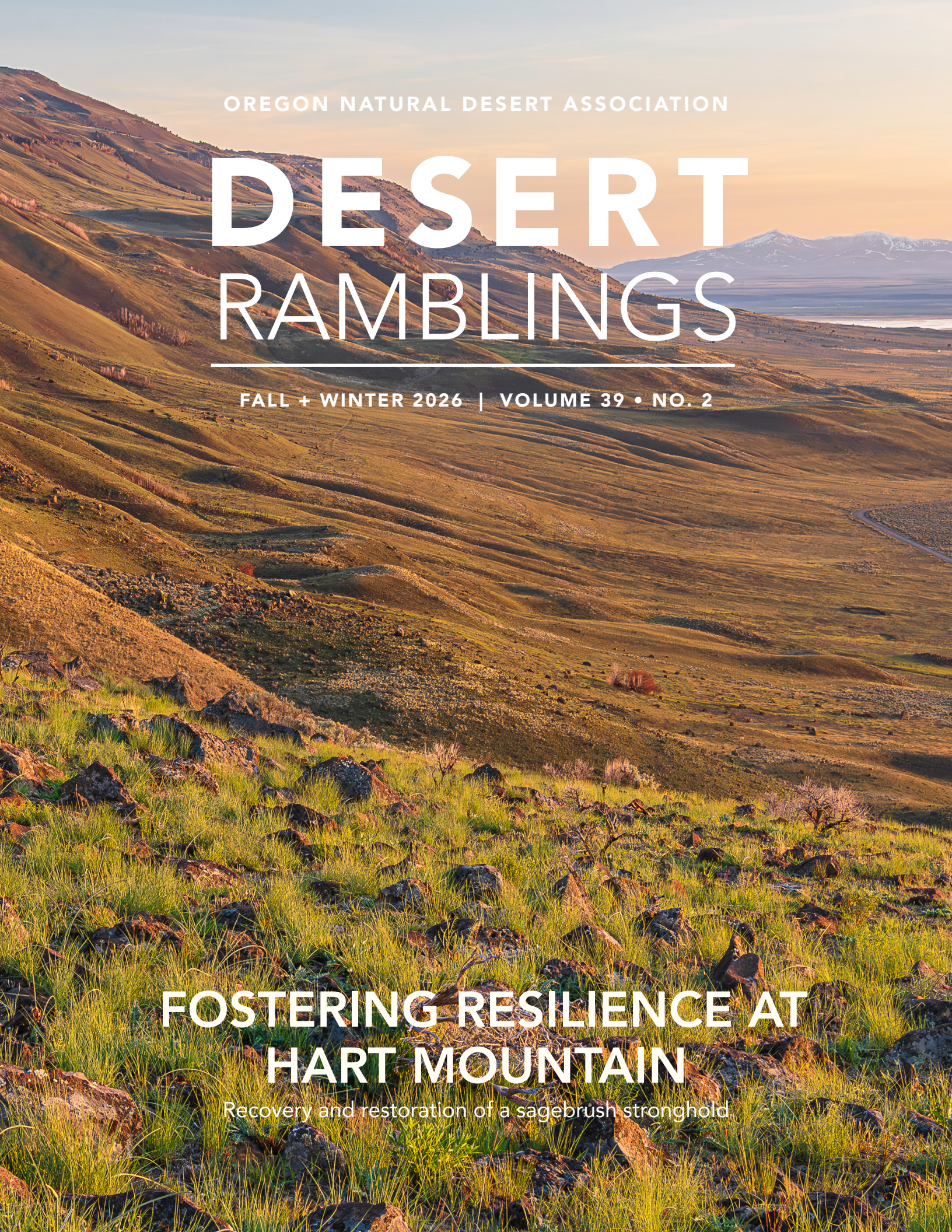




OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

DESERT RAMBLINGS

FALL + WINTER 2026 | VOLUME 39 • NO. 2

FOSTERING RESILIENCE AT HART MOUNTAIN

Recovery and restoration of a sagebrush stronghold



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OVERHEARD

"I love the relatively untouched landscapes and ecosystems of eastern Oregon. I see ONDA as an advocate and defender of those lands, so I support ONDA."

