

OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

# DESERT RAMBLINGS

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## OREGON'S SAGEBRUSH SPECIES

The high desert is teeming with a diversity of wildlife, including species that are found nowhere else on the planet.





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Backdrop: Antelope Bitterbrush  
Photo: Matt Lavin

## OVERHEARD

“Wild places such as the high desert can teach us about humility and reverence in the face of complex geological, ecological, and cultural systems and help safeguard our planet’s natural bounty in the face of increasing population growth, climate change and uncertain societal transformation.”

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## IN THIS ISSUE

LAND USE PLAN IN  
SOUTHEASTERN OREGON  
Securing historic wildlands protections.  
PAGE 4

REVISITING PINE CREEK  
CONSERVATION AREA  
Bringing new restoration methods to a  
cherished landscape.  
PAGE 5

OREGON’S BEST  
CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY  
After three decades of advocacy, it’s our year  
to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands.  
PAGE 6

OREGON’S SAGEBRUSH  
SPECIES  
The high desert is teeming with a diversity  
of wildlife, including species that are  
found nowhere else on the planet.  
PAGE 8

LAHONTAN CUTTHROAT TROUT  
Paragon of adaptation and legacy  
of the Pleistocene.  
PAGE 12

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## READ MORE AT ONDA.ORG

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT: BEAVERS  
WHERE TO: DESERT HOT SPRINGS  
HOW TO: PLAN A TRIP TO THE OWYHEE

Cover: Early spring, sage-grouse congregate at  
“leks” for breeding activity. Photo: Shannon Phifer



Morning light on the lower Owyhee River. Photo: Alan Majchrowicz

Dear Oregon desert advocate,

As the high desert's subdued winter palette awakens into the vibrant hues of spring, we are looking forward to an incredible year of conservation advocacy and restoration spanning from the John Day River to the Owyhee Canyonlands.

Within this issue of Desert Ramblings, we are pleased to share stories about an enduring restoration partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the history of the iconic Lahontan cut-throat trout, and an in-depth look at the wildlife that depends on Oregon's high desert. We are also particularly proud of the historic conservation in the Owyhee Canyonlands, in which we secured nearly 420,000 acres of new landscape protections after twenty years of advocacy.

You know the Owyhee as a grand landscape replete with geologic wonder, breathtaking beauty, rich biodiversity, deep cultural history and some of the best intact habitat and the darkest night skies. Oregon's Owyhee is indeed all of these things, and now it's also in the history books for yet another reason: following more than two decades of methodically working through a byzantine bureaucratic and legal labyrinth, the federal government's decision to protect vast expanses of habitat reflects the largest area ever protected by the BLM in its 78-year history managing public lands. Yes, you heard that right—largest area ever.

Hard-earned wins like this remind us that durable conservation comes through persistence, patience and the discipline of developing and following a long-term strategy. Your support—as a volunteer, donor, member, advocate—is a critically important part of this. You give ONDA the ability to pursue long-term endeavors that bring meaningful, lasting, impactful conservation to all of the incredible, conservation-worthy corners of Oregon's high desert.

The progress we've seen recently sets us up well to secure even more deserving protections for the Owyhee Canyonlands in 2024 as we continue pushing our leaders in Congress and the White House to act decisively to establish permanent protections across more than a million acres.

*This is a big year, and we're glad to have you along.* Thank you for your enduring support for protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert.

For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston  
Executive Director



# Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan

ONDA secures historic wildlands protection in federal land use plan.

by Mac Lacy, Senior Attorney

In a momentous decision, the Bureau of Land Management has adopted a plan to protect almost 420,000 acres of wildlands in the Owyhee Canyonlands. As part of a long awaited update to the Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan, which charts future management of 4.6 million acres of desert public lands, the agency chose to prioritize preservation of wilderness values across a critical swath of wildlands in the farthest corner of the state.

This is the largest amount of agency-protected acreage provided in any land use plan ever issued by BLM. As detailed in the new plan, the agency will preserve wilderness values on these public lands first and foremost, restricting development, off-road vehicle travel and other uses that could degrade these qualities.



Leslie Gulch. Photo: Alan Majchrowicz

The newly protected lands include remote corners of the Sheepshead and Trout Creek mountains and vast expanses of native sagebrush that bestride the iconic Owyhee Wild and Scenic Rivers. These wildlands provide intact habitat for hundreds of species, essential for maintaining biodiversity, mitigating climate change effects and supporting sustainable economies.

