

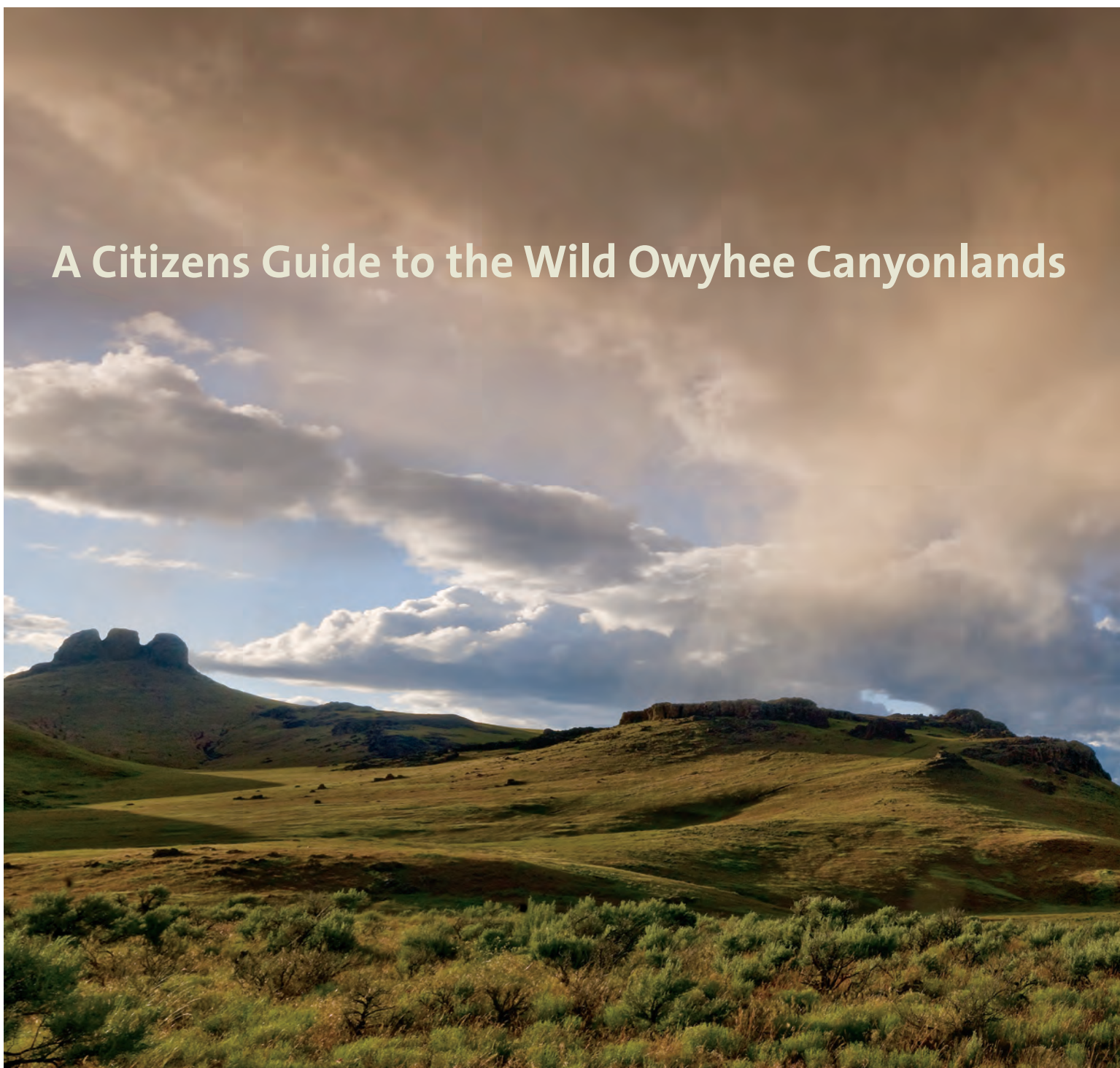


Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands



Protecting Our Desert Heritage

A Citizens Guide to the Wild Owyhee Canyonlands



Three Fingers Butte, proposed Wilderness in the Lower Owyhee Canyonlands. Photo: © Mark W. Lisk

At 1.9 million acres, the Owyhee Canyonlands represents one of the largest conservation opportunities in the United States.



Welcome to Oregon’s Owyhee Canyonlands—the center of the sagebrush sea and iconic landscape of the arid West. This remote corner of Southeast Oregon calls to those seeking solitude, unconfined space and a self-reliant way of life. Come raft the Wild & Scenic Owyhee River; hunt big game and upland birds; and walk dry streambeds surrounded by geologic formations from another world. We live and visit here because it is truly unique.



