

OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

# DESERT RAMBLINGS

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## A MODEL FOR CONSERVATION

Creating a shared vision to protect public lands



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## OVERHEARD

*“I love the beauty and accessibility of Oregon’s high desert. It’s important environmentally, ecologically, and culturally, and ONDA fights to take good care of all aspects of it.”*

Cover: South Steens Wilderness. Photo: Shannon Phifer



Pueblo Mountains in spring. Photo: Christof Teuscher



Wildhorse Lake, Steens Mountain. Photo: David Folts

## FROM THE OUTBACK

Dear Oregon desert advocate,

As you may know, protecting Steens Mountain is among the greatest conservation achievements in Oregon's high desert. Some twenty-five years ago, Oregon Natural Desert Association and desert enthusiasts far and wide celebrated new protections and management for one of eastern Oregon's most iconic regions.

Steens Mountain benefits from protections today because ONDA worked with a wide array of people and partners who care about sustaining public lands over the long term, eventually achieving a spectacular result for this one-of-kind landscape. This spirit of Steens lives on in each of ONDA's current initiatives, and bridging political, cultural and economic divides, pursuing shared interests, and embracing solutions is foundational to our community-based conservation work.

In this issue of Desert Ramblings, we'll explore how this approach, used so successfully at Steens Mountain, remains an effective model as we advocate for protecting the Owyhee Canyonlands and other important high desert places.

You'll also read a story highlighting a group of concerned members who rallied together to care for a high desert river they love, embodying the exceptional dedication to conservation found throughout ONDA's community. And, we share how community is also at the core of our effort to defend the McDermitt Caldera

from a multinational industrial mining proposal.

It's stories like these that give me tremendous optimism about what ONDA and our community will achieve in the months and years ahead. Right now, we are undoubtedly facing challenges never seen before in public lands conservation. But, we're confident we'll make tangible progress when we pair time-tested strategies with new adaptations to the threats, opportunities and circumstances we face today.

Community is essential in all of our efforts to secure a healthy, vibrant and thriving future for Oregon's desert lands, waters and wildlife. Thank you for sharing in this vision and for your ardent, enduring support for conservation.



For a wild desert,

Ryan Houston  
Executive Director

# COMING TOGETHER TO PROTECT THE MCDERMITT CALDERA

*Defending against industrial-scale mining in the high desert*

**BY MARK SALVO, CONSERVATION DIRECTOR**

Industrialized mining has descended upon Oregon's McDermitt Caldera, with the first federally approved plan for mine exploration released in December. This plan—the largest such operation ever authorized on public lands in Oregon—threatens to damage the caldera's lands, waters, wildlife and communities for generations.

Surrounded by the Oregon Canyon Mountains to the north and the Trout Creek Mountains in the west, the McDermitt Caldera is one of the last, best sagebrush strongholds remaining in Oregon's high desert. These public lands are vital to sensitive species, including greater sage-grouse, the federally threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, pygmy rabbit, pronghorn, mule deer, countless songbirds and myriad na-

tive plants. Indigenous peoples and communities cherish and depend on the caldera today, just as they have for thousands of years.

Now all of this is under threat. Jindalee Lithium, a transnational corporation based in Australia, hopes to dramatically expand exploration in the caldera in 2026. Merely exploring for minerals, let alone open pit mining, can cause irreparable damage to public lands, waters and resources. Exploratory drilling disrupts wildlife and causes permanent scars on the landscape, including from the dozens of miles of new roads constructed to access every last corner of a mining claim. Sacred sites and access to cultural practices could also be impacted.

ONDA has tracked this important issue for years, and we are working

closely with a broad coalition of tribal members, ranchers, conservation organizations and community members to oppose any mining activities in the McDermitt Caldera. Our group is determined to minimize impacts on public lands, tribal interests, recreation and continued sustainable use of the area. Working together, and pursuing every possible strategy, we seek to hold both the federal government and mining companies accountable to conservation law, the state of Oregon's strict environmental standards and cultural resource protections, and local communities that would be most affected by mining.

To learn more about current issues and get involved in advocating for conservation in Oregon's high desert, visit [ONDA.org/take-action](https://onda.org/take-action).



Hundreds of species of flora and fauna depend on increasingly rare sagebrush habitats like these threatened by mining in the McDermitt Caldera.