This milestone decision was a long time coming. The planning process began in 1995, wound its way to and from federal court several times, and finally produced a plan that formally recognizes 1.3 million acres of wilderness-quality public lands identified by ONDA staff and volunteers—one-third of which are now prioritized for wilderness protection. The new plan will be a model for how to protect public wildlands across the West. ♦

# Revisiting Pine Creek Conservation Area

Bringing new restoration methods to a cherished landscape.

by Gena Goodman-Campbell, Stewardship Director

In 2023, Oregon Natural Desert Association returned to Pine Creek Conservation Area after a three-year absence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing volunteers back to one of ONDA's most cherished and longstanding stewardship trip locations.

Located in the Lower John Day River Basin, the 34,331-acre Conservation Area is owned by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and managed for the benefit of fish and wildlife. Pine Creek is designated as critical habitat for steelhead, and the surrounding rugged uplands are home to a diversity of birds, animals and native plants, including plant foods and medicines that hold cultural significance to indigenous communities.

ONDA has partnered with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs for over two decades on a variety of restoration projects that have achieved many conservation gains, including removing more than 82 miles of derelict barbed wire fencing, planting tens of thousands of trees and taking steps to promote the recovery of steelhead habitat on Pine Creek.

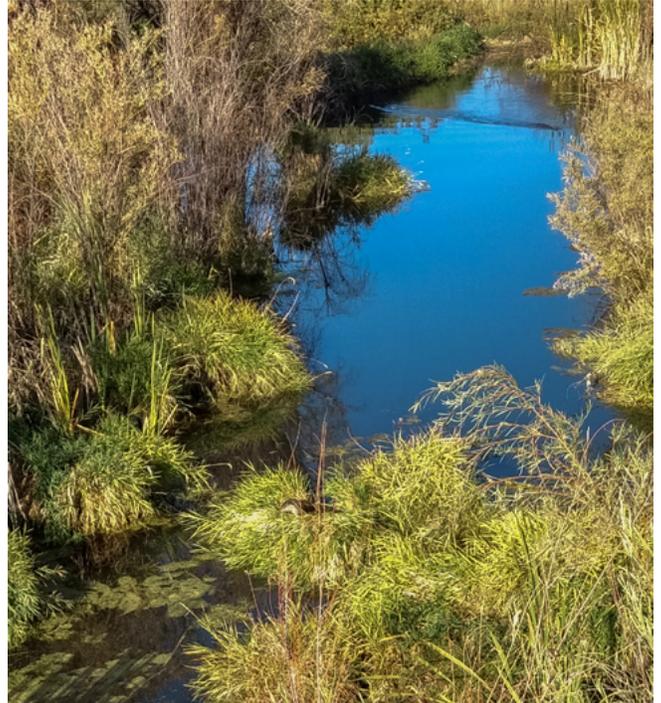
Pine Creek Conservation Area has also provided an important testing ground for ONDA and the Tribes to innovate new techniques to restore cool, clear and abundant waters that support a diverse array of fish and wildlife. These actions have enhanced climate resiliency throughout the Pine Creek watershed by supporting the recovery of thriving populations of beaver, whose dams lead to the formation of wetlands that soak up water like a sponge, storing it and keeping it cool into the dry summer months.

The success of these restoration efforts is readily apparent as one drives along Pine Creek on Highway 218, where beaver ponds teeming with life glimmer in the desert sun and willow thickets and towering cottonwoods obscure the creek in many places that just decades ago lacked any vegetation.

Now, ONDA is partnering with the Tribes on two exciting new projects in the area. Volunteers will have opportunities to restore the small, spring-fed streams that are the lifeblood of the Pine Creek ecosystem. And, we'll soon be launching a large, watershed-scale restoration project on Robinson Creek, the largest tributary of Pine Creek, that is slated to begin in 2025 and will restore three miles of historic steelhead habitat and bolster climate resiliency.

ONDA will also be working with the Tribes to incorporate the unique and valuable knowledge held by tribal members about the ecosystem and its stewardship, termed Traditional Ecological Knowledge, into our projects at Pine Creek.

ONDA is looking forward to continuing to deepen our partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and providing our members with new ways to care for and sustain this naturally and culturally rich landscape. ♦



Otter in a beaver pond at Pine Creek. Photo: Mark Darnell



The deep and rugged Owyhee Canyon. *Photo: Nate Wilson*

## Oregon's Best Conservation Opportunity

After three decades of advocacy, this is our year to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands.

by Mark Salvo, Conservation Director

Nothing worthwhile ever happens quickly or easily.

