



OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

# DESERT RAMBLINGS

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## IN THE NAME OF DESERT DEFENSE

Protecting public lands in Oregon's  
high desert from new threats





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## OVERHEARD

"I love the wide open spaces, the solitude and the silence. I support ONDA because I feel that it's a grassroots organization that really is out to advocate for and protect the desert."

Cover: Carlton Canyon, Owyhee Canyonlands. Photo: Korina Riggan

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## FROM THE OUTBACK

Dear Oregon desert advocate,

As you well know, our nation is facing many challenges. And, Oregon's high desert public lands are no different. Increasingly dangerous threats from elected leaders seeking to undermine conservation, dismantle federal agencies, silence the voice of the public, and sell off public lands are coming at an unrelenting pace. These threats are very real and deeply concerning.

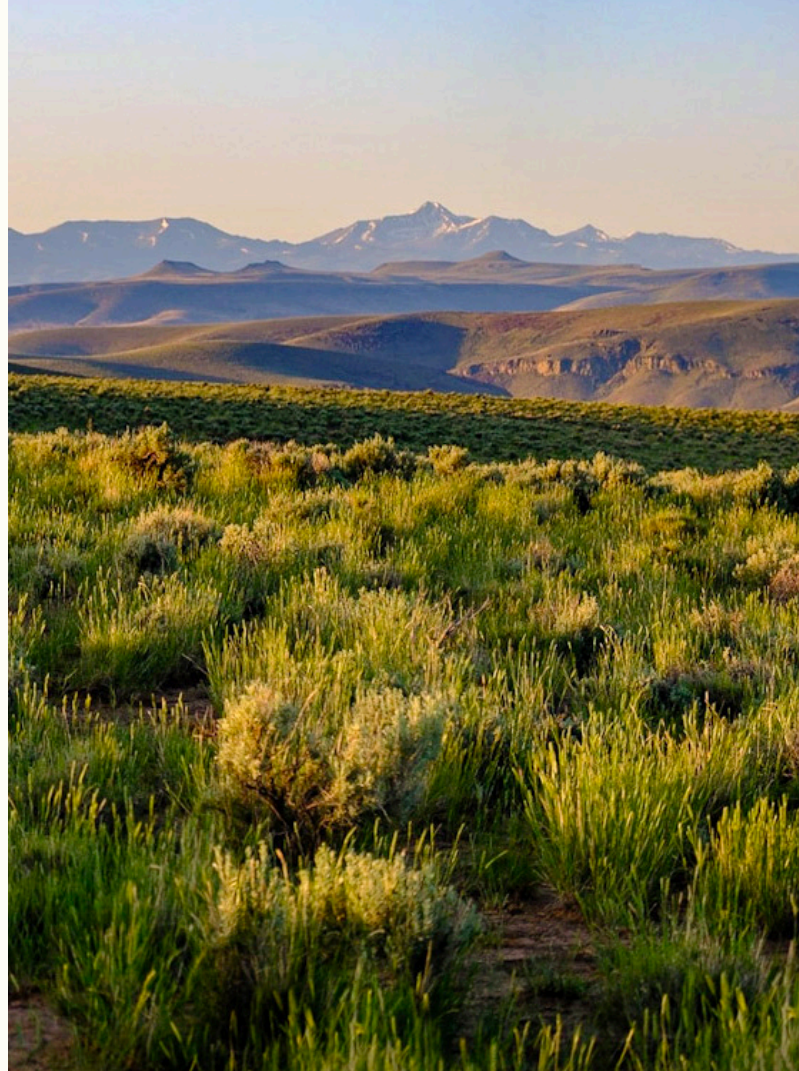
While Oregon Natural Desert Association has faced some of these challenges before, the threat of selling millions of acres of public lands to be developed by private interests is truly existential, upsetting the very existence of public lands and piercing to the core of what we stand for as an organization.

ONDA was formed nearly 40 years ago when a small group of individuals recognized that Oregon's high desert public lands needed a voice for conservation. They were motivated and passionate enough to gather their friends and interested community members together to create the organization that has since grown into what ONDA is today. And today, the high desert needs a voice more than it has at any time in the past.

While these challenges are immense and can feel overwhelming at times, our resolve here at ONDA is stronger than it has ever been, and we take our commitment to being your voice for Oregon's high desert very seriously.

