



OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

DESERT RAMBLINGS

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OWYHEE CANYONLANDS

Big wins driven by decades of determined advocacy



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Backdrop: Little Blitzen aspens in autumn
Photo: Matt Witt

OVERHEARD

“I love the climate, varied geography and wide open spaces in Oregon’s high desert. I also love desert rivers and streams and the aquatic species that inhabit them. I choose to support ONDA because it works tirelessly to protect these things and preserve them for future generations.”

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Cover: Leslie Gulch, Owyhee Canyonlands.
Photo: Tyson Fisher



Spires of the Owyhee Canyonlands. Photo: John Aylward

Dear Oregon desert advocate,

This summer brought a convergence of conservation opportunities in Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands as decades of advocacy resulted in important wins in our campaign to protect one of Oregon's most rugged and awe-inspiring landscapes.

In the span of just a few weeks, you celebrated new protections for more than 400,000 acres while championing a complementary Wilderness proposal introduced in the United States Senate. Soon thereafter a broad, diverse coalition of conservation groups, community members and Indigenous leaders joined ONDA in advocating for swift passage of the bill in a Congressional hearing.

While the timing may have been coincidental, the progress we're making to protect Oregon's incredible, majestic Owyhee Canyonlands has never been left to chance. Your steadfast commitment to a clear vision and long-term strategy continues to bring important progress as the permanent protection of the Owyhee becomes a discussion focused on when and not if.

This commitment extends beyond ONDA's land conservation campaigns and into our restoration program. More than a decade in the making, our long-term vision for habitat restoration along central Oregon's South Fork Crooked River continues to bring more diverse, abundant and resilient habitat throughout the valley while we innovate with new, increasingly effective restoration techniques.

These landscape protections and site-specific restoration accomplishments are coupled with enduring commitments to building conservation leadership and equity through efforts such as our Hillis Internship and the Tribal Stewards project, both focused on supporting and empowering future leaders through meaningful, in-depth experience on the front lines of conservation work.

Your ongoing dedication, generosity and support resulted in these and many other important gains. Your energy and steadfast determination have and always will drive a vibrant, healthy future for Oregon's high desert. *Thank you!*

For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston
Executive Director



Imagine Sutton Mountain

by Renee Patrick, Oregon Desert Trail Advisor



Photo: Renee Patrick

When I pitched my tent on the edge of the lumbering Sutton Mountain, the views were obscured by heavy rain clouds. My dry island of nylon was an escape from the drenching spring rains, and while I lamented missing out on the scenic vista that was buried in layers of hazy moisture, I knew a good soaking rain was something to encourage and even celebrate in this desert landscape. Some bright bloom or newborn babe would grow an extra inch in this wet, and for that I was grateful.

Luckily enough, my optimism for a dry morning and relief from the low-lying clouds was realized, and when I zipped open the tent fly the next day, the world revealed itself. I could see the brilliant Painted Hills, fresh and vibrant as if the rain dialed the hues up a notch, and beyond, in layers of ridgelines, sat the far reaches of the Ochoco Mountains...with a dusting of fresh snow! Even though I was backpacking in early May, winter's grip lingered.

I celebrated the views, one: because I would be able to hike the edge of this fault block sentinel and enjoy the unique vantage point that the ancient geology and plate tectonics provided, and two: because I would be ending my exploratory

nine-day backpacking trip through the John Day River Basin on a high note. Hiking up and over Sutton Mountain was to be the grand finale.

What is it to know the land? To our hiking hearts, it is to walk through it, to sleep between stands of bunchgrass, to drink from elusive desert springs, and climb up to rocky bluffs only previously traversed by bighorn sheep. Folks fortunate enough to spend time in this area become intimate with the plants, animals, geology, and human history unique to the area. We come to understand the importance of the largest intact expanse of feder-



Photo: Renee Patrick

al public lands in the John Day River Basin, and why it needs to be permanently protected, with Sutton Mountain as the pinnacle of these lands.

I prepared for this hike by printing out pages of text to read in the evenings when my legs wouldn't cooperate after 15 miles of walking up and down the steep (so steep) terrain along the John Day River. I had information on geology, history, public lands, and even a little poetry. I wanted bits of inspiration and intrigue to help me understand the place I was walking through. I wanted information that would help illustrate why the John Day River basin was so important, and places like Sutton Mountain, so unique.