*Photo: John Aylward*



Bill (far left) and friends working to clean up the South Fork in their free time this past summer. Photos: Cindy Hull

### STEWARDSHIP

## CELEBRATING THE STRENGTH OF COMMUNITY

*Volunteers rally together to care for a river they love*

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

The South Fork Crooked River rises from springs amidst central Oregon's sagebrush sea. Once a flourishing ecosystem, heavy agricultural use and the eradication of beaver by trappers diminished the quality of the area's fish and wildlife habitat. But now, thanks to ONDA's restoration efforts, the watershed is beginning to show signs of recovery.

Dense patches of willow and cottonwood are again growing along the river in ONDA's restoration areas, and beavers are building dams and creating wetlands that support an abundance of life. Still, much of the watershed remains out of balance. So when the area saw heavy snow and rain last winter, the South Fork was susceptible to unnaturally powerful floods.

The following spring, when Bill and Cindy Hull joined 19 other ONDA volunteers on a stewardship trip to the South Fork Crooked River, they were shocked by what they saw. Floodwaters had torn through ONDA's restoration plantings and the temporary fences volunteers had built to protect them, leaving behind wire mesh tangled with flood debris strewn along the banks.

"It was pretty devastating to see all of that damage to the work we've done out there," Bill said. While out walking along the river one evening, Bill was startled by the splash of a beaver's tail. This was the first time he had witnessed

evidence of beavers since he started volunteering on the South Fork with ONDA in 2018. It was right then that an idea popped into his head.

After returning home from the trip, Bill and Cindy got in touch with Jefferson Jacobs, ONDA's restoration manager, to share their idea. They wanted to rally other volunteers they had formed friendships with over their years of working at the South Fork to help clean up the mess made by the floods. Jefferson gladly took the Hulls up on their offer.

Bill and Cindy sprang into action, organizing a nine-person work party. They spent several summer days working on the landscape and returned again with a smaller group in the fall. Their efforts cleared the way for a family of beavers, who had just welcomed a pair of baby kits, to begin utilizing trees planted by volunteers in 2019.

In recognition of the Hulls exceptional commitment to the South Fork Crooked River, ONDA selected Bill and Cindy as the recipients of our 2025 Conservationist of the Year Award.

The Hulls are quick to point out, however, that this is not about them as individuals. This unique effort is a testament to the strength of the entire ONDA community and the commitment of the thousands of supporters who step up time and again when the high desert needs their help.



# A MODEL FOR CONSERVATION

From Steens Mountain to the Owyhee Canyonlands, creating a shared vision to protect Oregon's high desert public lands.

**BY MARK SALVO,  
CONSERVATION DIRECTOR**

Even in a region as varied and vast as Oregon's high desert, Steens Mountain stands as one of its most breathtaking landscapes—a geologic splendor, featuring spectacular glacial gorges, shimmering aspen stands, bountiful wildflowers, rolling sagebrush grasslands, and an abundance of fish and wildlife.

Permanently protected 25 years ago, the community process that led to federal designation of Steens was as unique and complex as the mountain itself. Even the convoluted name given the new designation, the "Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area," was a compromise among stakeholders who negotiated every last detail of the Steens Act passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton in 2000.

Most importantly, broad, vociferous public support for protecting Steens, led by thousands of ONDA members, both propelled those local conversations forward and ensured the effort produced lasting protections for the mountain.

## **A LANDMARK ACT**

The Steens Act dramatically strengthened conservation management on Steens Mountain using an array of measures that reflect both the rich diversity of the landscape and the stakeholders committed to its future. At its core, the legislation designated more than 170,000 acres as the Steens Mountain Wilderness—98,000 acres of which are livestock-free, the first and only legislated "cow-free" wilderness in the nation. The act then surrounded the wilderness area with a 500,000-acre Cooperative Management and Protection Area. To this mix, Congress added 29 miles of new Wild and Scenic Rivers and the nation's first ever Redband Trout Reserve. Finally, the Steens legislation protected the entire region, totaling 1.1 million acres, from mining and geothermal development.

Arriving at a final, collaborative proposal for Steens wasn't without its challenges, but the momentum for finally protecting the mountain was undeniable, fueled by unrelenting public support, leadership from Oregon's congressional delegation, and a willingness among conservationists, ranchers, and landowners to chart a path forward for this shared landscape.