Cover: Hart Mountain recovering from the Warner Peak fire.
Photo: Jim Davis

Pueblo Mountain. Photo: Bruce Couch



Dear Oregon desert advocate,

Here at Oregon Natural Desert Association, our work to protect, defend, and restore Oregon's high desert never rests.

Field crews inventorying wildlands, research teams studying fire recovery, volunteers on stewardship trips, and advocates championing strong protections have been hard at work throughout the season. Day in and day out, we have been collecting data, planting trees, generating public comments, and pushing forward a conservation vision for Oregon's high desert.

At the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, where a 65,000-acre fire burned in 2024, ONDA took advantage of the long summer days to work in the field with academics, students, and refuge staff to study fire recovery in the absence of livestock grazing. As one of the few regions free from the impacts of domestic livestock, Hart Mountain serves as an important model for resiliency in the high desert.

Nearby, working across the vast stretches of public lands surrounding Steens Mountain, field teams have been inventorying nearly 600,000 acres of wildlands, collecting the data needed to support strong, science-based advocacy for conservation in the years ahead. Maps, photos, GPS points, and route inventories will all be compiled into reports used by land managers in the years ahead as they decide how to best manage this corner of the desert.

All the while, thousands of miles away in Washington, D.C., some elected leaders have continued to threaten public lands while undermining long-established principles for public lands management. The current administration is seeking to overturn decades-old policy designed to protect the most important, most intact public lands across the West. And they are seeking to remove regulations to promote the short-term financial interests of a few over the long-term interests of the public.

ONDA members—including the most ardent Desert Defenders highlighted here in Desert Ramblings—have responded with determination and resolve, generating thousands of comments opposing rollbacks to grazing regulations, massive new industrial proposals, and the weakening of conservation policies.

Your unwavering energy and advocacy has and will continue to bring us closer to our vision of a healthy, thriving high desert. Thank you!



For a wild desert,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'RH' with a stylized flourish.

Ryan Houston
Executive Director

Hart Mountain. Photo: Mark Darnell





Activists lobby for wildlife. Photo: Mary Patenburg

CONSERVATION

Become a Desert Defender

From love of place to grassroots power

NAOMIO SERIO, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

Crisp air flooded with the scent of sagebrush. The quiet calm of waterfowl paddling across desert lakes. The pure awe of watching your first pronghorn herd in motion. Experiences like these ignite a love of Oregon's high desert and a deep desire to protect these public lands.

Oregon's irreplaceable high desert is facing more threats now than ever before, including attempts to dismantle and defund land management agencies, regulatory rollbacks, and efforts to sell off public lands. This is in addition to ongoing concerns such as mining proposals, development, and other extractive uses that put wildlife habitat in eastern Oregon at risk.

At ONDA, grassroots advocacy has a central role in our conservation work. Every time you respond to our action alerts, you're taking an important step in protecting and defending Oregon's high desert. There are also times when we need advocates to engage in ways that require more time and information. This

could mean writing a letter to the editor, attending a town hall meeting, organizing an educational event, or monitoring conditions in priority landscapes.

If you're hungry to channel your skills, interests, and love for Oregon's high desert into this type of advocacy, we invite you to become a Desert Defender. We host an online meeting every other month to discuss current conservation priorities in Oregon's high desert and opportunities for public engagement. Our aim is to build grassroots power by equipping you with the knowledge and connections to turn your love for this place into effective conservation advocacy.

Take a lead role in ONDA's next conservation success by signing up to be a Desert Defender at [ONDA.org/take-action](https://onda.org/take-action).



STEWARDSHIP

Tribal Stewards Partnership Invests in Indigenous Leadership

Supporting the next generation of desert stewards

GENA GOODMAN-CAMPBELL,
STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR

Eight years after Oregon Natural Desert Association launched the Tribal Stewards program, the effort is spreading its roots in the Burns Paiute Tribe community and growing its impact across Oregon's high desert, thanks to a deepened partnership with the Tribe and Lomakatsi Restoration Project.

With the goal of supporting emerging conservation leaders in Tribal communities, the program provides a wide variety of paid work experiences for Tribal young adult participants alongside mentorship opportunities.