I was reminded of this recently when I received an envelope on my desk, sent from a longtime ONDA member. Inside was a mint-condition 1992 edition of this very newsletter, along with a note that included the reminder, "You have come a long way as an organization! Thank you for all the good work!"

As I flipped through the once-news stories and calls for advocacy, I saw before me numerous success stories and answered actions. Those who have followed along with ONDA know that conservation work does not happen quickly nor easily. But even if it takes years or decades, the impact of your advocacy is something that will be looked back on, and appreciated, forever.

ONDA's Owyhee Canyonlands campaign, aiming to protect more than a million acres of southeastern Oregon's iconic national treasure, has arrived at a pivotal moment.

After more than thirty years of advocating for protection for Oregon's Owyhee, the last four years representing conservation interests in efforts to secure

wilderness designation for the landscape, and the last twelve months launching a national monument campaign, ONDA and our community are on the precipice of forever protecting this remote and irreplaceable landscape.

Today, we've arrived at our next best conservation opportunity, and we could not be more excited about the possibilities ahead.

### **Where are we today?**

We have not one but two opportunities to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands this year, beginning with Senator Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley's proposal, the "Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act." First introduced in the Senate in 2019, every new iteration of this bill has been better than the last. The most recent version was passed with bipartisan support by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, the farthest a bill to protect the Owyhee has ever progressed in Congress.

The Malheur CEO Act includes three primary components:

- Designates more than 1.1 million acres of wilderness in the Owyhee Canyonlands—adding by nearly 50 percent the total acres of wilderness protected statewide in Oregon.
- Transfers 30,000 acres of land into trust for the Burns Paiute Tribe and creates tribal co-stewardship opportunities on adjacent public lands.
- Establishes a flexible, adaptive, science-based grazing management and monitoring program designed to improve the ecological health of public lands on 4.5 million acres in southeastern Oregon.

Senators Wyden and Merkley are to be congratulated for navigating the challenges of developing and advancing this bill in the Senate. And with your sustained advocacy, we'll get this effort to the finish line and protect the deep, rugged canyons, rolling sagebrush plains and stunning rivers of Oregon's Owyhee.

This effort is a testament to the importance of protecting the Owyhee as conservationists, the Burns Paiute Tribe, ranchers and many others have all come together to protect more than a million acres of public lands.

### **What else can we do?**

While we will continue to advocate for Senator Wyden and Merkley's wilderness legislation, we are simultaneously pursuing a second option to permanently protect the Owyhee in the event that Congress cannot pass the bill: a presidentially proclaimed Owyhee Canyonlands National Monument.

Presidents are authorized to declare national monuments on public lands and waters to conserve "objects of historic or scientific interest" for current and future generations. Eighteen presidents—including nine Republican and nine Democrat—have used this power over the past 100 years to protect deserving areas.

No landscape is better qualified for monument designation than the Owyhee, a region rich in ecological, cultural, historic, geological, archaeological and even paleontological resources. And if that isn't enough, Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands also preserve some of the darkest night skies in the lower 48 states. Add astronomical marvels to the long list of Owyhee values deserving of presidential protection.

ONDA is excited to lead a huge coalition of organizations representing millions of people from

across the United States that have convened in recognition of both the need and opportunity to designate an Owyhee Canyonlands National Monument. Launched in September 2023, the Protect the Owyhee Canyonlands Campaign is working alongside tribal advocates, sporting enthusiasts, artists, businesses and local residents to promote the landscape for monument designation.

The national monument campaign is primed for success as conservation advocates continue calling on President Biden to take action on the Owyhee. Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands couldn't be more deserving of this national attention.



Rolling hills and distinctive rocks of the Owyhee. Photo: Alan Majchrowicz

### **What comes next?**

While there are a few differences between these two approaches, both would permanently protect more than 1 million acres of desert wildlands in the Owyhee, and the abundant fish and wildlife, cultural resources and outstanding recreational opportunities found there. Importantly, both approaches would stave off mounting threats that put the Owyhee's exceptional values at risk.

Looking back at our 1992 Desert Ramblings newsletter on my desk, I see what we've accomplished in more than 30 years since then. At the time of that publication, I'm not sure we knew the impact we'd have on high desert conservation. When the time comes for us to look back on the Owyhee Canyonlands campaign—be it 10, 20, or 30 years from now—I imagine a scenario in which we recount the successes and achievements this tenacious community of desert conservation advocates were able to accomplish.