As described in our cover story, "In the Name of Desert Defense," ONDA is deploying an array of strategies to ensure decision makers uphold conservation values, public lands benefit all Americans, and transparent, inclusive decision-making as a core tenet of public lands management is maintained. And by working in partnership with other organizations, Tribal leaders and elected officials at the local, state and national level, collectively we make for a robust resistance that is advocating tirelessly for Oregon's high desert and the principles we hold dear.

But our work is not all defense. ONDA is securing important conservation gains for rivers and wildlife as described in "Protecting Oregon's Desert Wildlife." We also outline our commitment to supporting Tribal and Indigenous leadership in conservation, and we cover our work to document wilderness characteristics near Steens Mountain to promote expanded protections.



Sunset in the McDermitt Caldera. Photo: John Aylward

Unprecedented times require unprecedented resolve. Your unwavering conservation advocacy has and will continue to bring important, tangible protections for Oregon's high desert, contributing to thriving habitat, abundant wildlife and sustained biodiversity for years to come. Thank you!



For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston  
Executive Director





# Wilderness Inventories, and Why They Matter

The foundation of public land management

**BY: MARK SALVO, CONSERVATION DIRECTOR**

Wilderness Inventory Technicians gather data to see whether public lands qualify for wilderness or other conservation designations in the Sheepshead and Pueblo mountains. *Photo: Anne White*

**F**ragile, vulnerable and finite, Oregon's desert wild lands are endlessly valuable. These public lands protect wildlife, provide for climate resiliency, preserve cultural resources, and serve as a refuge for people seeking solitude in an increasingly hectic world.

ONDA was established to nurture these values, protect public lands and support wilderness conservation. As an essential part of our work, we've supported volunteers and staff for decades to inventory desert public lands for their wilderness character, a legally defined and holistic set of qualities that make an area uniquely wilderness compared to other lands.

The detailed on-the-ground information gained from these inventories provides ONDA with the data necessary to compel federal agencies to provide appropriate land management. By meticulously photographing and mapping these areas, ONDA is able to protect some of Oregon's most essential desert landscapes. To date, we have secured protections for more than 4.4 million acres of wilderness-quality lands in Oregon's high desert.

Now we're at it again. This summer we deployed two field technicians to inventory wilderness character across more than 220,000 acres south and east of Steens Mountain.

Because much of the Steens Mountain region is already protected, our technicians were tasked with inventorying public lands beyond this protected expanse, in the Sheepshead and Pueblo mountains. Their aim was to see whether these public lands qualify for wilderness or other conservation designations. If so, ONDA could use that information to press for new protections that would create larger blocks of uninterrupted wild lands as we have achieved on other landscapes.

Our wilderness inventory in the Steens Mountain region will continue in 2026, building on ONDA's rich legacy of advocacy for public lands management and protection across the high desert.

## 220,000 ACRES

This summer we deployed two field technicians to inventory wilderness character across more than 220,000 acres south and east of Steens Mountain.



# Protecting Oregon's Desert Wildlife

ONDA's advocacy advances state conservation priorities

**BY: MARK SALVO, CONSERVATION DIRECTOR**

**O**NDA has a long and successful record of protecting federal public lands in Oregon's high desert at the national level. But as the calendar flipped from 2024 to 2025, we spotted a unique opportunity to also advance key conservation priorities for Oregon's desert lands, waters, and wildlife in state policymaking. So far, we've accomplished...



Lahontan cutthroat trout.  
*Photo: Friends of Nevada Wilderness*



Beaver. *Photo: Sylvie Bouchard*

## Stream restoration

Spurred by your advocacy, tens of thousands of miles of rivers and streams across Oregon's high desert can be more quickly and easily restored thanks to a new law that closes beaver trapping on designated waterways on federal lands. Beavers are a keystone species that create and maintain high quality streamside habitat that supports hundreds of species of wildlife, including in the iconic Malheur, John Day and Owyhee river watersheds.

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The exceptional conservation gains ONDA helped to secure for Oregon's high desert at the state level this year complement our enduring commitment to protect, defend and restore federal public lands. This comprehensive approach will ensure the strongest possible conservation outcomes.