Greeley Flat—Owyhee Breaks Wilderness Study Area. Photo © Mark W. Lisk

The Oregon Owyhee Canyonlands Campaign is working to protect one of the most expansive and dramatic landscapes in the West, featuring rare wildlife, pristine waterways and incredible outdoor recreational opportunities.

Stretching from the mountain ranges of the Great Basin to fertile expanses of the Snake River Plain, the Owyhee Desert ecosystem encompasses nearly 9 million acres across three states. Local residents refer to it as ION country, since the Canyonlands lie at the confluence of Idaho, Oregon and Nevada. The name *Owyhee* harkens back to a time before state lines were drawn, when three Hawaiian trappers were killed by local residents. An archaic spelling of their island home (oh-WYE-hee) became the name of this landscape of deep riverine canyons and sagebrush sea.



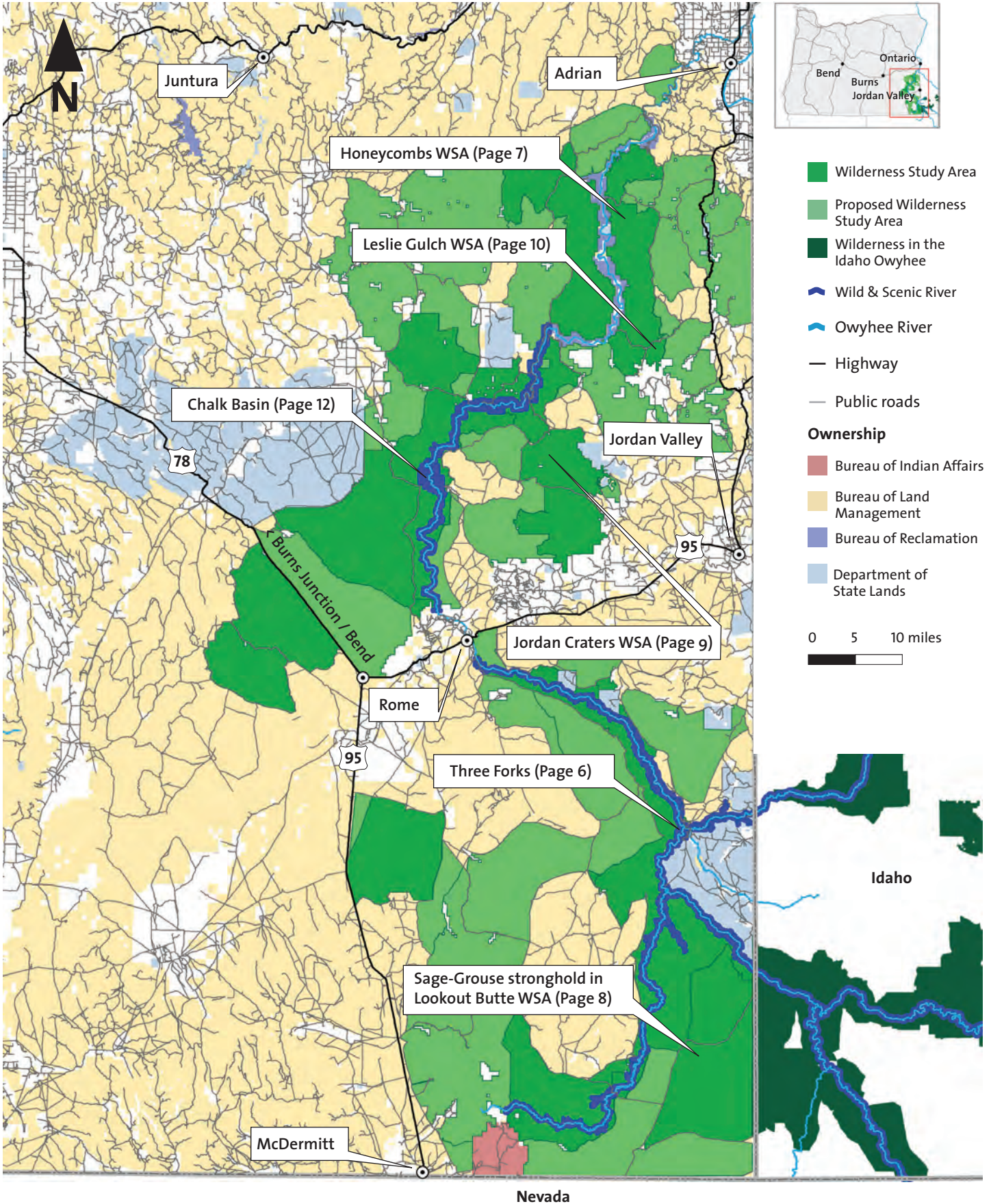
Seventeen contiguous Wilderness Study Areas, spanning 1 million acres of public land, have been designated by the Bureau of Land Management. Citizen inventories have identified an additional 900,000 acres with wilderness characteristics that merit permanent protection.