"The Tribal Stewards program gives our young adults opportunities to start a career in conservation. With all of the different jobs they get to do and people they meet as stewards, I hope one of their experiences sparks an interest in them that gives them the motivation needed to be successful in whatever path they choose," said Jody Richards, interim Deputy General Manager for the Burns Paiute Tribe, who also serves on its Tribal Council.

During this year's eight-week summer program, Tribal Stewards collected native grass seed to restore desert habitat impacted by wildfire and monitored the effects of a changing climate on migratory birds at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The group learned from elders and other knowledge holders within the Burns Paiute Tribe, while also gaining insights from land management agencies and conservation professionals.

"The Tribal Stewards program is kick-starting a restoration workforce in the Burns Paiute Tribe community and is initiating important conversations



Tribal Stewards at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Photos: Ian Snyder

about long-term stewardship and natural resource opportunities for the Tribe, both on their Tribally-owned lands and across their ancestral homelands," said George Swartzlender, Tribal Initiatives Project Manager with Lomakatsi Restoration Project.

Encompassing more than 5,000 square miles of land from central Oregon to western Idaho, the traditional lands of the Burns Paiute Tribe include iconic places like Steens Mountain and Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. While this landscape is remarkably resilient, Oregon's high desert also faces many challenges—from climate change and invasive annual grasses to encroaching extractive uses and industrial development—that Tribal Stewards and program partners are working together to address.

Tackling these challenges requires combining the restoration experience of conservation groups like ONDA and Lomakatsi Restoration Project with the deep Indigenous Knowledge of the Burns Paiute Tribe.

"My hope is that our young people who are participating in the Tribal Stewards program will become leaders who will teach the next generation how to be stewards of our lands," said Richards.

Ryan Houston, ONDA's Executive Director noted, "Indigenous peoples have lived throughout Oregon's high desert since time immemorial, and partnerships with Tribal and Indigenous communities like Tribal Stewards are central to how we will collectively protect, defend, and restore Oregon's high desert for generations to come."



Hart Mountain after the Warner Peak Fire. Photo: Jim Davis

Fostering Resilience at Hart Mountain

Recovery and restoration of a sagebrush stronghold

MARK SALVO, SENIOR ADVISOR,

GENA GOODMAN-CAMPBELL, STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR

Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge is among the most important remaining sagebrush strongholds in the American West. Established in 1936 to conserve pronghorn (historically misnamed “antelope”), the refuge encompasses expansive sagebrush grasslands, sparkling creeks, lush mountain meadows, verdant aspen groves, and dramatic rocky ridges that provide habitat for hundreds of native species. Pronghorn, greater sage-grouse, bighorn sheep, pygmy rabbit, native trout, and countless species of migratory birds depend on this remarkable Oregon desert landscape.

Hart Mountain’s public lands would not be what they are today if not for the removal of domestic livestock from the refuge in 1990. Oregon Natural Desert Association’s community played a role in achieving this extraordinary and controversial conservation milestone. Over the last 34 years, native vegetation, desert springs, streams and meadows, and fragile soils steadily recovered from more than a century of grazing impacts. Free from chronic grazing disturbance, the refuge has become a living demonstration of the resilience of high desert ecosystems while also protecting increasingly rare intact sagebrush habitat.

THE WARNER PEAK FIRE

In August 2024, Mother Nature presented the refuge with a new challenge. Lightning ignited a wildfire along the refuge’s rugged western escarpment. Driven by hot, windy conditions, the Warner Peak Fire raced down the broad eastern slope of the refuge, scorching ecologically rich mountain shrublands and streamside habitats. The fire raged for 24 days before it was fully contained, burning more than 65,000 acres—nearly one-quarter of the refuge.

Wildfire is a natural part of sagebrush ecosystems, and Hart Mountain has experienced periodic fires throughout its history. But Oregon’s high desert is no longer the same landscape it was even a few decades ago. Climate change and invasive annual grasses now fuel hotter, larger, and more frequent fires than historically occurred in the region. Native shrubs recover slowly, while invasive grasses such as cheatgrass rapidly colonize burned areas, outcompeting native vegetation, increasing the likelihood of future fires and creating a destructive feedback cycle.