Desert horned lizard. *Photo: Alan St. John*

## Wildlife conservation

At ONDA's encouragement, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife proposed adding more than two dozen high desert wildlife and plant species to its statewide conservation strategy—a critical first step toward reversing population declines. We are hoping to add even more to the list, including some vulnerable desert wildflowers that deserve protection.



Male sage-grouse. *Photo: Devlin Holloway*

## Sage-grouse protection

Our enduring commitment to conserving Oregon's most imperiled desert wildlife resulted in expanded protections across more than 5 million acres of sage-grouse priority habitat in the high desert. At ONDA's urging, the Oregon Land Development Commission then adopted new, larger sage-grouse range maps that will determine where any new development must avoid or mitigate for impacts to the species.





Tribal Stewards gain professional experience in conservation while restoring Oregon's high desert. *Photos: Gena Goodman-Campbell*

# Supporting Tribal Leaders in Conservation

ONDA's ongoing partnership with Tribal and Indigenous communities

**BY: GENA GOODMAN-CAMPBELL, STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR**

Oregon's high desert is the homeland of a diversity of Tribal and Indigenous people with deep cultural, religious and spiritual connections to the landscape. Across the nation and in eastern Oregon, much of what is now public land was taken from Tribal and Indigenous people by force, confiscation or coercion. Today, historic and current injustices often hinder these same people from fully engaging in public lands conservation and stewardship.

For decades, Oregon Natural Desert Association has engaged with Tribal and Indigenous communities in our stewardship projects and conservation campaigns. In these conversations, ONDA has learned that young people seek more opportunities to steward their ancestral lands.

To address this need and support Tribal and Indigenous leadership in the conservation sector, ONDA launched the Tribal Stewards Program in 2019. Tribal and Indigenous program participants gain professional experience in the conservation field while working on culturally informed ecological restoration projects in Oregon's high desert. ONDA currently partners with the Burns Paiute Tribe and Lomakatsi Restoration Project on this effort.

The Tribal Stewards program emphasizes the integration of Indigenous Knowledge with conservation practices based on Western science. Participants are mentored by ONDA staff, Tribal staff, and federal land managers to learn about career pathways in natural resource management. Visits with Tribal elders and community leaders provide important cultural context for the restoration work.

Working on both public lands and tribally owned properties, Tribal Stewards participants have completed restoration projects in some of the most ecologically important places in Oregon's high desert, including the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, and Pine Creek Conservation Area. Projects have included streamside planting to enhance native fish habitat, restoring greater sage-grouse habitat, collecting native plant seeds to support rehabilitation of burned areas, and conducting wildlife surveys to inform future management.

These activities bolster the ecological health of Oregon's high desert, while creating important partnerships and fostering the leadership and professional development of participants.



# *An Interview with Tribal Stewards Participants*

Ahead of the 2025 season, ONDA sat down with Gabe First Raised (Burns Paiute, Fort Belknap and Shoshone), who led the 2025 Tribal Stewards crew, and three returning participants—Lane Hawley, age 24, (Burns Paiute and Duck Valley Shoshone), Dell Marsh, age 19, (Burns Paiute, Fort McDermitt, and Duck Valley Shoshone), and Jordan First Raised, age 21, (Burns Paiute, Fort Belknap and Shoshone)—to hear about their experiences with the program.

**ONDA:** *What initially drew you to participate in Tribal Stewards?*

**Lane:** I just really wanted to learn about the land and what we can do to help it.

**Gabe:** I want to give our youth the opportunity to steward our ancestral lands. The younger generation doesn't use these lands as much as I'd like, probably because a lot of them haven't been taught how to hunt or fish and where and when to find roots. I like working with young people, mentoring the youth of our tribe.

**ONDA:** *What was your knowledge of natural resources or conservation prior to Tribal Stewards? Has this experience changed your perspective on the field at all?*

**Lane:** We did not have a lot of knowledge when we started. Before, I wasn't looking at plants or learning about all of the seeds and what they can do to help after a burn. I thought that was pretty interesting.

**Dell:** It has made me more aware of what I could do. Sometimes when we're just driving around and seeing dense forests or other issues like that, I think about what we can do to help.