And what did I learn?

Geologically speaking, I had to imagine myself standing here millions of years ago when this landscape was being buried by ash, lava, and volcanic mud, solidifying and preserving ancient plants and animals.

Ecologically speaking, I learned that Sutton Mountain was the nexus of important migration patterns of elegant creatures like the Rocky Mountain elk, sleek pronghorn antelope, and the nimble mule deer. Above, equally intricate patterns emerge from winged fauna drafting in the air currents; golden eagles and ferruginous hawks soar, while sage sparrows and red-naped sapsuckers flit in the wooded brush below.

Culturally speaking, I was walking through the original homelands of the Warm Springs Tribes and the Northern Paiute peoples, homelands that probably appeared much as they did thousands of years ago, for this area, in particular Sutton Mountain, hasn't been disrupted by extractive industries, expansive development, or intrusive management. Sutton Mountain is as it has been, and that is why permanent protection for this area is so important: so it stays that way.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors travel to the Painted Hills National Monument just across the road from Sutton Mountain. In fact, the iconic painted hills don't end at the monument's boundary. If we step back into the imagination machine when I watched layers of ash and basalt build into the hulking ridgeline of Sutton Mountain, those compounding layers

would also resemble the colorful neighbor across the street, as the lower reaches of the mountain continue to reveal.

If visitors turned around to consider Sutton Mountain as their next destination, they would find more than just a stunning backdrop, they would find secluded valleys, rolling grassy hills, and outcrops of impressive volcanic rock... all the things I love to explore on a hiking trip into this special area. But without more consideration and planning, it is easy to imagine the destruction that unmanaged recreation or devel-



Hikers walking the length of the dramatic Sutton Mountain fault line will sometimes keep company with the clouds, other times with expansive views. *Photo: Renee Patrick*

opment could bring and already has to nearby desert destinations. That is why a thoughtful and inclusive plan to permanently protect Sutton Mountain will be so important. It is through improved conservation management that we can sustain the values that make a hike here today, and in 100 years, so compelling.

I think the wonderful thing about visiting Sutton Mountain is that much is left to the imagination. This is a place prime for following your curiosity as very few established trails will tell you where to go. Instead, you can ramble at will, and if you keep the values of ecological diversity, intact habitats, and respect for cultural, historic, and local communities in mind, recreating with respect and intention can be in harmony with this place and its future.

I invite you to climb up to the rolling grasslands of Sutton Mountain's flank, walk the edge of the dramatic fault, and when you arrive at the 4,700-foot summit, picture what this place will look like in a few hundred years. You won't have to imagine it, it will look like this. ♦

A Decade of Restoration

by Gena Goodman-Campbell, Stewardship Director

Rising from springs in the midst of central Oregon’s sagebrush sea, the South Fork Crooked River winds through the canyons of the South Fork Wilderness Study Area before joining up with other tributaries to form the main stem of the mighty Crooked River.

Although this landscape is known for its rugged desert beauty and abundant fish and wildlife, a century of heavy agricultural use has tested the resiliency of this important ecosystem. ONDA has identified several areas as a priority for restoration and developed a long-term restoration strategy for the South Fork Crooked River to transform a dry and denuded landscape to one with flourishing native plants and abundant cool water supporting productive fish and wildlife habitat.



And, after more than a decade of investment, ONDA is celebrating the completion of an initial phase of the South Fork Crooked River restoration project. Working on this private conservation property, this May ONDA volunteers installed the final 5,500 trees bringing the total streamside trees planted at the site to more than 25,000.

In addition to site-specific ecological benefits, the South Fork Crooked River restoration project was designed to demonstrate to public land managers the recovery potential of streams in the high desert. And, throughout the project ONDA developed a number of innovative planting techniques that make the project a noteworthy, replicable model.

With a focus on strategies that encourage beaver to resume their role as ecosystem engineers, ONDA’s approach features densely planted native trees tapping deep into the water table. ONDA achieved a nearly 100% survival of newly planted trees and more than a foot of growth per month during their first summer – a 400% increase over previous growth rates.