## 170,000 ACRES

The legislation designated more than 170,000 acres as the Steens Mountain Wilderness—98,000 acres of which are livestock-free, the first and only legislated “cow-free” wilderness in the nation.

*Photo: Shannon Phifer*



*Photo: Sage Brown*



*Photo: Sage Brown*

### THE POWER OF COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Steens Mountain isn’t just an achievement in conservation—it’s a blueprint. It shows that lasting protection for iconic desert landscapes doesn’t have to come through confrontation. Instead, enduring conservation can emerge when diverse stakeholders are invited to a process, when conservation proposals honor ecological integrity and wilderness and balance protections with local needs, and when legislation embeds cooperation as a core principle.

ONDA is pursuing the same strategy for protecting more than 1 million acres of wilderness in Oregon’s Owyhee Canyonlands. While Congress and the new administration were focused on other priorities in 2025, ONDA and our partners were continuing to broaden our coalition and build support for a comprehensive proposal to protect, manage and restore this irreplaceable landscape. This included Senator Wyden reintroducing his Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act in Congress and securing an endorsement for protecting the Owyhee from the National Congress of American Indians, which represents 250 Tribes from across the country.

### STEENS, FOREVER

As debates continue over public lands management in eastern Oregon—from the top of Steens Mountain to the rimrock of the Owyhee Canyonlands—the Steens Act stands as a testament to what’s possible: a future where natural landscapes remain wild, local communities are engaged, and conservation is a shared vision rather than a point of division.

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**STEENS MOUNTAIN ISN’T JUST AN ACHIEVEMENT IN CONSERVATION—IT’S A BLUEPRINT. IT SHOWS THAT LASTING PROTECTION FOR ICONIC DESERT LANDSCAPES DOESN’T HAVE TO COME THROUGH CONFRONTATION.**



Photo: James Parsons

## SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

# BLACK COTTONWOOD

*Our biggest broadleaf tree builds ecosystems*

**BY LEEANN KRIEGH, VOLUNTEER**

If you love to play in and along rivers and streams of the West, be sure to stop and thank a cottonwood. Black cottonwoods (*Populus trichocarpa*) are the tallest broadleaf tree in the West, rising far above relatives like willows and quaking aspens. Partly due to their great size, they're considered keystone species that provide an outsized impact on life in and along local waterways.

Cottonwoods grow incredibly fast, shooting up in a hurry so they won't get shaded out by other trees. Their rapid growth makes them ideal for restoring damaged streams, as ONDA and its generous volunteers have done by planting thousands of the trees in the John Day River Basin and along the South Fork of the Crooked River.

During their short lives, cottonwoods provide a long list of ecological benefits. Their high, sturdy branches are valuable nesting spots for large birds like eagles and osprey, and both the branches and trunks feed hungry beavers, who also use the wood to build their dams and lodges. Cottonwoods' long roots help to prevent streamside erosion, and aquatic species depend on fallen leaves and branches for

food and cover.

The ecosystem benefits of these remarkable trees seem to increase as they age and even long after they die. When a strong wind comes along, large branches readily fall off, opening up the trunk—which also hollows out as the tree ages—for insect and bird life. Within a few hundred years, the entire tree dies, and the notably soft, wet wood decays rapidly, supporting an untold number of species.

When you come across one of these tall, beautiful trees in town or in the wild, stop to take a closer look. Check out the heart-shaped leaves, darker on top and lighter on the bottom. Note the ridged trunks on older trees, the many nests in the trunks and branches, and, on female trees, the flower buds that smell like vanilla.

In summer, female trees spread seeds attached to cottony fluff; contrary to popular belief, the "snow" is not an allergen, so there's nothing to fear. In every season of the year, these exceptional trees provide a welcoming respite for us and the species our lives depend upon.