**Jordan:** It has opened my eyes to fire risk and what we can do to restore areas after a burn.

**Gabe:** I grew up in Burns, and have lived on the [Burns Paiute Tribe] reservation for the majority of my life. The summer after eighth grade, I started working for the Tribe's Youth Opportunity Program as a fish tech and worked there for four seasons until I graduated high school. I went to college for a few years and left. It turns out I didn't want to be a fish

biologist! The fish biologist who was my boss in the Youth Opportunity program was a mentor to me, but I didn't know anyone within the Tribe who was working in fisheries. There's a cultural learning curve for non-tribal staff working with tribal youth. The objective of my job now is to strengthen the workforce within the Tribe.

Partnering with ONDA and Lomakatsi has helped the Tribe with the capacity issues we've experienced and has helped me learn more about the lands we're working on, what we are doing, and why we're doing it.

**ONDA:** *Are there traditional stewardship practices of the Burns Paiute Tribe that you're curious about or think could improve the health of the places where you are working?*

**Gabe:** A big one for me that I've heard stories of is cultural burning. For example, they used to periodically burn the area around Malheur refuge to remove dead tule plants and bring up new shoots, which they would use for building wickiups or tule huts.

**ONDA:** *What are some favorite memories from last year and what are you looking forward to this season?*

**Jordan:** It's been good to get to see the mountains: Jefferson, Mt. Hood, Broken Top, and the Three Sisters. I'm looking forward to doing bat surveys at the Malheur refuge this year.

**Lane:** When we were out in Fossil, OR that was all new to me. It was cool to drive by the Painted Hills and see new places. I'm just looking forward to anything new. I want to keep learning.

ONDA's Tribal Stewards Program is an important initiative that aims to promote partnerships and support Tribal and Indigenous leadership in Oregon's high desert. It is gratifying to see ecologically important restoration projects spark interest in conservation and provide a means to explore traditional stewardship and cultural practices. We look forward to expanding our efforts and continuing to engage Tribal Stewards in critical restoration work in the years ahead.



Working together and learning about natural resources and conservation.



Tribal Stewards collect native plant seeds.





Dawn on the Owyhee River. Photo: Corie Harlan





Conservation advocates support and restore desert public lands. Photo: Sage Brown

# In the Name of Desert Defense

Protecting public lands in Oregon's high desert from new threats

**BY: RYAN HOUSTON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

What comes to mind when you think of Oregon's desert public lands? Maybe it's the vast expanses of sagebrush steppe that support an abundance of wildlife around Hart Mountain. Perhaps it's the undammed John Day River that provides cool, clean water for summer steelhead and Chinook salmon. Or, it could be the golden aspen groves that flourish on Steens Mountain.

Public lands in eastern Oregon include some of the most beloved places in the West. Are we just fortunate, or is this because conservation advocates like you are working hard to keep it this way?

Public lands are not protected by chance. The rich natural legacy found in Oregon is thanks to the commitment of desert activists and defenders. For nearly 40 years, Oregon Natural Desert Association's community of supporters has led the way, protecting the desert's most iconic landscapes and the wildlife, wildlands, recreational opportunities and cultural values they sustain.

Central to this work is mounting a vigorous defense when misguided proposals that would fragment habitat, imperil species, damage ecosystems, or favor development over the public interest are put forward.

Over the decades, ONDA has successfully prevented industrial energy development, blocked new roads and barred illegal off-road vehicle use from carving up the desert, ensured the best available science drives public lands management, and so much more. But our job is never done, and it is getting more challenging.

## Unprecedented Threats

With anti-conservation federal leadership at the helm in Washington, D.C., Oregon's high desert public lands are facing new and expanded threats. Congress and the Trump administration unashamedly seek to sell off public lands, weaken federal agencies through funding cuts, hollow out conservation laws, ignore science, silence the voice of the public, and promote the interests of extractive industries over those of the public.

While some of their tactics and rhetoric may be new, as an experienced, stalwart advocate for the region, ONDA is well-prepared to meet today's evolving challenges. Fueled by your support, day in and day out, ONDA is defending Oregon's desert public lands by nimbly deploying four key strategies.



## *Strategies to Defend Oregon's Desert Public Lands*

### ORGANIZING AND MOBILIZING GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

ONDA believes in the philosophy embedded in the famous Gandhi quote, "When the people lead, the leaders will follow." Even when it seems like elected leaders are not listening to the public, we know they are. With the collective power of more than 25,000 members and supporters, ONDA's community can convince our leaders to act to protect conservation values by speaking up in town halls, writing emails and letters, participating in every step of public planning processes, and taking action online.