Eastern Oregon offers stark examples. The Long Draw Fire (2012), Miller Homestead Fire (2012), and Buzzard Complex Fire (2014) together burned more than one million acres and left extensive cheatgrass invasion in their wake. As the smoke cleared from the Warner Peak Fire, ONDA and our partners wondered: would Hart Mountain tell a different story?

HART MOUNTAIN POST-FIRE RECOVERY RESEARCH PROJECT

Even before firefighters had finally extinguished the Warner Peak Fire, ONDA began assembling a scientific team to study the refuge's recovery. Understanding how Hart Mountain responds is important not only for the refuge itself, but also for what it may reveal about restoring and managing other sagebrush landscapes affected by wildfire across the West.

We were thrilled to partner with Dr. Michael Reisner of Augustana College and Dr. Lisa Ellsworth of Oregon State University to design a long-term study comparing burned and unburned areas on the refuge. With no time to lose, scientists, students, and field technicians gathered at Hart Mountain in late June this year to establish study sites and collect the first season of data. The group was also joined by Dr. Rick Miller and Dr. David Pyke, two of the nation's leading sagebrush ecologists, who shared invaluable observations and offered impromptu lessons on sagebrush steppe and post-fire recovery.

What we discovered was both sobering and encouraging.

While invasive annual grasses had crowded into some burned areas, native grasses and wildflowers had also emerged from the ashes, and tiny sagebrush, bitterbrush, and snowberry seedlings had sprouted across many of our study plots. Perhaps the refuge ecosystem, having not been grazed by livestock for more than 30 years, has greater resilience to wildfire than surrounding, grazed public lands?

Hart Mountain burn area. Photo: Jim Davis



Researchers collect data. Photo: Anne White

Over the coming years, we will continue measuring vegetation recovery to better understand how this extraordinary landscape responds to one of the defining conservation challenges facing sagebrush steppe in Oregon and across the West.