Thanks to ONDA’s advocacy to bring increased restoration investment to the South Fork Crooked River, the Bureau of Land Management has now taken note of this success and recently entered into a multi-year partnership with ONDA to design and implement the restoration of over six miles of the South Fork Crooked River on public lands. This means ONDA’s community of desert supporters can look forward to even more successes along this vital ribbon of life in the high desert for many years to come.

Read more about the project at <https://onda.org/our-approach/restore/south-fork-crooked-river/> ♦

Sage-Grouse: Denizen of the Sagebrush Sea

by Mark Salvo, Conservation Director

As much as we love Oregon's high desert, it can be inhospitable at times. Summers are hot and dry. Winters can be bone chilling. To the casual observer, the landscape might appear sparse and unforgiving.

But for greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), this is home. In fact, the species thrives in healthy sagebrush steppe, perfectly attuned to its hardships wrought by dramatic seasonal changes. Grouse know where to find wet meadows of succulent wildflowers in late summer and flock to tall sagebrush for food and cover in cold, snowy winters.



Displaying male greater sage-grouse. Photo: Tatiana Gettleman

What the species cannot tolerate is habitat loss and the erosion of ecosystem health. Sage-grouse are highly sensitive to disturbance and disruption caused by energy development, crop agriculture, residential development, livestock grazing, invasive species, off-road vehicle use, transmission lines, fencing—the list goes on.

These impacts, further exacerbated by climate change, have had a dramatic effect on sage-grouse populations. The species has suffered an 80

percent decline range-wide since 1965 and a nearly 40 percent decline since 2002. These west-wide trends are also reflected in Oregon where numbers dipped to the lowest ever recorded in 2019.

More must be done to save sage-grouse. With your support, ONDA is pursuing ambitious campaigns to protect millions of acres of public land that encompass some of the most important habitat for the species in Oregon. We have also engaged the Bureau of Land Management in a comprehensive planning process to conserve what remains of sage-grouse habitat, restrict incompatible land use and development and let grouse be grouse! The outcome of these efforts will be critical to the future of this enduring species. ♦



Summertime sunrise in the Owyhee's Succor Canyon. *Photo: Rick Samco*

Big Wins for Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands

A convergence of opportunity driven by decades of ONDA's strategically-crafted and determined advocacy.

by Ryan Houston, Executive Director and Mark Salvo, Conservation Director

ONDA's Owyhee Canyonlands campaign made huge strides this summer.

On June 8, Senator Ron Wyden, joined by Senator Jeff Merkley, introduced a new and improved Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee (CEO) Act in the Senate. This visionary proposal would protect more than 1.1 million acres of Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands as wilderness while also providing for important tribal priorities, supporting improved recreation management and economic development, and

promoting the long-term ecological health of the landscape.

Just eight days later, the Biden administration's Bureau of Land Management (the Bureau) announced protections for more than 417,000 acres of Oregon's most remote and rugged desert wildlands in the Owyhee. This precedential decision, decades in the making, prioritizes protection of wilderness values on more public lands than ever proposed in a single Bureau district in the history of the agency.

We are thrilled by this progress, and the promise of even more protection to come for the quintessential Owyhee Canyonlands.

Senators Wyden and Merkley have now introduced the Malheur CEO Act in the Senate in three out of the last four years, and every iteration is closer to the ultimate version we hope to see enacted. Front and center, the latest legislation would protect deep rugged canyons of the Owyhee River, stunning high country in the Trout Creek and Oregon Canyon mountains, flanks of the Malheur River watershed and endless expanses of rolling sagebrush grasslands across more than a million acres of public lands.

Together, the Bureau's plan and the senators' legislation will protect more than 1.3 million acres of public lands across the region!

This continuity of habitat conservation will be critically important for native species, including the iconic greater sage-grouse, majestic bighorn and stately golden eagle, that depend on vast, connected, healthy ecosystems to thrive. The new plan will prohibit future construction of roads, energy facilities and other industrial development that fragment and degrade habitat, reserving these areas instead for biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, watershed protection and quiet recreation.



Unbelievable stargazing is a hallmark of the Owyhee Canyonlands. In the coming decade, scientists say it may become one of the last places to view the stars of the night sky and the Milky Way in the lower 48 without light pollution. *Photo: John Aylward*

While the underlying drivers of the legislative proposal and the administration's plan are different, they combine to send a clear message that the Owyhee Canyonlands is a local, state and nationally important landscape worthy of the highest levels of conservation and protection. The Bureau's plan grew from decades of ONDA advocacy and litigation that compelled the agency to follow through on mandated management planning, while the Senators' legislative proposal grew from community-based stakeholder conversations. Our elected officials in Congress and the administration have recognized the importance of this landscape, and their efforts boldly and unmistakably reflect their constituent's values and priorities.