This grassroots engagement is critically important and generates results. Just last year, your advocacy encouraged the Bureau of Land Management to specially protect more than 3 million acres of public lands in the Owyhee Canyonlands and the Greater Hart-Sheldon. Your activism was also instrumental in passing a new law banning beaver trapping and in ONDA's ongoing efforts to block the U.S. Air Force's attempts to turn the Owyhee Canyonlands into a low-elevation jet fighter training area at the expense of wildlife and Tribal communities.



Tribal members and public land managers work together to steward cherished lands. *Photo: Sage Brown*

### BUILDING STRENGTH THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Political strength grows when a diversity of voices come together in support of a common goal. This is why building partnerships is an intentional component of ONDA's public lands defense strategy.

We ally with individuals, businesses, hunting and fishing groups, national organizations, recreationalists, and Tribal and Indigenous communities who share our conservation vision. Together, ONDA and our partners reach a broader audience, apply more political pressure, and develop more durable solutions than we could otherwise on our own.

ONDA's work on the Owyhee Canyonlands is a prime example of building strength through partnerships, as the Owyhee Coalition includes more than a dozen organizations representing 22 million Americans. This is complemented by support from Tribal Nations that, in just the past two years, has grown from one local Tribe to now 57 Tribal Nations from across the Northwest resolving to protect the Owyhee. Together, this group is advocating for permanent protections while countering ill-conceived proposals that would roll back protections on millions of acres of Owyhee public lands, undercut conservation laws, and open up the landscape to extractive development.



ONDA members write letters in defense of high desert public lands. *Photo: Charlie Hayman*



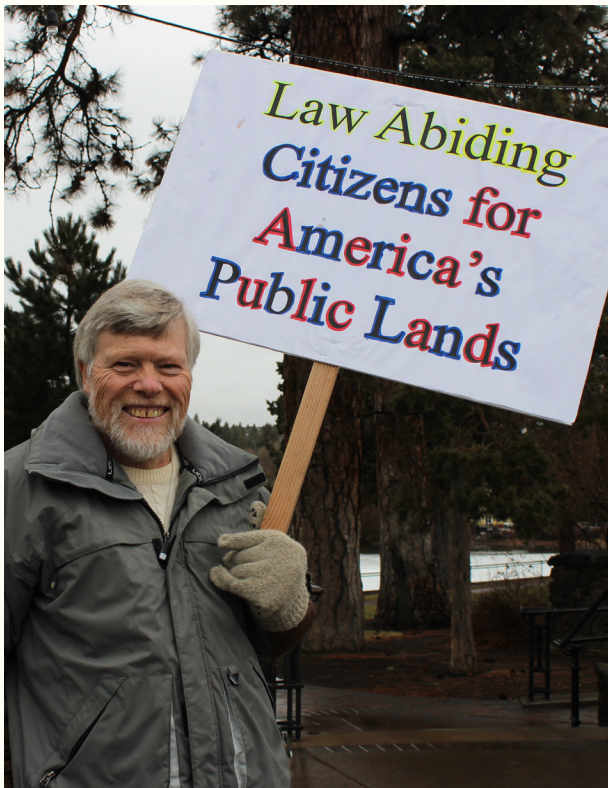
## HOLDING LEADERS ACCOUNTABLE

In politically turbulent times like these, it is essential to staunchly defend our core values for public lands, including public benefit, public engagement, transparency, and the role of science in decision-making. As these values are increasingly under threat, our elected leaders need to be keenly focused on engaging in good-faith bipartisan compromise when feasible, and holding the line against backsliding when necessary.

ONDA is eager to share kudos for those leaders who support public lands, but we're also willing to push back if our representatives waver in their commitment to the conservation values their constituents share. This was demonstrated when we celebrated Senator Ron Wyden's leadership in moving protective legislation for the Owyhee through the Senate in 2024. When progress stalled, we pressed the senator to continue championing his proposal to permanently protect the Owyhee.

## 22 MILLION AMERICANS

The Owyhee Coalition includes more than a dozen organizations representing 22 million Americans.