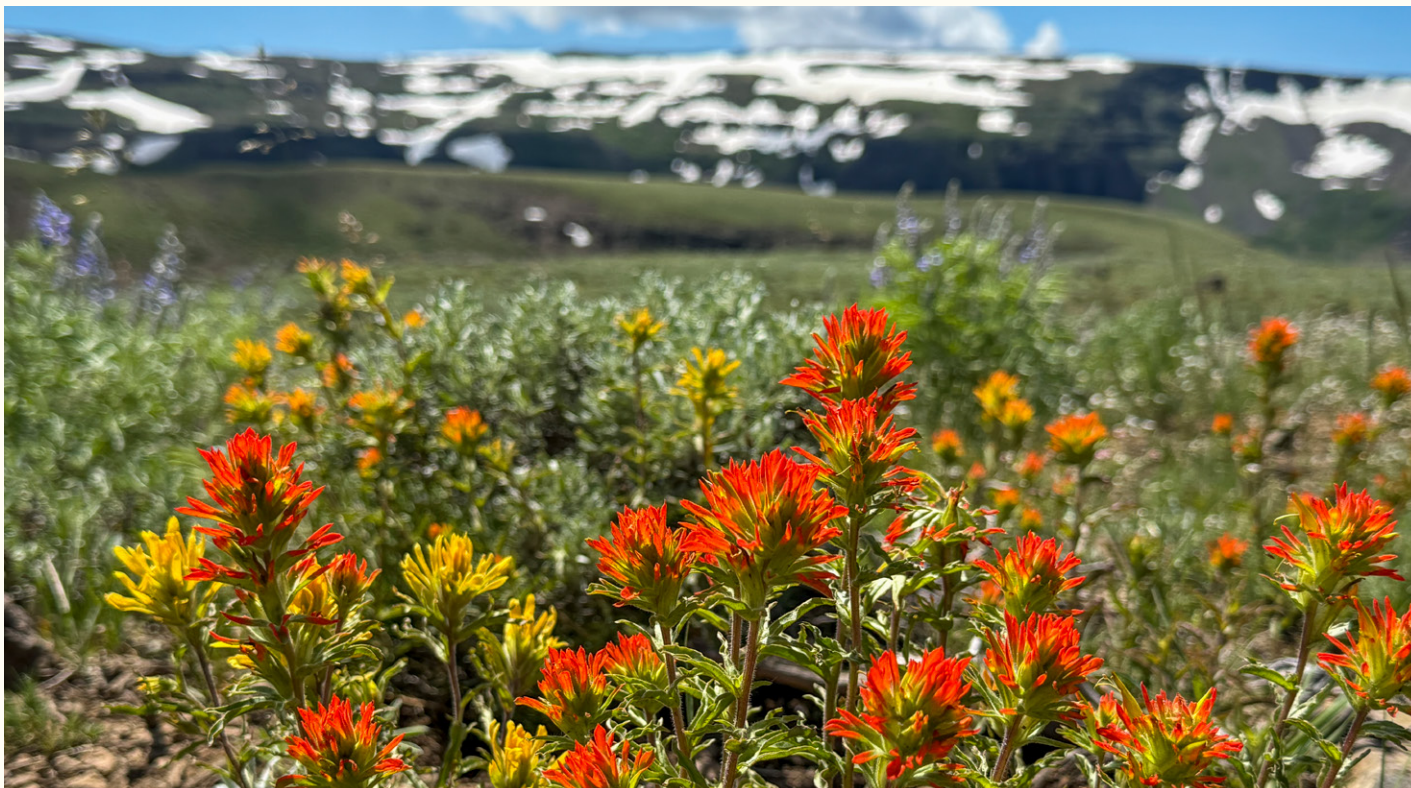
PARTNERING ON REFUGE RESTORATION

In the meantime, ONDA is also partnering with the refuge to complete urgent restoration actions on Rock Creek and other waterways impacted by fires. In 2025, severe storms brought heavy rainfall that eroded the banks of Rock Creek, which lost much of its streamside vegetation in the fire. These conditions were contributing to further harm, with every big storm flooding the popular Hot Springs Campground and damaging nearby habitat.

Refuge staff reached out to ONDA for assistance, and we quickly responded. ONDA organized dozens of volunteers to build Beaver Dam Analogs along Rock Creek and nearby Bond Creek. These natural structures, built to mimic small beaver dams, slow water flowing through the area and mitigate erosion. The dams also collect sediment and force floodwaters to infiltrate streambanks, reducing their destructive power and instead supporting the regeneration of dense aspen groves and other important wildlife habitat.

Now, ONDA is collaborating with the refuge to plan additional stream restoration projects across Hart Mountain. Working together, we will ensure this incredible, resilient habitat comes back even better than it was before the fire.

For decades, ONDA has answered the call whenever Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge was in need, and that commitment will continue. As Oregon's high desert public lands continue to experience unprecedented ecological change, Hart Mountain will become increasingly important as both a sanctuary for native wildlife and a model for recovery and restoration of resilient sagebrush ecosystems throughout the American West.



Steens Mountain Paintbrush. Photo: Tara Lemezis

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Indian Paintbrush

Painting the desert in vibrant hues

SOPHIA BORGESON, DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE

With its sunset-like color palette, few wildflowers capture the attention of desert hikers quite like Indian paintbrush. From April to August, this botanical artist blankets Oregon's high desert with vibrant hues of pink, red, orange, and yellow. Some paintbrush species will even display all of these colors in a single patch.

You can find over 30 native species of Indian paintbrush in Oregon's high desert. Common favorites include desert paintbrush (*Castilleja chromosa*), Applegate's paintbrush (*Castilleja applegatei*), and scarlet paintbrush (*Castilleja miniata*). Steens Mountain even has its own endemic variety of this showy perennial, aptly named Steens Mountain paintbrush (*Castilleja pilosa* var. *steenensis*).

Standing five inches to two feet tall, this durable wildflower remains vivid and intact for months at a time. Adaptable to a wide range of elevations, from sea level up to 12,000 feet, this versatile plant thrives in a diversity of habitats. Some species favor dry brushy slopes, while others prefer sandy flats. Some paintbrush flourish in grassy meadows and others on rocky ridges.