While similar in their conservation goals, the Bureau's plan and the senators' legislation are distinct in some important ways. The Bureau's plan is temporary and protects the 417,000 acres for "the life of the plan," likely to be 20 to 30 years. At the end of this period, the Bureau will make a new plan for the next 20 to 30 years.

In contrast, the senators' proposal is permanent. It would protect 1.1 million acres as wilderness forever. As ONDA's goal is to permanently protect more than 2.5 million acres of wildlands in the Owyhee Canyonlands, we will continue championing the legislation to build upon the Bureau's plan and provide lasting protections to the landscape.



Oregon's Owyhee is one of the most wild places in the entire country, where natural conditions prevail and much of the area looks today as it has for millennia. In Leslie Gulch Wilderness Study Area, hike through sandy washes, look for the 200+ bighorn sheep that inhabit the land or soak up a swath of wildflowers in the summer months.

Photo: Hansen Family



A long cherished destination for rafting, hunting, and fishing and a well-known wildlife mecca, the Owyhee Canyonlands deserve the strongest possible conservation protections. *Photo: Jon Muyskens*

This approach will form the basis of ONDA's advocacy strategy through the end of 2024 when this Congress concludes and the Presidential election could change leadership in the White House. ONDA will continue pressing for permanent protections—via legislation as our first priority or via administrative action when necessary—before this critical deadline at the end of next year.

With a plan in the books and a bill introduced in Congress, committed ONDA members and community partners at our side, and support from elected leaders at home and in Washington, D.C., the prognosis for the Owyhee Canyonlands is good and the likelihood of celebrating another big win for the Owyhee is strong. ♦



The Owyhee's diverse geology formed millions of years ago when the land was part of the supervolcano that is now Yellowstone. The landscape features honeycomb-like spires, vast rhyolite domes, deep canyons, caves and more. *Photo: Greg Burke*

OWYHEE CANYONLANDS QUICK FACTS

- The Owyhee River watershed spans more than 11,000 square miles across Oregon, Idaho and Nevada
- Prior to dam construction on the Owyhee and Snake Rivers, migrating salmon traveled up the Owyhee River to spawn in Nevada —the only salmon run ever to reach Nevada!
- The Owyhee Canyonlands is home to Northern Paiute, Shoshone and Bannock tribes.

Species Spotlight: Pygmy Rabbit

by Scott Bowler,
ONDA Volunteer

“Oooh! Cute Bunny!” It seems like every little critter gets the “cute” label nowadays, but the pygmy rabbit actually *is* a darn cute little critter. Emphasis on little, as they’re the second smallest of the Lagomorph clan after the pika, a group that also includes rabbits and hares.

Pygmy rabbits (*Brachylagus idahoensis*), meaning “short rabbit first identified and found in Idaho,” are our smallest rabbit, after the three larger native and introduced cottontail species and the brush rabbits of North America. While they are obviously a rabbit, they’re only about as big as a grapefruit and weigh about a quarter to a half pound. They’re a dull tan color, have very small ears, and sport a tiny tail, suiting them to their desert environment and underground living quarters. While they do *look* like a cottontail, those guys are a good bit bigger with longer white rimmed ears and larger, whiter tails—and are much more common. Chances are that you are usually seeing cottontails in the high desert unless you spot the pygmy’s key characteristics.



Pygmy rabbits are the only rabbits in North America that dig their own burrows—a sign to look for in the field. Photo: Peter Lancaster

Pygmys are a sagebrush obligate critter, meaning they are dependent upon the plant for both food and shelter, and are thus only found in healthy sagebrush communities in the Great Basin and beyond. Unlike pika, they do not store food and must forage every day. Interestingly, pygmys sometimes even climb up into a sagebrush—well off the ground—which is why the first one I saw startled me, since it was about 3 feet high!