Conservation of Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands has significant economic benefits for communities in Southeast Oregon's Malheur County. Over \$9 million was spent by hunters, anglers, and visitors in 2008 alone. Tourism and recreation are currently a vital part of the local economy, and a promising area for future economic growth.



Three Forks hot springs.
Photo © Sarah Lynch

Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands Conservation Opportunities





Recreation

The Owyhee Canyonlands offer a wide range of recreational opportunities.

The deep gorges and canyon walls of the Owyhee River mark the heart of this incredible landscape. The *New York Times* has gone so far to proclaim the area “Oregon’s Grand Canyon.” All told there are 186 miles of the Owyhee that carry a Wild & Scenic River designation, protecting the free-flowing character of the river.

Rafting:

Rafters flock to the Owyhee in the spring and early summer, when water levels are highest. The middle section of the Owyhee from Three Forks to Rome is a 39-mile challenge, featuring Class III, IV, V+ rapids with boulder gardens, heavy hydraulics and steep drops. The Lower Owyhee, from Rome to Birch Creek, is 48 miles of Class II, III, and IV rapids; these have a pool-and-drop character, where quiet water extends to the lip of rapids before falling sharply over into other pools.

After a day on the river, boaters often choose a camp based on proximity to unique geologic formations. A side hike to the light-colored spires of Chalk Basin and Pruet’s Castle or a climb to the canyon rim offer amazing views of purple, indigo and orange blending into a desert sunset.

Hiking and backpacking:

Exploring the maze-like geologic formations or vast expanses of uninterrupted terrain on foot is one of the most intimate ways to see the Owyhee. Leslie Gulch Wilderness Study Area (WSA) offers incredible hiking in four gulches: Dago, Upper Leslie, Runaway and Juniper; with views of Mahogany Mountain, the Honeycombs and Jordan Craters.

Backpackers find the Owyhee an excellent destination because the sheer size of the area allows for multiple day trips



Honeycombs Wilderness Study Area. Photo © David Kessner

and self-designed loops that can cover dozens of miles. Far-flung areas such as Anderson Crossing, Three Forks and Five Bar serve as jumping-off points to an authentic wilderness experience.

Hot Springs:

The Owyhee is home to remote and intimate hot springs that rank among the best in the state. At Three Forks, a water-fall tumbles into a series of pools that visitors can soak in while watching the lazy Owyhee River drift through the river canyon.

Hunting:

Big game hunting within the Owyhee Canyonlands is renowned throughout the West. The handful of highly sought after tags issued yearly for California bighorn sheep in the Lower and Upper Owyhee Canyon are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for hunters.

Many hunters are equally as passionate about upland game birds in the open country. Eastern Oregon leads the state in chukar production and harvest, while ring-necked pheasants, California quail and mourning doves abound.



Rafting the Wild & Scenic Owyhee River. Photo © Leon Werdinger



Hiking in the Succor Creek proposed Wilderness. Photo © Mark W. Lisk

Honeycombs Wilderness Study Area

If you're searching for solitude and the rugged terrain that provide shelter for iconic mammals and raptors in the Owyhee, head to the 38,000-acre Honeycombs Wilderness Study Area. The area is a formidable maze of volcanic ash towers secluded from the din of civilization. Motorized off-road-vehicle (ORV) use is prohibited in the Honeycombs, allowing hikers and backpackers to follow the sandy washes in Painted and Carlton Canyons or Three Fingers Gulch. California bighorn sheep use this side of the reservoir in great numbers, and you can usually spot one on a faraway ridge. Golden eagles and ferruginous hawks use the area's great ash spires to nest in winter.



Wildlife

More than 200 species of wildlife roam the Owyhee, using the immense ecosystem for migration and core habitat.