ONDA's community urges leaders to protect conservation values by speaking up for public lands. Photo: ONDA Staff



Members sign on to support the Owyhee Canyonlands campaign. Photo: Hank Elholm

## LEVERAGING THE POWER OF THE COURTS

Many of the most egregious attacks on public lands, public involvement, and science involve clear violations of federal laws that require transparency, rigorous analysis, and rational, deliberate decision-making. When agencies shortcut these mandates and ignore ONDA's repeated attempts to help them correct their errors, we will challenge their decisions in court.

Our long-term success rate is over 85%, and federal court decisions have created the foundation for many of our most significant achievements. As new threats continue to emerge out of the legislative and administrative branches of the federal government, the courts are the last stop in our nation's system of checks and balances. ONDA will continue to utilize this strategy as a vital backstop to ensure Oregon's high desert is protected.

ONDA's dedication to desert defense is increasingly important as each day brings alarming new threats to public lands in Oregon and across the West. With persistence, determination and an unwavering commitment to conservation values, our community will be the defenders that public lands need right now.

Join us in continuing our steadfast efforts to conserve public lands, waters and wildlife, now and always.

Learn how you can become a desert defender at [ONDA.org/take-action/](https://onda.org/take-action/).



# Species Spotlight: Desert Wasps

These misunderstood insects play a vital role in Oregon's high desert ecosystems

BY: SELA SMITH-BEDSWORTH, 2025 HILLIS INTERN

For many of us, the mere mention of “wasps” conjures images of aggressive, stinging pests crashing summer barbeques or building ominous nests on our front porches. This common misperception, often inspired by encounters with a small fraction of wasp species like yellowjackets, dramatically undervalues one of nature's most beneficial insects. In fact, many wasps can't even sting.

In Oregon's high desert—from the Owyhee Canyonlands to our very backyards—wasps play a critical role in balancing healthy ecosystems. Rather quietly, they perform essential work such as pollinating wildflowers, regulating insect populations, and providing food for birds and other animals. But our misconceptions of this insect, paired with impacts caused by a changing climate, habitat loss and invasive species, put wasp populations under stress.

## Small Creatures, Big Impact

In the sagebrush steppe and wetland areas of the high desert, wasp species like the blue mud dauber wasp (*Chalybion californicum*), great golden digger wasp (*Sphex ichneumoneus*) and thread-waisted wasp (*Sphecidae* spp.) contribute to the environment in surprising ways. Some species pollinate native plants such as rabbitbrush and asters, which bloom in late summer. This is crucial for these plants because other pollinators are much less active during this time. Other wasp species nest in the ground and dig small burrows within the earth, helping to aerate the soil and improve water infiltration, in turn, benefiting native vegetation.

About 97% of all wasp species are insect predators. Species like chalcid wasps (*Chalcididae* spp.) act as a natural pest control, laying their eggs inside moths, beetles, flies and other insects. When their larvae hatch, they feed on these insects, helping control their numbers in a manner that is both effective and chemical free.

While wasps can be predators, they can also be prey, providing a significant food source for other desert



Thread-waisted wasp. Photo: David Alexander

dwellers. Birds such as loggerhead shrikes—a vulnerable species in Oregon—and most of our insect-eating songbirds rely on wasps and wasp larvae to feed themselves and their chicks. Amphibians and reptiles including frogs and lizards also consume wasps when the opportunity arises—as do mammals, like bats. By serving as prey, wasps help sustain the diversity of wildlife in the high desert.

## Coexisting with Wasps in the High Desert

When we look past their stigma, coexisting peacefully with wasps is achievable and important for ecosystems.

Oregon Natural Desert Association's efforts to restore lands and waters across Oregon's high desert support essential habitat for these important insects. Our projects, including the Pine Creek restoration work at the tribal-owned Pine Creek Conservation Area, rebuild the plant diversity and ecosystem conditions that wasps and other important species need to survive and thrive. And, our work to conserve Oregon's exceptional desert landscapes like the Owyhee Canyonlands and the Greater Hart Sheldon protects vital habitat for wasps and the intricate web of species that call the high desert home.

Wasps may never win a popularity contest, but their important role in high desert ecosystems is undeniable. Your support of Oregon desert conservation ensures that these unsung heroes continue their essential work.



## WARM WELCOMES AND SUMMER ADDITIONS

It's with great pleasure that we welcome **Chad Brown** to ONDA's board of directors.

Chad is an award-winning photographer, filmmaker, Navy veteran, conservationist and social entrepreneur with a passion for storytelling and protecting wild places.