Pygmy rabbits also dig their burrows in sagebrush stands and are, in fact, the only rabbit in North America that digs its own burrow. You’re most likely to find them in the least disturbed areas with moderate sagebrush cover, plenty of undergrowth, and with deeper and looser soils to burrow into.

These rabbits have a shorter gestation and breeding season than most other *Lagomorphs* and time birth with the likely emergence of new spring growth, so exactly when they do so is keyed to their habitat: in higher and colder areas babies will arrive later in the spring than in warmer lowlands. And since they can have up to three litters of as many as six babies a year, they do indeed breed like rabbits.

Their rapid reproduction might be key to pygmy rabbit survival. The species is threatened by both predation and habitat loss. They fall prey to a variety of predators: coyote, weasels, and owls primarily; fox and hawks less so. Meanwhile, wildfire, climate change and development pressures limit their habitat. Both federal and state agencies have identified pygmy rabbit as a species of conservation concern.

ONDA’s conservation efforts throughout the high desert, and particularly in the Greater Hart-Sheldon, offer hope for this cute, and iconic, desert species. Learn more at www.onda.org/core-pygmy-rabbit-habitat. ♦

UPCOMING EVENTS

For all details and our full list of events, visit [ONDA.org/events](https://onda.org/events)



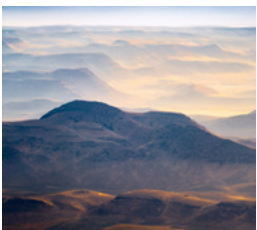
Wild & Scenic Film Festival

Friday, September 29, 2023

6:00 P.M.

Tower Theatre, Bend and streaming online

Enjoy an evening of short films showcasing our earth's natural wonders and the stories of activists working to conserve the environment. There will be an in-person show at the Tower Theatre in Bend, OR as well as a virtual version streamed online.



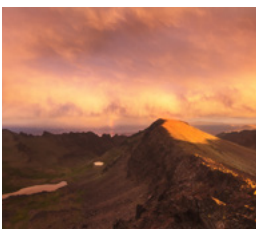
Wild Desert Calendar Party and Online Gallery Premiere

Friday, November 3, 2023

5:00 P.M.

Barrel Room at Immersion Brewing, Bend and online

Gather in Bend to meet the photographers behind the 2024 edition of our Wild Desert Calendar and admire great high desert photography alongside fellow conservation advocates, or enjoy our online gallery.



High Desert Hootenanny

Friday, November 3 | 5:00 P.M.

KEEN Garage, Portland

Friday, December 8 | 5:00 P.M.

Aspen Hall, Bend

Join our annual celebration of desert conservation! Raise a glass to the wonders of Oregon's high desert and conservation successes of 2023. Hear highlights from this year's habitat restoration, advocacy and community-building initiatives and learn about what's to come in the year ahead.

Photos: Event 1 – Brent McGregor, Event 2 – Scott Smorra, Event 3 – Jamey Pyles



MEET CHARLENE HISS

When Charlene Hiss first crossed through southeastern Oregon, she wasn't sure the hot and at times unforgiving sagebrush sea was for her. But, the high desert piqued her curiosity, leading her to ONDA in hopes of learning how to best explore the wonders of this remarkable landscape.

Years later, Charlene is now a dedicated member and stewardship volunteer who has helped with everything from trail maintenance to riparian restoration and independent stewardship projects. Charlene regularly ventures with her husband from their home in Vancouver, WA to Oregon's high desert for camping and hiking, and this year they were thrilled to finally have the opportunity to raft the Owyhee River.

When asked why she enjoys donating to support desert conservation and being part of the ONDA community, Charlene effused, "I like ONDA's balance of advocacy, education and stewardship. The staff are great. The volunteers I have met on stewardship trips have been hardworking and openhearted, with interesting and diverse life experiences and knowledge. On those trips, I have heard a lot of great stories, learned new things, and experienced the satisfaction of seeing how a small group of people can change the world one little bit at a time." ♦

To make a monthly commitment to high desert conservation and restoration, visit [ONDA.org/givemonthly](https://onda.org/givemonthly).

WARM WELCOMES & FOND THANK-YOUS



This February, we welcomed **Carrie Bowden** as our new Finance and Operations Manager, bringing with her not only a passion for Oregon's high desert, but over 25 years of experience as a finance professional

at a large investment bank. Her career took her from New York as a sales trader, to central Illinois as a financial advisor and business manager, to Bend where she moved into a management role covering a large market in the Pacific Northwest. Her connection to the outdoors has led her on many adventures with her feisty pint sized pup, Buddy, who you may see basking in a window around the office.