To get there, every action matters in our Owyhee Canyonlands campaign. Thank you for your sustained advocacy and calls for protecting this iconic landscape. Public support, demonstrated in a multitude of ways, will get the job done.

Now is the time for Oregon's Owyhee. Please visit [onda.org/take-action](https://onda.org/take-action) to become involved! ♦



# Oregon's Sagebrush Species

The high desert is teeming with a diversity of wildlife, including species that are found nowhere else on the planet.

by Renee Schiavone, Communications Manager

Oregon's high desert is a landscape filled with dramatic contrasts and surprising subtlety. Poetically dubbed the "Sagebrush Sea," the signature shrub dominates the region. With dry conditions year round, summers are intensely hot and winters bitterly cold. Wildlife certainly don't have an easy time of it. And yet, an astonishing abundance of life thrives here.

Living in the Sagebrush Sea, with all its variations in elevation, temperature and precipitation, requires unique adaptations of its inhabitants. Native vegetation can survive on less than 12 inches of rain per year, with big sagebrush and rabbitbrush flourishing throughout the

region, as well as Oregon's oldest known tree, the western juniper. Wildflowers and waving bunchgrasses fill the understory, and lichens and moss cling to every possible surface. It is within this ecosystem that hundreds of birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and insects flourish. Often shy and reclusive, those who are patient will be rewarded as these creatures reveal themselves, including species found nowhere else in the world.

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## ***Desert Fish and Wildlife***

Here are just some of the fish and wildlife you can expect to see in Oregon's high desert throughout the year.

Male sage grouse fan their tails into a starburst when displaying—an act of both defense and mating.  
*Photo: Shannon-Phifer*



### **Large Desert Mammals**

Mule deer, pronghorn, coyotes, American badgers and both black- and white-tailed jackrabbits are commonly seen in Oregon's high desert. Elk, bighorn sheep, bobcats, mountain lions, red foxes, North American porcupines and North American beavers are also found in some parts of the region.

### **Small Desert Mammals**

Smaller desert mammals include long-tailed weasels, woodchucks, cottontail rabbits, pygmy rabbits, pika, golden-mantled ground squirrels, antelope squirrels, Townsend's chipmunk, yellow-pine chipmunks, Ord's kan-

garoo rats and northern pocket gophers. Mice species include desert woodrat, northern grasshopper mouse, western harvest mouse, deer mouse, meadow mouse, sagebrush vole and creeping vole. There are also numerous bat species that depend on the high desert.

### **Diverse Desert Birds**

The high desert supports a remarkable diversity of birdlife. Iconic and well-known species include greater sage-grouse, golden eagle and sage thrasher. High desert lakes, streams and wetlands support American dusky flycatchers, yellow warblers, orange-crowned warblers, house wrens, spotted towhees, Brewer's sparrow, sagebrush sparrow, western meadowlarks, swallows and nighthawks. Mountain chickadees, Cassin's finches, black-headed grosbeaks, green-tailed towhees, yellow-rumped warblers, MacGillivray's warblers, mountain bluebirds, common ravens, northern flickers and white-headed woodpeckers are common in parts of the region.

Owls are essential to functioning desert ecosystems, ranging from tiny burrowing owls to grandiose great horned owls. At least fifteen species of eagles, hawks and falcons can also be found soaring over the desert or darting across the landscape, including merlin, American kestrels, Cooper's hawk and northern goshawk.

### **Spectacular Desert Fish**

It might be surprising to learn that Oregon's high desert is home to myriad fish species, including threatened populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout, bull trout, Hutton tui chub, Warner sucker and steelhead. Many of these fish evolved from populations that became isolated in lakes and drainages throughout the high desert over millennia. Absent of dams and among the longest free-flowing rivers in the nation, the John Day River and its tributaries are a stronghold for desert fish, including steelhead, Chinook salmon, bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout and interior redband trout.

### **Resplendent Desert Reptiles**

Often forgotten are the most mysterious desert critters—our reptiles and amphibians. Keep your eyes out for sagebrush lizards, Great Basin collard lizards, side-blotched lizards, western rattlesnake and western toad throughout the high desert.

### **Essential Desert Insects**

Often maligned, insects and other invertebrates are vital, fascinating and deserving of their own article. They pollinate plants, control pests, cycle nutrients and serve as food for a vast array of fish and wildlife. One survey found more than 1,240 species of insects in just one swath of sagebrush habitat in Idaho.