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## EVENTS

# SPRING + SUMMER

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



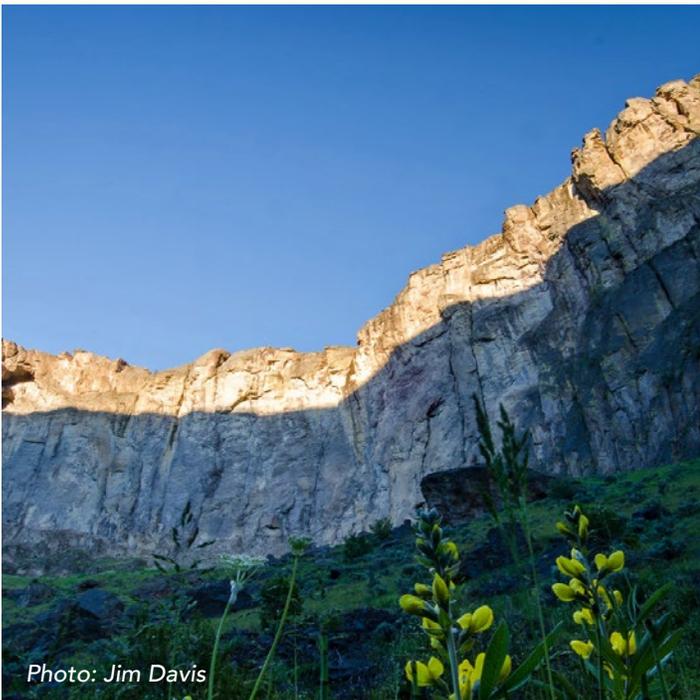
## SAGEBRUSH SOCIALS

Tuesday, June 2 | 5-7 p.m. | Portland  
Peninsula Park, Picnic Shelter A

Wednesday, June 10 | 5-7 p.m. | Bend  
Miller's Landing Park

Wednesday, September 16 | 5-7 p.m. | Eugene  
Alton Baker Park, Shelter 1

Save the date! Join fellow ONDA members, staff and supporters for these casual summer celebrations of the dedicated community who supports high desert conservation. Catch up with other desert enthusiasts and learn about upcoming conservation initiatives. Find more details at [ONDA.org/events/](https://onda.org/events/).



## CALL FOR PHOTO SUBMISSIONS

Opens Wednesday, April 1

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

*Photo submissions begin April 1. To be considered for the 2027 Wild Desert Calendar, submit your photos by June 1.*

Shots of winter scenes, areas of conservation importance, desert plants and wildlife or 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 at [ONDA.org/submit-your-photos](https://onda.org/submit-your-photos).

## DESERT OUTING

# SPOT DESERT WILDLIFE

*Head to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge for easy and abundant viewing options*

**BY SCOTT BOWLER, VOLUNTEER**



In French, the name Malheur means “misfortune and bad luck.” Perhaps this comes from the area’s occasional harsh conditions. But wildlife enthusiasts will know that, contrary to its name, south-eastern Oregon’s Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is the place to go for good fortune when the aim is spotting wildlife.

The Malheur refuge and the surrounding areas provide some of Oregon’s premier wildlife watching opportunities, especially for birds. This 187,757-acre refuge contains mainly wetlands and provides a great diversity of particular habitats—supporting an amazing array of animal users. Just beyond the refuge, the public lands on Steens Mountain to the east and the rolling sagebrush steppe to the west provide a rich and diverse habitat matrix, supporting what may be among the most varied animal populations in Oregon.

**BIRDS.** More than 340 bird species call Malheur National Wildlife Refuge home, but migrating birds are the stars of the show. Migrants start arriving in March and typically peak in May. Many birds just stop over before heading farther north, but others will spend their breeding season in the area.

Look especially for sandhill cranes, Ross and snow geese, swans, many different ducks (shovelers, teal, ruddy), plenty of shorebirds (American avocet, stilts, sandpipers, willets), and many perching birds (sparrows, warblers, blackbirds, shrikes, swallows).

If viewing raptors is your goal, winter time is best, and spring songbird spotting is not to be missed.

*Expert Tip: Migratory birds can be especially abundant in the diverse wetlands along the Donner und Blitzen River running northwards from French Glen towards Malheur and Harney Lakes.*

**MAMMALS.** The refuge’s essential habitat also supports some 67 mammal species. Larger mammals abound in summer and fall, and they tend to frequent the uplands around the refuge headquarters

and the southern Blitzen Valley.

The refuge is most notably home to mule deer, pronghorn and elk, and the refuge headquarters is again an easy and excellent viewing area. After the snow melts off for the season, venture further afield when roads open that give access to the high country. Here you’ll also find pronghorn, deer, elk, as well as elusive bighorn sheep.

