law School where he is pursuing a master of laws degree.

This August, we welcomed *Claire Cekander* as our donor relations manager. Claire comes to ONDA from the Boston Foundation where she focused on planned giving and connecting donors to opportunities to support critical initiatives. Claire has a degree in environment and sustainability sciences from Cornell University and has held board and staff positions in the sustainable agriculture field where she honed her communications and fundraising skills. Claire is passionate about conserving Oregon’s public lands and looks forward to connecting with ONDA’s community of supporters.

In September, *Karly Foster* stepped into the role of campaign manager. Born and raised in western Oregon, Karly has broad experience in intercultural communications, public education, and organization of diverse stakeholders to advocate for conservation and community values. She has succeeded, often in very challenging settings in Oregon, Alaska and Idaho. She’s excited to return to Oregon, now that she has completed her master’s degree in environmental science at the University of Idaho, and we are thrilled to welcome Karly to ONDA!

Get to know ONDA’s staff
Visit [ONDA.org/about-us](https://onda.org/about-us)

Q&A with Alyssa James

by Gena Goodman-Campbell, Stewardship Director

ONDA continues to prioritize engaging with Tribes on important conservation issues, and one way we pursue this is through the Tribal Stewards project, which offers paid work experiences that introduce Indigenous young adults to different types of conservation careers.

Here are a few snippets from our conversation with Alyssa James, Diné (Navajo), one of 10 young adults who took part in Tribal Stewards this past summer.

What was your favorite project?

The fisheries work at High Lakes was really fun, except for all of the mosquitoes! I also liked building fences around springs at Little Crane Creek, the staff from Malheur National Forest kept us working all day and that was the only week that went really fast for us because they just kept us busy.

What was the most challenging week of work?

Denny Jones Ranch was very challenging, it was really hot and we did a lot of walking.

But I kind of liked hiking around and being out all day working, and then coming back knowing that you’ve lived through the day.

Is there a type of work that you gained experience with this summer that you are interested in pursuing further?

Botanist.

What is it that draws you to plants?

Plants are all so different and their scientific names are very crazy but so interesting. Learning more about them seems like a good challenge to take on.

I want to keep learning about plants that grow around my home and help bring them back for medicinal or ceremonial use. I am also interested in being a midwife, we use a lot of different medicinal plants during home birth and I would like to help with that. ♦



Alyssa James fishing near Strawberry Mountain. Photo: Gena Goodman-Campbell



MEET ELLEN MENDOZA

A MEMBER SINCE “BEFORE IT WAS ONDA”

by Allison Crotty, Development Director

Ellen first visited Alvord Hot Springs and Steens Mountain in 1980. She’d recently moved to Oregon from New York, had just finished her first year of law school, and the open space of the desert was something she’d never experienced before.

Ever since then, she says, “it’s been a love affair with the Oregon desert. Even though I’ve always lived on the westside, I’ve always gone east to the desert to just open myself up.”

Attending ONDA events helped Ellen to understand conflicts between desert and agriculture, and wildlife and people. “ONDA through the years has really managed to find the sweet spot where you can make alliances and agreements to protect the wilderness but still recognize that men and women are there and those needs also have to be protected and acknowledged.”

“Another reason I support ONDA is that through my years of involvement I’ve seen continual recruitment of new people coming to the issue and younger people coming into the organization. To me, that is a really good sign of a good organization. I’m heartened by all these new people! I think ONDA continuing to grow and broaden its appeal shows its success.”

Thank you, Ellen, and thank you to all the members and conservation supporters like her for their countless contributions to furthering high desert conservation over the past 35 years! ♦

Species Spotlight: Western Rattlesnake

By Alan St. John

Herpetologist, author and a founding member of ONDA

Reprinted from the April 1988 issue of Desert Ramblings. You can see the original in the archive at [ONDA.org/desert-ramblings](https://onda.org/desert-ramblings).



The Great Basin subspecies of the western rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis lutosus*) coiled up in Big Sand Gap, Alvord Desert. Photo: Alan St. John

Although it is a commonly held notion that Oregon’s rattlesnakes are either “timber rattlers” or “diamondbacks,” there is actually only one species found in the Pacific Northwest, the Western Rattlesnake. Its coloration and pattern is highly variable which leads to the confusion. Over its wide range in the West several geographic races (subspecies) have been designated, two occurring in Oregon; the Great Basin Rattlesnake, *Crotalus viridis lutosus*, of southeast Oregon, and the Northern Pacific, *C.v. oreganus*, of western, central and northeast Oregon. Although all Western Rattlesnakes are basically tan to brown with darker blotches along the back, the variations from the deserts, *lutosus*, are lighter with smaller, oval blotches, while those from more wooded sections, *oreganus*, are darker, often with a greenish hue, and have larger squarish blotches.