## Wildlife Conservation

Among the remarkably broad range of species that live in Oregon's Sagebrush Sea are a distinct batch of wildlife that would not exist without sagebrush habitats. Known as "sagebrush obligates," they are both dependent upon and serve as indicators of the health of the high desert where they live. Classic sagebrush obligates include greater sage-grouse, pronghorn and pygmy rabbit. These animals can only thrive in a healthy sagebrush steppe ecosystem, so protecting and restoring these habitats is the only way to sustain populations of these critters.



GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

An iconic species native to Oregon's high desert, the greater sage-grouse thrives in healthy sagebrush steppe. This charismatic ambassador of the Sagebrush Sea, known

for its elaborate mating displays, is a favorite for wildlife watchers in Oregon and from around the world. Unfortunately, the species has suffered an 80 percent decline range-wide since 1965. In Oregon, numbers dipped to the lowest ever recorded in 2019.

Within the thousands of square miles of sagebrush habitats in eastern Oregon are rare and unique environments that support species that specialize in those habitat niches. For example, more than 80 species of migratory waterbirds flock to Lake Abert every year, while most other wildlife have no use for the hyper-saline lake. California bighorn sheep, specially adapted to mountain cliffs and river canyons, rarely descend from their protected ridgelines, content to feed and raise their young out of reach of predators.

Fragile desert lands and waters face increasing threats from climate change, development and other human uses, invasive species and wildfire. Habitat loss and fragmentation upset the delicate balance of life in this landscape.



PYGMY RABBIT

North America's smallest rabbit species, pygmy rabbit weigh a quarter to half pound and measure about the size of a grapefruit. Pygmy rabbits depend on sagebrush for food and shelter. Despite their small size, pygmies dig their own burrows, typically at the base of a sagebrush shrub. Reduced sagebrush habitats threatens pygmy rabbit populations. The species was recently petitioned for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act.

These pressures limit habitat and erode healthy ecosystems desert wildlife need to survive. The region's wetlands provide habitat for the greatest diversity of species. And yet, these areas are among the most threatened. Consequently, both rare and once common species that depend on these resources are now declining.

ONDA's landscape-scale conservation strategies, engagement in desert planning and policymaking, and restoration projects offer a solution.

For key species like beavers and redband trout, healthy desert rivers and streams foster life.



PRONGHORN

Unique to North America, pronghorn are found throughout the open plains and grasslands of the Sagebrush Sea. Undisputedly the fastest mammal on the continent, pronghorn adapted long ago to outrun the now-extinct American cheetah. Pronghorn almost followed the way of the American cheetah, declining to as few as 10,000 to 15,000 individuals in the early 20th century. Decades of conservation efforts have saved the pronghorn, though the species will require continued attention into the future.

Unique to high desert streams, redband trout have adapted to flourish in arid landscapes, developing a greater tolerance for high water temperatures and lower dissolved oxygen levels than most other trout. Still, the species needs abundant, cool water characteristic of healthy streams to survive long-term. Unfortunately, redband trout populations are struggling across large parts of the desert due to diminished streamflow and habitat loss.



REDBAND TROUT

ONDA's efforts to bolster native plants beavers use for food and shelter are happily increasing the species' once-declining range again. This population uptick puts beavers back to work restoring desert creeks and rivers which in turn improves habitat for fish, such as the redband trout.

ONDA has developed our Desert Wildlife conservation campaign to make the most of an unprecedented opportunity now before us. To ensure a future for these magnificent fish and wildlife and the habitats they need, ONDA is advocating for wildlife protections along with improved land management,

Serving as nature's ecosystem engineers, beavers are invaluable streamside habitat developers, playing a vital role in the health and resilience of desert waterways, to the benefit of fish, other wildlife and a huge diversity of desert plants. Heavy trapping in the era of European settlement nearly eliminated beavers from the high desert. Fortunately, their populations are beginning to stabilize and special efforts are underway to restore beavers to desert waterways in need of their ecosystem services.



BEAVER

preservation of wildlands, regulation of recreational opportunities and other steps. This will include investing in efforts to shape several state and federal wildlife plans that will identify and protect key wildlife habitats and migration corridors. And efforts like our Owyhee Canyonlands campaign, an initiative to protect than 1 million acres of desert land, offer even more opportunities to support Oregon desert wildlife.

Once ranging far and wide in the West, the California subspecies of bighorn was reintroduced and continues to make their home in Oregon's high desert—though finding them is certainly a challenge. They favor rocky ridges and river canyons in some of the most remote corners of the region. In the 1800s, nearly all populations in North America were wiped out, primarily due to unregulated hunting. Today, California bighorn sheep, now numbering 4,000 statewide, are closely managed and monitored.