Chad's career has been defined by the combination of visual storytelling and impactful advocacy, and he strives to empower BIPOC and Indigenous communities while safeguarding vulnerable ecosystems like Oregon's high desert. He has testified before Congress, advocating against drilling in the Arctic Circle alongside the Gwich'in Nation, and Chad has been a long-standing advocate for protection of Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands. We're honored to have his passion and perspective on our leadership team.



Chad Brown,  
Board of Directors

This summer we were thrilled to have several seasonal additions to our staff.

In May, we brought on two Wilderness Inventory Technicians, **John Short** and **Ethan Moser**, who spent their summer inventorying the wilderness characteristics of more than 220,000 acres of land south and east of Steens Mountain. Their work supports efforts to protect public lands in the Sheephead and Pueblo mountains. We thank John and Ethan for their time spent in the desert this summer supporting essential conservation work.

Additionally, **Sela Smith-Bedsworth** joined us as a Hillis Intern—a paid opportunity for early career individuals to gain skills in conservation that honors the memory of ONDA supporter, Harv Hillis. Sela nimbly supported a wide range of fundraising, communications and outreach work, including taking on a primary role in producing our Wild Desert Calendar. Following her time with us, she returned to Eugene to start her third year at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication. We thank Sela for a summer of impactful work.

Finally, **Emma Cox** joined us as a law clerk in Portland this summer. Emma is a rising 2L at University of Washington School of Law and was awarded a 2025 Justice John Paul Stevens Public Interest Fellowship to support her work at ONDA this summer. Prior to law school, Emma worked as an intern for Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley and then as a staffer to Rep. Earl Blumenauer in Washington, D.C. She supported the full gamut of ONDA's legal actions and policy work this summer, and we wish her well back at school in Seattle this fall.

## Meet Malcolm Costello

Finding community and connection  
through conservation

BY: HANA SANT, DEVELOPMENT MANAGER



Malcolm and Karen Costello

When Malcolm Costello moved to Bend in 2022 he was introduced to ONDA by his friend Rick Samco, a longtime supporter and contributing photographer to the Wild Desert Calendar. Soon after, he joined a stewardship trip to the Oregon Badlands and found himself captivated not just by the landscape, but by the community he discovered in ONDA's supporters and staff.

A lifelong cyclist, Malcolm spent decades exploring rural Oregon on bike, where he fell in love with the vast, open landscapes of the eastern half of the state. He supports ONDA with his time, money and advocacy because it gives him the chance to contribute to the protection of the desert lands, waters and wildlife that have meant so much to him and his wife, Karen.

Malcolm explains, "ONDA has remained steadfast and clear-eyed on an enduring journey to conserve millions of acres of the most beautiful, ecologically important and unique landscapes that make up central and eastern Oregon. And that's a journey I want to be on."

Malcolm also values ONDA's collaborative approach to conservation and its welcoming community. "We learn so much from those around us and build connections that we treasure as much as the landscape on which they were formed," he says. "Being part of ONDA feels like being part of a community committed to something bigger than ourselves."

To find your community in conservation, visit [onda.org/get-involved/](https://onda.org/get-involved/)



# Fall + Winter Events

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



Photo: Bob Wick

## Eugene Sagebrush Social

**Tuesday, September 9, 2025 | 5-7 p.m. | Eugene  
Alton Baker Park, Shelter 1**

Join fellow ONDA members, staff and supporters for a casual summer celebration of the dedicated community who supports high desert conservation. Catch up with other desert enthusiasts, learn about upcoming conservation initiatives and test your knowledge with an exciting, optional game of high desert trivia.



Photo: Dan Hawk

## Oregon's Desert in Print

**Friday, October 17, 2025 | 5-7 p.m. | Bend and online  
The Barrel Room at UPP Liquids (formerly Immersion Brewing)**

Gather in Bend for an exclusive showcase of this year's most compelling Oregon high desert photos, many of which are featured in the 2026 Wild Desert Calendar. Admire landscape and wildlife photography alongside conservation advocates, meet photographers, and more. For those outside of Central Oregon, we'll also premiere this year's calendar images in our virtual photo gallery.