Bighorn sheep. Photo © Greg Burke

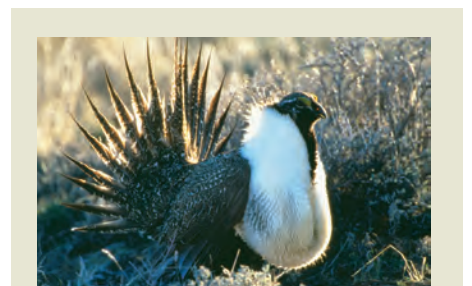
The California bighorn sheep is the most magnificent big game animal in the Owyhee. Since being reintroduced to the Canyonlands in 1965, bighorn sheep have flourished to an estimated 400 individual animals—the largest herd in North America. The rugged, open habitat of the Canyonlands provides opportunities for wild sheep to evade predators, while the outcroppings and cliffs are important lambing sites in the late-spring months.



Pronghorn. Photo © Greg Burke

The fleet-footed pronghorn antelope—the fastest mammal in North America—move quietly over the landscape. Herds of Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer use the Owyhee for their wintering grounds, seeking refuge from deep snows and low temperatures in the canyon country near the Oregon-Idaho border. The migration paths of these animals run through the heart of the Owyhee, connecting the habitat these creatures need to roam.

The Canyonlands are important habitat for raptor species that utilize the steep walls for nesting and roosting. Ferruginous and red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, and peregrine falcons all use the canyon habitat, whose quality is equal to that found in the nationally recognized Snake River Birds of Prey Conservation Area in Idaho.



Greater Sage-Grouse. Photo © Frank Cleland

The most threatened and important species tied to the sagebrush steppe of the Owyhee Canyonlands is the Greater Sage-Grouse. Sage-Grouse rely on vast expanses of unfragmented sagebrush for cover, diet, nesting and mating grounds called “leks.” Countless leks in the Owyhee offer early-risers extraordinary opportunities in the spring to witness the intricate mating dance of the grouse, when males will strut, call and display their tail feathers to attract potential mates.



Geology

The spectacular geologic formations and incised river canyons in the Owyhee Canyonlands set it apart from any other place in the world.



Canyon walls at Iron Point on the Owyhee River. Photo © Greg Burke

In the Owyhee, the complex interaction of volcanism, faulting and sediment deposition have fashioned a landscape of unique beauty and created distinct microhabitats suited for specific flora and fauna.

Uplift and erosion have left a stunning record of the region's geologic history. The deepest part of the Owyhee Canyonlands at Iron Point has sheer walls extending hundreds of feet above the river, revealing a beautiful mosaic of basalt, rhyolite, volcanic ash and sediment. The red rust of iron oxide and the greens, yellows and oranges of lichen and other microflora along the dark basalt contribute to a dizzying array of texture and color.

Tall pale ash walls along the river corridor evoke images of towers and fortresses at places named Chalk Basin, Pruitt's Castle and Lambert Rocks. Here the contrast of black basalt with lighter colored lake sediment creates a layered panoramic that keeps rafters and hikers awestruck.

Jordan Craters Wilderness Study Area

To understand the volcanic events that shaped the region, venture to the 28,000-acre Jordan Craters Wilderness Study Area. This 27-square-mile volcanic field is a reminder of the recent geological history of the Owyhee desert. The vents and lava flows in Jordan Craters are well-preserved because the eruption occurred only an estimated 3,200 years ago.

Much of the basalt in this area originated from the eruption of Coffeepot Crater. The vast crater is actually a cinder cone that produced smooth pahoehoe lava with an undulating and ropy texture. The craters, pits, tubes, blisters and other features of Jordan Craters create an endlessly fascinating landscape reminiscent of the surface of the moon. Rarely explored tubes and caves offer glimpses into delicate ferns and mosses that thrive in microclimates underground. These tubes also house eight different species of bats, including Townsend's big-eared bat, listed as a sensitive species in Oregon.



Jordan Craters Wilderness Study Area. Photo © Greg Burke



Vegetation

The Owyhee encompasses one of the largest remaining expanses of high-quality sagebrush habitat in the West.

Unbroken stretches of olive-green sagebrush roll across the horizon, uninterrupted by the rise of mountains or the shallow decline of playas. The Owyhee encompasses one of the largest remaining expanses of high-quality sagebrush habitat in the West; maintaining these core plant communities is of high ecological importance for wildlife connectivity and overall desert-ecosystem health.

The distinctive hydrology, geology and soils of the Owyhee create a swaying and beautiful understory of bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue and squirreltail that complement the sage. Other herbaceous plants, known as forbs, add dashes of color in the spring: lavenders and soft azures of sand lupine, delicate crimsons and oranges of the various paintbrushes, golds and yellows of arrowleaf balsamroot, or the delicate white of the iconic Bruneau mariposa lily.

The unique soil substrates create room for larkspur, biscuitroot, phlox, penstemon and sagebrush buttercup. In fact, there are several distinct plant communities throughout the Owyhee that might only be recognized by a walk or horseback ride through the area.