Beneath the cluster of vibrant color that Indian paintbrush is known for is a hairy green, reddish-brown, or purple stem with alternating leaves. Its fiery eye-catching lobes are not petals but rather modified leaves known as bracts. These bracts structurally support the small green flowers nestled among them. While this design lacks a convenient landing pad for many insects, the tubular-shaped flowers are well suited to hovering nectar-seeking pollinators like hummingbirds, who are particularly drawn to the crimson flares. Nearby plant species also benefit when these same pollinators visit them, providing broad ecosystem advantages.

Paintbrush has the versatile trait of being hemiparasitic, meaning the plant relies on a living host plant to provide most of its nutrition. Its green leaves allow paintbrush to photosynthesize, but it also has specialized root structures called haustoria that sequester water and nutrients from the roots of other species like sagebrush, lupine, and various perennial grasses, contributing to biodiversity. By reducing the growth of dominant host plants, paintbrush creates opportunities for weaker competitors to coexist.

Intriguing wildflowers like Indian paintbrush offer a reminder of the intrinsic, irreplaceable beauty of Oregon's desert public lands. ONDA's landscape-scale conservation efforts ensure desert plants, including paintbrush and dozens of others, flourish alongside fish, wildlife, and communities for decades to come.

FALL + WINTER EVENTS

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



Photo: Dale Strouse

WILD & SCENIC FILM FESTIVAL

Friday, October 2, 2026 | 6:00 p.m.
Tower Theatre, Bend and streaming online

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



Photo: Barb Rumer

HIGH DESERT HOOTENANNY

Thursday, November 19, 2026 | 5–7 p.m. | Portland
Thursday, December 3, 2026 | 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 2026. Hear highlights from this year's work to protect, defend, 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: Patrick Alexander

HIGH DESERT SPEAKER SERIES

January–March 2027

This annual series features compelling speakers, captivating stories, stunning photography, and fascinating natural history from Oregon's high desert. These events will inspire attendees to take action to conserve Oregon's desert public lands. Our full lineup of speakers and dates will be announced in late 2026.

DESERT OUTING

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN DESERT BEAUTY THIS FALL

A round-up of hikes along the Oregon Desert Trail

SCOTT BOWLER, ONDA VOLUNTEER

Fall is one of the best times to hike along the Oregon Desert Trail, a 750-mile Oregon Natural Desert Association-conceived route showcasing some of eastern Oregon's most spectacular public lands. Many sections of the trail have beautiful fall color, and cooler temperatures make autumn a great time for either a day hike or a multiday backpacking trip. Here are some of my favorites. Find more information at [ONDA.org/regions/oregon-desert-trail/](https://onda.org/regions/oregon-desert-trail/).



Wildhorse Canyon. Photo: Scott Bowler



Hart Mountain. Photo: Jon Muyskens



South of Anderson Crossing. Photo: CF Hansen

WILDHORSE CANYON

Blazing with colorful aspen, cottonwood, bitter cherry, grasses, and more, Wildhorse Canyon on Steens Mountain is exceptional come fall. From the Steens Mountain Summit parking area, descend a steep mile down to Wildhorse Lake, continue downstream south to the confluence with Little Wildhorse, then return to complete a challenging 6.5-mile loop.

DIABLO RIM

This large, faulted uplift on the east side of Summer Lake offers a 5.5-mile ridge hike with spectacular views. Access Diablo Peak from the town of Summer Lake via Thousand Springs Lane, just north of the rest area. Make a weekend of it and stay at Summer Lake Hot Springs to enjoy a post-hike soak.

HART MOUNTAIN NATIONAL ANTELOPE REFUGE

DeGarmo Canyon offers an easy 1.5-mile out-and-back hike to a waterfall, or continue on to summit Hart Mountain or Warner Peak. Camp at the spectacular Hart Mountain Hot Springs Campground to extend your adventure.

ABERT RIM

The largest exposed fault scarp in North America, Abert Rim offers stunning views of Lake Abert, a rare hypersaline lake vital to migratory birds. Start at the Lake Abert Wildlife Viewing Area, park by the sign, and hike up to the rim. Once up there, explore forests with high meadows and aspen groves.

OWYHEE CANYONLANDS

Visit Anderson Crossing on the West Little Owyhee River, a gorgeous wild river canyon requiring a longer camping trip. Most routes involve river crossings and are often inaccessible during springtime runoff. You'll need a high-clearance vehicle to access the area and explore.