CALIFORNIA BIGHORN SHEEP

## Advocacy

Each of ONDA's primary programs works to ensure that these fragile species and the ecosystems they depend on for survival are protected.

There are several ways we as individuals can aid in providing healthy homes for diverse populations of fish and wildlife. For starters, consider getting out in the desert to give it some care. Taking part in a stewardship trip is one way to improve the health of the desert in a hands-on way. For a longer lasting impact, engaging in advocacy actions is a way to speak up for the lands and wildlife you love by encouraging lawmakers to take permanent action to protect the high desert. ♦

*Photo Credits: Pygmy Rabbit – Peter Lancaster, Greater Sage-Grouse – Chris Christie, Pronghorn – Tara Lemezis, California Bighorn Sheep – Shannon Phifer, Beaver – Michael S. Quinton*

# Species Spotlight: Lahontan Cutthroat Trout

Paragon of adaptation and legacy of the Pleistocene

by Scott Bowler, ONDA Volunteer



Lahontan cutthroat trout. Photo: USFWS

Cutthroat trout, *Oncorhynchus clarkii ssp.*, are the most widespread species of the Salmonidae family in western North America. Populations occur from southern Alaska to northern California, on both sides of the Continental Divide, and throughout the Great Basin—an area close to 210,000 square miles and one of the driest, yet most diverse, landscapes in the United States.

During Pleistocene times, an era over 12,000 years ago known as the last Ice Age, the environment was vastly different in the Great Basin. This was a period categorized by water and ice, with massive rain-fed lakes covering about 25% of the area, including some in Oregon. Lake Bonneville, covering some 20,000 square miles (close to the size of present-day Lake Michigan) was the largest, while Lake Lahontan covered an impressive 8,500 square miles. It is in Lake Lahontan and its connected waters that *Oncorhynchus clarkii henshawi*, Lahontan cutthroat trout, evolved.

Lahontan cutthroat trout developed to huge sizes there—up to 42 inches and 50 pounds—spawning in its many tributaries and feeding on abundant prey. Indigenous people in the area relied heavily on Lahontan cutthroat trout and their prey species, the Tui chub. The sustainable fishery annually produced an estimated one million pounds of fish.

Beginning in the early 1800s, human activities and other factors began to take a toll on Great Basin fish. The climate warmed and dried, and waters evaporated and became more alkaline. Habitats shrank and fragmented. As a response, isolated populations of fish adapted into the many species, sub-species, varieties and strains that occur today.

Climate change, overfishing, dams, over-allocated water, development and other factors eventually led to an early listing of Lahontan cutthroat trout as a federally “endangered” species. This status was later modified to “threatened” to accommodate management options. Today, only 10% of the trout’s original habitat range remains.

Lahontan cutthroat trout are a truly adaptable fish, responding to dramatic differences in water salinity, temperature, human-caused disturbances and sheer loss of habitat. Today, there are scattered populations of the stream-dwelling varieties occurring in suitable habitat remaining in the Great Basin. These riverine fish are, in response to challenging conditions, much smaller than the lake variety, maturing at 6-12 inches and about one pound. In eastern Oregon, some populations are established in their ancestral Alvord Lake basin, in streams draining from Steens Mountain and Pueblo Mountains, as well as in several streams flowing from the Trout Creek and Oregon Canyon mountains. There are also populations in streams in and around the McDermitt Caldera along the Oregon/ Nevada border.

If the McDermitt Caldera rings a bell, that’s because it’s been in the news lately as a potential source of critical minerals, especially lithium. During the aforementioned Pleistocene times, the caldera was filled with a large shallow lake. Today, only a few isolated streams flow down from the highlands into the basin, in some cases drying up as they reach the lowest level of the caldera. The few miles of stream that do remain contain some highly adaptable, and quite important, remnant populations of Lahontan cutthroat trout. These fish already live a very precarious existence and the proposed development in the Caldera add new complications, and serious threats, for the fish.

Someone famous once remarked that when tinkering with anything, it’s best to save all the pieces. *Oncorhynchus clarkii henshawi* have proven themselves to be tough, adaptable survivors for many millennia—but they need viable habitat to persist. It’s up to us to save the pieces. ♦

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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

### High Desert Speaker Series

The Speaker Series fosters a deeper understanding of ecology, encourages well-informed exploration of the high desert and promotes collaborative cross-cultural practices that conserve eastern Oregon. Join us at these engaging events in Bend and in Portland.