*Expert Tip: Higher elevation locations tend to be better for finding high desert mammals. Plus, if you venture up there in the summer, you’ll also be treated to wildflowers.*

**ENJOY THE AREA.** Start your visit early at the refuge headquarters. With support from the Friends of the Malheur Refuge organization, headquarters has abundant resources including bird lists, maps, driving tour brochures, and staff and volunteers to field questions. Next, head down the Central Patrol Road to enjoy the auto tour. You’ll find many lakes, ponds, marshes and thickets to visit, each home to different species depending on the season.

With great camping and lodging options nearby, consider spending a night or two as there is so much to see and do in the area, including miles of great hiking trails, open alpine wandering through diverse wildflowers, beautiful aspen groves, and gorgeous ponds and streams.

*Expert Tip: Don’t just drive through the refuge. Bring your binoculars, sun protection, bug spray, hiking gear, and explore at a leisurely pace on foot.*

**STEWARDED THE REFUGE.** ONDA has worked with refuge staff and other partners for decades to restore habitat and improve conservation management on the refuge. *Learn more about recent efforts at [onda.org/regions/steens-mountain-region/malheur-national-wildlife-refuge/](http://onda.org/regions/steens-mountain-region/malheur-national-wildlife-refuge/).*

*Photo 1 and 4: Sage Brown  
Photo 2: Dan Streiffert  
Photo 3: Jeremy Austin*

## STAFF + BOARD UPDATES



### MATEO REYNAUD

Thank you to Mateo, who joined us as our Hillis Intern last fall, working on events and communications out of our Portland office. He is a recent graduate of the University of Oregon and,

following the Hillis Internship, Mateo looks forward to using the skills he learned to support and write about Oregon's outdoors.



### NAOMI SERIO

We welcomed Naomi as ONDA's new Community Organizer, based in Bend. In this dynamic role, she engages local communities, builds partnerships, and mobilizes people to protect

our spectacular high desert lands, waters and wildlife. Drawn to conservation through experience in both research and hands-on advocacy, Naomi brings a strong background in community engagement and environmental science to the role.



### NICK KILBY

As our new Stewardship Coordinator, Nick will be leading stewardship trips to engage volunteers in restoring desert habitat. He brings experience working on stewardship and restoration

projects with the Deschutes National Forest and ThinkWild to the role.



### RENEE PATRICK

After nearly a decade of stewarding and promoting the Oregon Desert Trail, Renee has stepped aside as Oregon Desert Trail Advisor at ONDA. The ODT is a 750-route that winds through

some of the most beautiful and iconic places in Oregon's high desert. Thank you, Renee, for your care, vision and commitment to the trail, and your lasting contribution to conserving this landscape.

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

### MEET PHYLLIS PENGELLY



BY KARINA DIAZ, DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR

Phyllis Pengelly discovered Oregon Natural Desert Association in 2007 when she came across our Wild Desert Calendar, a publication that showcases the natural wonders of Oregon's high desert. Soon after, Phyllis and a friend began attending ONDA events with a former board member. During one early outing—helping roll up barbed wire—she became truly hooked on conserving the high desert, and Phyllis has now been a frequent volunteer for nearly two decades.

Phyllis has participated in numerous stewardship trips, volunteering to monitor sage-grouse at Hart Mountain and to plant willows along the South Fork of the Crooked River. She recalls, "It's a magical experience to be up before dawn in the desert, listening to the drum of the grouse and seeing their big white chests in the distance. I'm so grateful to have been able to do that."

Inspired by the beauty and importance of the high desert, Phyllis wanted to help spread the word and encourage others to support conservation. She now volunteers at nearly every Bend event, welcoming newcomers and encouraging people to get involved. You'll often find her behind the membership table or selling raffle tickets at our annual Wild & Scenic Film Festival. Over the past 10 years alone, Phyllis has volunteered with ONDA on more than 70 different occasions.

From events to office help, ONDA has volunteer opportunities in Bend and Portland—and we're always happy to welcome new folks. *Learn more at [ONDA.org/volunteer](https://onda.org/volunteer).*

Oregon Natural Desert Association  
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# Give the gift of continuing conservation

Your legacy gift sustains the health of Oregon's desert lands, waters and wildlife.



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

Photo: James Parsons

## Protecting, defending and restoring Oregon's high desert since 1987.

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.

**LEARN MORE AT ONDA.ORG**