In March, **Renee Schiavone** stepped into the role of Communications Manager. She comes with experience in both the communications and environmental sectors, serving as a copywriter for a

large New York advertising agency and later a writer for environmental brands and organizations. She's been the voice of national brands and has worked on campaigns for organizations such as Surfrider Foundation and the United Nations. Renee is passionate about connecting people with the public lands found in Oregon's high desert.

In June, **Haley Tobiason** joined us as our summer 2023 Hillis Intern. Supporting long-term monitoring efforts and informing legislative and administrative policies surrounding Lake Abert, Haley spent her summer surveying and recording bird use alongside two expert ornithologists. Prior to joining ONDA, Haley graduated from California Polytechnic University in June with a B.S. in Environmental Management and Protection and a minor in Biology. We thank her for a summer of impactful work and wish her luck on her next endeavor!

We wished a fond farewell to **Joanna Zhang**, our Wildlife Coordinator, in March. While managing our wildlife conservation portfolio, she also played key roles in our desert Wild and Scenic Rivers and Sutton Mountain protection campaigns. We are cheering for her continued success in her next career pursuit in the desert Southwest. Come July, we also said goodbye to **Beth Macinko** after three and a half years engaging and leading volunteers on stewardship and restoration projects. As our stewardship coordinator, Beth connected hundreds of volunteers directly to the high desert, leading trips and coordinating independent steward projects that will have a lasting positive impact on desert habitat. We offer our best wishes to Beth and her family on their next adventure in Washington!

Additionally, we recently welcomed **Steve Kallick** and **Terry Butler** to our board of directors, and said thank you and goodbye to longtime board member and former Vice President **Bob DenOuden**.

To be the first to hear when we have open positions, tune into our e-newsletters or check out [ONDA.org/careers](https://onda.org/careers). If you are interested in volunteering with ONDA, check out [ONDA.org/volunteer](https://onda.org/volunteer). ♦

GROW YOUR SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATION



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VOLUNTEER

View the Solar Eclipse from the High Desert

by Renee Schiavone, *Communications Manager*



Photo: Jongsun-lee, Unsplash

TRIP DETAILS

Where to View: Within the Oregon high desert, the annular eclipse path will include Summer Lake, Lake Abert, Greater Hart-Sheldon, Pueblo Mountains WSA, parts of the Alvord Desert, and the McDermitt Caldera.

When to View: In the U.S., the first landfall of the annular solar eclipse will be at Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area at 9:15A.M. PST, moving over parts of southeastern Oregon between approximately 9:20A.M. and 9:24A.M. The eclipse will be at maximum annularity in Summer Lake and Lake Abert at approximately 9:20A.M., reaching the Greater Hart-Sheldon at approximately 9:21A.M., then passing over the Pueblo Mountains WSA and southern parts of Alvord Desert towards Fields at approximately 9:22A.M., and finally crossing over McDermitt Caldera at approximately 9:23A.M.

Among the diverse geology, arid climate, and abundant plants and wildlife that make the high desert a unique landscape, it's the clear, unobstructed skies that tend to live the most vividly in our memories.

Lucky for Oregon's desert lovers, this fall we have a special show coming to our favorite skies. On **Saturday October 14, 2023**, the annular solar eclipse will cross North America with its path traversing across southeastern Oregon. One of four types of solar eclipses, the annular solar eclipse is a product of the moon passing between the sun and Earth, at a point when the moon is farthest from Earth. As it's farther away, it appears smaller than the sun and does not completely cover it, displaying a ring of light around a dark disk.

The sun is never completely blocked by the moon during an annular solar eclipse, so it's important to note it's never safe to look directly at the sun without specialized eye protection designed for solar viewing. Additionally, viewing any part of the bright sun through a camera lens, binoculars or a telescope without a special-purpose solar filter secured over the

front of the optics will instantly cause severe eye injury. To safely view the eclipse, look through safe solar viewing glasses or a solar camera filter. ♦

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



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Photo: © Chad Case

Protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert since 1987. Learn more at [ONDA.org](https://onda.org).