FOND FAREWELLS AND WARM WELCOMES



After nearly 30 years advocating for the conservation of public lands across the West, Mark Salvo has retired from his role as our conservation director. Mark is a tireless advocate, driven by his affinity for protecting habitat for the greater sage-grouse and well known for his encyclopedic knowledge of all things related to federal public lands policy. Although he is now officially retired, Mark remains deeply engaged with ONDA and will continue working with us as a senior conservation advisor.



This summer, we thanked our Communications Manager, Renee Schiavone, for her many contributions to ONDA's conservation work. Renee shared the wonders of the high desert far and wide, engaging and inspiring people to get involved in efforts to protect, defend, and restore Oregon's desert public lands. We're grateful for Renee's dedicated service, and we offer her our best wishes as she moves out of state to continue her education.



In May, we brought on two Wilderness Inventory Technicians, Shea Stobaugh and Wendy Short, who spent their summer inventorying the wilderness characteristics of more than 430,000 acres of land south and east of Steens Mountain. Their work supports efforts to protect Oregon desert public lands in the Sheepshead, Pueblo, and Trout Creek mountains. We thank Shea and Wendy for their essential work.



We're pleased to welcome Becca Kay as ONDA's new communications manager. Based in Bend, Becca brings a deep background in communications and advocacy to the role, as well as a long-term commitment to caring for the environment and a passion for the outdoors.

ONDA'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS IS PLEASED TO WELCOME TWO NEW BOARD MEMBERS, GREG CITTADINI AND INGE WELLS



Greg began exploring Oregon's high desert 25 years ago with his fly fishing rod in hand, and he has since become a dedicated ONDA member and volunteer. Through his travels around central and eastern Oregon, he has witnessed firsthand how a shared love of the land can bring people together to support conservation and stewardship. You can often find Greg volunteering at ONDA events in Portland.



Inge grew up in the Willamette Valley and fell in love with Oregon's high desert while hiking and camping in the Owyhee Canyonlands, Steens Mountain, and the John Day River Basin. Inge worked in the Appellate Division of the Oregon Department of Justice for nearly 20 years, representing state natural resource agencies on a range of topics related to water, land, fish, and wildlife management in Oregon. She has served on numerous boards over the years and is eager to use her legal expertise, skills, and experience to help ONDA conserve Oregon's high desert.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Photo: Mike Greenstreet

Connected Across State Lines

Mike Greenstreet supports conservation from afar

Mike Greenstreet calls Olympia, WA home, but living out of state hasn't changed his connection to Oregon's high desert. Mike was born in Ontario, Oregon in 1950 and believes those first scented days of sagebrush and juniper hooked him on the desert for life. Although two years later his family moved to the Eugene-Springfield area, eastern Oregon remained a favorite place. "Being outdoors was just part of life," Mike says as he recounts a childhood filled with outdoor adventures.

Today, retirement and access to vacation rentals make weeklong desert trips easy, even from Olympia. Mitchell, Oregon has become a favorite place where there are so many areas to visit: Spring Basin Wilderness, Cottonwood Canyon State Park, Sutton Mountain, Painted Hills, Lookout Mountain and Black Canyon Wilderness.

Mike appreciates the many ways ONDA connects people to the high desert, including the hiking guides that inspire new adventures and the educational programs. ONDA's High Desert Speaker Series, especially the 2026 event about beavers, reminded him of his solo journeys into the Pueblo Mountains to watch beavers.

Most of all, he values ONDA's work conserving the landscapes he has loved for decades, especially the streams, willows, and stream-side areas that support wildlife. "I look back and think at every stage of life I've been out in the desert doing something. I've been fly fishing on the Deschutes forever, skiing in desert country where most people don't think about skiing, backpacking, and more."

Members like Mike show that no matter where you live, conserving Oregon's high desert public lands is about staying connected to the places you love and ensuring they'll be there for future generations.

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

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Add a gift to your will now to ensure future
generations can appreciate the high desert.

ccekander@onda.org | 503.703.1006 | ONDA.org/legacy



Photo: John Burkhardt

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