Lupine near Three Fingers Gulch proposed Wilderness Study Area. Photo © Mark W. Lisk



Arrowleaf balsamroot in the Owyhee Breaks Wilderness Study Area. Photo © Scott Bauer

Upper Leslie Gulch Wilderness Study Area

It is estimated that there are at least 28 species of plants that are found only in the Owyhee. Perhaps no place characterizes the endemism of the region more than the 11,653 acres of the Upper Leslie Gulch Wilderness Study Area.

Here the decomposition of volcanic ash deposits creates a full spectrum of soil colors, and each hosts a particular species. The green ash tuff where you might find the annual Packard's blazing star has different geochemical properties than the white ash tuff that hosts desert biscuitroot.

Etter's groundsel, an annual found only in this region, grows on loose talus slopes in the Leslie Gulch drainage. Rare perennials like grimy ivesia and Owyhee clover also find their own separate niches depending on topographic and geologic factors.



Leslie Gulch in the Slocum Creek Wilderness Study Area. Photo © Greg Burke



Local Culture

In the Owyhee Canyonlands, history unfolds free of the trappings of modern life. The landscape remains much the way it has always been.

The Owyhee was inhabited for at least 10,000 years by semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers who are ancestors of the modern-day Northern Paiute, Bannock and Shoshone tribes. These native people shared a lifestyle and culture similar to the indigenous tribes of the Great Plains, seeking out wheatgrass, fescue and Indian rice to winnow and grind into flour.

There are over 500 known archaeological sites in the Owyhee. Near ancient campsites and hunting blinds, archaeologists have unearthed weapons and stone tools made from chert, obsidian, agate, jasper and opalite. These lithic scatters include bones of bighorn sheep and deer hunted centuries ago, as well as remnants of seeds and plants. Excavated sites such as the Dirty Shame Rock Shelter and Birch Creek Historic Ranch reveal objects of an ancient daily life including pottery, clay figurines, woven baskets, nets and sandals.

Petroglyphs Along the River

In many places along the Owyhee River, white etchings on black basalt enchant kayakers and rafters. Geometric drawings featuring human figures, bird tracks, ladders, rain symbols and circles are carved into rock faces. Many mysteries remain locked in these symbols. Archaeologists speculate the drawings might have had shamanistic purposes or been a way to conjure hunting magic. Most likely, these aggregate sites are tapestries of stories of the past.

Traveling around the Owyhee evokes its Wild West heritage. Dirt roads in the area follow sections of wagon roads built in the mid 1800s to provide routes to nearby gold and silver mines at Silver City and Delmar.

Later, the plains drew others to the area, including Basque herders and ranchers. At Birch Creek Historic Ranch, on the National Register of Historic Places, the public can visit and explore outbuildings, cabins and barns. An irrigating waterwheel, handcrafted stone walls and a collection of antique farm equipment transport visitors back to a simpler time. Basque influences can still be seen in the Owyhee gateway town of Jordan Valley, where local cowboy historians are recording the stories of their kin and other pioneers.

Working ranches throughout the Owyhee embody the local values and customs of the West. By protecting big open spaces, these self-reliant communities will continue on as the cultural backbone of the region.





An Owyhee overlook, Chalk Basin. Photo © Greg Burke

Protect the Owyhee Canyonlands

Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands Campaign encourages you to contact the following individuals and ask them to extend permanent protection to this special place.

Senator Ron Wyden
 Senator Jeff Merkley
 Rep. Greg Walden
 Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar

wyden.senate.gov/contact
merkley.senate.gov/contact
walden.house.gov
feedback@ios.doi.gov

Help protect the dramatic Owyhee landscape and its incredible wildlife, recreational opportunities and heritage by joining Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands campaign online at:

www.WildOwyhee.org

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 Chris F. Hansen
 Owyhee Wilderness
 Coordinator

The Oregon Owyhee Canyonlands Initiative is a coalition of citizens coming together to preserve the Owyhee River and its iconic desert landscapes. We envision a future for the Owyhee where plant and animal communities flourish, wide open spaces and recreational opportunities abound, and traditional livelihoods and local communities thrive. The stories, culture, and values of this area were born from the rolling sagebrush hills and dramatic river canyons, and we want the next generation to inherit the same beauty and solitude that we find in the Canyonlands today.

Supporters of the Oregon Owyhee Canyonlands Campaign include the following:



Cover photo: Confluence of the Three Forks of the Owyhee River. Photo: © Mark W. Lisk