Photo: Deigh Bates

## High Desert Hootenanny

**Thursday, November 13, 2025 | 5-7 p.m. | Portland  
Friday, December 5, 2025 | 5-7 p.m. | Bend**

Join our annual celebration of desert conservation! Commemorate the wonders of Oregon's high desert and the many conservation successes achieved in 2025. Hear highlights from this year's work to protect and restore the state's dry side, learn about what's to come in the year ahead and meet members of our dedicated community.



Photo: Jim Davis

## High Desert Speaker Series

**February – April 2026 | Dates TBD**

Our annual event series features diverse speakers, captivating stories, stunning photography and fascinating natural history from Oregon's high desert. Attendees can expect to be inspired to conserve our public lands through these events. Stay tuned for our full lineup of speakers and dates to be announced in late 2025.

# Desert Trip Tips

Experience the far-reaches of Oregon's high desert

BY: JAMES PARSONS, ONDA VOLUNTEER



Camping in the Owyhee Canyonlands. Photo: John Aylward

It's not until one finds themselves in the middle of hundreds of miles of sagebrush that they realize how truly uncharted many of Oregon's high desert landscapes are. It's part of the beauty, but also the challenge, of spending time here. Looking to get out into the far reaches of eastern Oregon? Consider these tips before heading out.

## **Tip #1: Be prepared for travel in one of the most remote areas in the lower 48**

The remoteness of Oregon's high desert takes some getting used to. Throughout eastern Oregon, gas stations are infrequent, close early, and electric vehicle charging stations are unheard of. Cell reception is spotty. Many roads require medium to high clearance vehicles. For a successful journey, travel in an appropriate vehicle, be sure to have a detailed map, carry a gas can with extra gas, and check you have a spare tire that you know how to change. Investing in a satellite messenger device for emergency texting when there is no cell service is a great idea.

## **Tip #2: Avoid driving on wet roads**

It's always a good idea to check the weather before you head out. Visitors should look out for rain and avoid driving on wet dirt roads. Even small amounts of moisture can waterlog desert soils and make some areas in the desert inaccessible. Be particularly careful in the Owyhee Canyonlands and Alvord Desert, where cars are known to get stuck in mud for days.

## **Tip #3: Don't forget to look down**

Rattlesnakes are abundant during warm weather in much of Oregon's high desert. To avoid them, watch where you're stepping, don't hike with headphones on so you can hear their warning rattle, be extra careful around abandoned structures, and keep your pets behind you when you hike.

## **Tip #4: Bring plenty of water**

Eastern Oregon is particularly arid, so you may need to carry more water than you are used to in other environments. While there may be springs or perennial water sources in some areas, many are unreliable due to seasonal variation or other factors. If you do plan on utilizing natural water sources on your trip, carry an adequate water purification system.

## **Tip #5: Make a plan in advance**

Those who want to experience the less travelled portions of the high desert need a plan. With so much ground to cover in this vast landscape, you'll want to consider both where you want to go and how you'll navigate the area once there. Planning out roads, mileage between points of interest and route descriptions will be particularly helpful when you lose cell service. For example, Three Forks is my favorite place to visit in the Owyhee Canyonlands, but you must plan for the fact that the road in is 26 miles on dirt—and that's short for this area!





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A photograph of three owl chicks standing on a rock in a desert setting. The chicks are brown and white with yellow eyes. The background is a blurred desert landscape with green and brown vegetation.

# Plan Your Legacy in 3 Simple Steps

- 1**  
REFLECT  
Add a gift to your will now to ensure future generations can appreciate the high desert.
- 2**  
CONNECT  
Call ONDA. We'll guide you through the process of including ONDA in your will.
- 3**  
CELEBRATE  
Feel the satisfaction of knowing you've taken steps today to sustain Oregon's high desert for tomorrow.

ccekander@onda.org | 503.703.1006 | [ONDA.org/legacy](https://onda.org/legacy)

Photo: Tara Lemezis

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

Oregon's high desert is the homeland of a diversity of Indigenous people, including the Northern Paiute, Shoshone, Bannock, Wasco, Warm Springs, Yahooskin, Cayuse, Walla Walla and Umatilla peoples organized within several Tribes. These include the Burns Paiute Tribe, Fort McDermitt Paiute and Shoshone Tribes, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation, the Klamath Tribes, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and others.

ONDA is committed to collaborating with these communities and eager to continue learning more about how our conservation mission can complement Tribal and Indigenous conservation goals.