#### **Cultivating Partnerships: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Science in Land Stewardship**

March 19, 7–8 P.M. | \$15

Tower Theater, Bend

March 20, 7–8 P.M. | \$10

Hollywood Theater, Portland

Experience an enlightening evening with Dr. Cristina Eisenberg as she delves into ecocultural restoration and the fusion of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western Science in land stewardship. ONDA Stewardship Director Gena Goodman-Campbell will explore current organizational initiatives to restore Oregon's high desert and foster partnerships with the region's tribes.



#### **Tracing Geological History Through Rocks and Minerals in Oregon's Desert**

April 11, 7–8 P.M. | \$10

Hollywood Theater, Portland

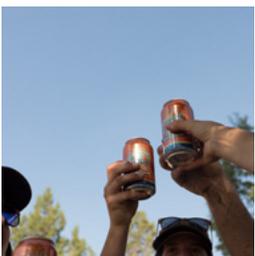
April 18, 7–8 P.M. | \$15

Tower Theater, Bend

Wrapping up ONDA's 2024 Speaker Series, immerse yourself in the world of Oregon's desert rocks and minerals as Alison Jean Cole explores the region's geological history through rock collecting in balance with conservation.

### Sagebrush Sippers

Save the date! Join fellow ONDA members, staff and supporters for these free, casual summer celebrations of the dedicated community who supports high desert conservation. More details to come.



June 12, 5-7 P.M. | Bend

June 26, 5-7 P.M. | Portland

September 10, 5-7 P.M. | Eugene



Photo: Jim Harrison

### MEET JIM HARRISON

#### **A Dedication to Restoration and Ecosystem Health**

Jim Harrison discovered ONDA while seeking restoration trip opportunities as a way to connect more deeply with the high desert. As a lifelong outdoor enthusiast residing west of the Cascades, Jim wanted to learn about Oregon's dry side and develop a stronger appreciation for a lesser-known landscape.

Since getting involved with ONDA, Jim has gained a special connection to riparian restoration efforts that improve desert waterways. "The vast majority of species found in the high desert reside in riparian zones where water is found. Human activity also occurs in these areas. The riparian zone experiences competing interests and is important to all species," remarked Jim.

Jim chooses to donate to ONDA to support critical conservation efforts and contribute to catalyzing leadership in land stewardship. After four years of involvement, numerous donations and nearly 500 hours spent volunteering, he has learned a great deal about the history of the land and gained a richer connection to its past, present, and potential future.

"My greatest hope for the future of the high desert is to see a healthy, restored ecosystem as it was before European settlement. ONDA is an organization that demonstrates this future can be possible," said Jim as he reflected on being an ONDA member. ♦

To support healthy ecosystems and contribute to efforts to protect and restore Oregon's high desert, visit [ONDA.org/donate](https://onda.org/donate).

## NEW FACES AND FOND FAREWELLS



In the new year, we welcomed *Sarah Lindsay* to the team as our new Stewardship Coordinator. Before landing at ONDA, Sarah spent her early career in the spheres of environmental education, ecological restoration and environmental compliance. She holds a B.S. in Biopsychology from Tufts University and a M.S. from the University of Vermont's Field Naturalist and Ecological Planning program, where she completed a master's project studying moth populations in a pine barrens ecosystem. A nature enthusiast for as long as she can remember, Sarah is particularly excited by sightings of reptiles, invertebrates and desert flowers. In warmer weather she will be on the lookout for short-horned lizards, sagebrush sheep moths and Columbia Plateau cactus in bloom.

After over 16 years with ONDA, *Barksdale Brown* moved on from his role as Finance and Operations Director. Bark brought exceptional humor, passion and commitment to his work. ONDA is grateful for his important contributions to making ONDA a strong organization capable of attaining ambitious conservation goals.

This fall, as a Hillis Intern, *Marleigh Dunning* brought her insatiable scientific curiosity and field experience mapping out beaver habitat to ONDA. Marleigh combed through hundreds of journal articles and summarized the likely impacts of beaver habitat on 294 Oregon Conservation Strategy (OCS) Species. This work is critical for informing the upcoming OCS that will determine the state's wildlife policies and priorities for the next ten years. Marleigh is a recent graduate of Dartmouth College, and she is now moving on to a position with the U.S. Forest Service. We thank her for a season of impactful work and wish her luck on her next endeavor!