The rattle is composed of hollow, loosely interconnecting segments that click together and produce a buzzing sound when the tail is vibrated. Newborns cannot rattle, having only a hard, rounded nubbin called a “button.” As the snake grows, new rattle segments are added each time it sheds its skin. Since snakes usually shed more than once a year, it is impossible to compute the age of a rattlesnake by counting rattle segments. On each side of the head, between the eye and the nostril, is a heat sensory “pit”. These are so incredibly sensitive that the snake can accurately strike at warm-blooded prey in total darkness. The Western Rattlesnake averages from 2 to 3 feet in length, but rare specimens close to 5 feet have been found.

The rattlesnake is widespread throughout most of Eastern Oregon, below 5,000 feet. The favored habitat is brushy, rocky areas of deserts, canyons, and dry, open woodlands. A southern exposure with deep rock crevices is required for winter communal denning, with large numbers often congregating to hibernate. They are beneficial, feeding mostly on rodents and occasionally on lizards, frogs, toads and nestling birds. 1 to 20 young are live-born in the late summer or during autumn.

The rattler is probably a prime reason why many people are apprehensive about desert hiking and camping. These fears are largely unwarranted. The threat from this reptile is usually greatly exaggerated due to persistent beliefs in untrue fables and just plain “tall tales.” A rattlesnake will not make an unprovoked attack on a human, cannot strike more than half of its body length, and will usually try to escape and hide, if given that option. In actuality, the Western Rattlesnake is fairly shy and retiring and is rarely seen. During the mid-day heat of summer, these snakes remain hidden in cool retreats, so encounters on day hikes are rare.

With greater understanding, the rattlesnake may be freshly viewed as a fascinating component of the high desert ecosystem. Along with the Prairie Falcon, Coyote, and Pronghorn Antelope, it is one of our important wildlife symbols of the untamed American West and also deserves protection in remote places. ♦



TRIP DETAILS

Drive time: 4 hours from Bend, OR; 7 hours from Portland, OR
Fall+Winter highlights: fall color, snowfall, birds

Explore Hart Mountain’s Burnished Aspen Groves

by Joanna Zhang, *Conservation Fellow*

Autumn is a particularly colorful time to visit Hart Mountain. The aspen trees that fill the area’s numerous draws and basins are flickering in fiery red, orange and yellow hues, accenting the already dramatic fault block mountain topography. Snow is possible at this time of year at Hart’s 5,600 feet in elevation, and, when it falls, the area’s red rocks, green lichens and golden foliage stand out against their fresh white backdrop.

DeGarmo Canyon is an excellent hiking option at Hart Mountain, as it offers an easy route of 1.5-miles out and back through a stunning canyon, as well as a more challenging 10-mile roundtrip hike that takes you up to DeGarmo Notch, a hanging valley with incredible views. Aspen groves line much of this hike, which also features waterfalls, and perhaps a few late-blooming wildflowers.

Not far from DeGarmo Canyon, you’ll find a great soaking at the Hot Springs Campground, which is located on the eastern flank of Hart Mountain. Soakers can choose between two hot springs — the protected comfort of a 6-foot deep pool surrounded by wind-blocking stone walls, or a primitive pool hidden off a closed road on the backside of the parking area. In a short stroll from this 29-site campground, you’re likely to see many birds, including northern harriers, Bullock’s orioles, yellow warblers and greater sage-grouse. Photo: Jim Davis

DRIVING DIRECTIONS: From Plush, take County Highway 3-12 (Hart Mountain Road) north toward the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge for about 10 miles. Turn right (east) onto small dirt road just south of the DeGarmo Creek crossing. Follow the road for about 0.5 miles, keeping right at the 0.2 mile mark and left at the 0.3 mile mark until you reach a small parking area near DeGarmo Creek. If you do not have a high clearance vehicle, you can park along the highway and walk the extra 0.5 miles.

For more desert outings, check out our Visitor’s Guides at [ONDA.org/guides](https://onda.org/guides).



50 SW Bond Street, Suite 4
Bend, OR 97702

See you at the Wild & Scenic
Film Festival on September 30!

Details: **ONDA.org/events**

A large photograph of a desert landscape serves as the background for the lower half of the page. In the foreground, there are several bright red, spiky desert flowers. The middle ground shows a sandy, sloping hillside with sparse green and brown vegetation. In the background, a clear blue sky is visible above a range of distant, snow-capped mountains.

GOT GRIT?

PUBLIC LANDS CONSERVATION TAKES
GRIT AND DETERMINATION.

Adding ONDA to your will or estate plan is much easier.
Your simple action today fuels conservation for the long haul.

Allison@ONDA.org | 541.330.2638 x315 | [ONDA.org/legacy](https://onda.org/legacy)