Additionally, we recently welcomed *Anton Chiono* to our board of directors, as well as saw standing board members take on new roles. We're happy to announce *Jim Stratton* has moved from Treasurer into the role of President, while *Terry Butler* has moved into the role of Treasurer and *Elisa Cheng* has moved into the role of Secretary. Gilly Lyons and Monica Tomosy continue to serve as board members. ♦

## CALL FOR PHOTO SUBMISSIONS: APRIL 1, 2024

Enter your best high desert photos for a chance to be featured in our annual calendar, bi-annual newsletter, social media or other publications.

Photo submissions begin April 1, 2024. To be considered for the 2025 Wild Desert Calendar, submit your photos by June 15, 2024.

Shots of winter scenes, areas of conservation importance, desert plants and wildlife and people appreciating desert beauty are particularly favored. Follow the tips and guidelines on our website for more information on what and how to enter, as well as rules and details: [ONDA.org/submit-your-photos](https://onda.org/submit-your-photos).



Owyhee Canyonlands spring hike.  
Photo: Brad Miller



Lower John Day River.  
Photo: Jim Davis



Mcdermitt Caldera coyote.  
Photo: Sean Grasso

# Desert Birdwatching at Lake Abert

by Haley Tobiason, ONDA Volunteer

## TRIP DETAILS

**What:** The lineup of bird species you may encounter as you venture alongside the lake include American avocets, Wilson's phalaropes, red-necked phalaropes, eared grebes, black-necked stilts, willets, Western and least sandpipers, snowy plovers, long-billed dowitchers, Northern shovelers, gulls and more. ONDA has a handy species checklist you can reference and try your luck finding, with over 200+ birds that frequent the area.

**Where:** Birds tend to group up on the north end of the lake, but through peak migration season you will see a variety of species all along the lake.

**When:** You can find a few birds at Lake Abert as early as June, with avocet typically being the first species to arrive. However, late July through early September is the optimal time to see the most species at peak abundances. As the saying goes, the early bird catches the worm, which is why many birders head outdoors at dawn. Aim to start your adventure earlier in the day, as birds come out to eat in the morning. At Lake Abert specifically, the heat and sun reflection on the lake ("heat shimmer") can make birding more challenging later in the day.

**How:** To have the most enjoyable and comfortable birdwatching experience, make sure to bring binoculars, a hat and sunglasses, plenty of water, protective clothing or sunscreen and bug spray to ward off the deer flies you'll meet out there. For some extra excitement, bring a spotting scope, camera and download eBird on your phone.

Lake Abert in the summer. Photo: Haley Tobiason

If you've been wanting to catch a fresh cast of characters as a birder or are a long-time bird admirer wanting to dive deeper, Lake Abert should be the next stop on your adventure itinerary.

Tucked under the towering Abert Rim, sitting 30 miles north of Lakeview in eastern Oregon, this glittering blue body of water is not your average lake: it is super salty! As Oregon's only hypersaline lake, Lake Abert is a special and unique ecosystem home to many bird species that you'd be strapped to find anywhere else in the state.

Living in its salty waters and shores are hosts of alkali flies and brine shrimp that attract hundreds of thousands of birds every year to refuel and rest at this



Birds feed on alkali flies. Photo: Haley Tobiason

desert oasis along their grueling seasonal migrations. This massive influx of birds every summer, coupled with Highway 395 winding alongside the lake's eastern edge, make Lake Abert perfect for birders of all interest and skill levels. Scattered along the highway around Lake Abert are gravel and dirt pullouts, which you can take advantage of to stop and get a better glimpse of the birds along the shores.

**DRIVING DIRECTIONS:** Take US-20 East to Riley, Oregon. At the junction before the gas station, turn right onto Highway 395 and follow for about 70 miles, where you will come upon Lake Abert. Alternatively, take US-97 South through La Pine and turn left on OR-31 South. Stay on OR-31 for about 120 miles, passing through Summer Lake and Paisley. In Valley Falls, take a left to merge on to Highway 395, and you will come upon Lake Abert after about 5 miles. ♦

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



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Photo: © Greg Vaughn

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

ONDA's conservation work takes place on the traditional lands of the Northern Paiute, Wasco, Warm Springs, Bannock and Shoshone people, as well as ceded lands of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and on lands currently managed by the Burns Paiute Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Many Indigenous peoples live in Oregon's high desert region today, including members of the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (Wasco, Warm Springs and Paiute), the Klamath Tribes (Klamath, Modoc and Yahooskin) and the Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribe.