

AMERICAN OUTBACK:

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Harney County, Oregon ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Text and Photos by Eric Lucas



Poised on an old fencepost held high by haphazardly stacked rocks, the trail register for Wildhorse Lake leans a tad sideways into the timberline winds on Steens Mountain. The lake itself is a cobalt dinner plate far below; between us and it lie an almost sheer cliff face, a scree slope and snowdrifts still hugging crevices in early July. Only three parties have been down the trail this year, and their penciled comments beckon anyone with a wilderness appetite.

“Spectacular!” “Fishing fabulous.” And, not least: “Trail not 4 Sissies.”

We take this as invitation rather than warning. Down the cliff face we go, looking for flat footing, scooting warily across snow banks, tugging at rock handholds and hairpinning our way down the scree to the open meadows by the lake. Bumblebees buzz in lupine and paintbrush, and gold sand beaches hem the lee shore. From here we cast Renegades up against a rockfall 20 yards away, watching for the telltale flash of gold that marks a strike by one of the lake’s native Lahontan cutthroat trout.

“Trail not 4 Sissies”

These are slender 13-inch beauties of amber, topaz and marigold, with just a brief stitch of vermilion under the jaw that testifies to their species. After two hours of casting—and lollygagging on the beach, watching the sky deepen its blue, and kites patrol the meadows—we head back up to the Range Rover with four fish in hand. Going up proves tougher than down, maybe because heading down is fueled by the adrenaline of anticipation, and heading back carries the mild clutch of regret. And maybe it’s because the high afternoon sun softens the snow beneath our feet. The exposure is a couple hundred feet, and there’s a reason “slide” is a word often paired with “snow.”

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Trail not 4 Sissies, indeed.

But few wimps make their way to Steens Mountain, the 9,733-foot centerpiece of Oregon's Great Basin desert empire. Below the Steens summit, almost 6,000 feet straight down, lies the Alvord Desert, a glistening playa sometimes featured in movies for its salt-pan severity. In the thermals above, golden eagles peruse the escarpments and canyons beneath them, which include an unnerving inspection of any humans who may be about. The distant flats are an unvarying carpet of dryland brush, what songwriter Ian

south. Nevada is the primary state containing the Great Basin, with fingers reaching into California, Oregon and Utah. Its topography is basin-and-range, with hundreds of north-south spines interrupting gravelly flats. Its traffic jams are caused by roadside cattle drives. Its key characteristic is the simple geographic fact that there is no outlet to the sea. Whatever water comes here stays here. Its sheer size is so great that one of the entrances into it, US 95 near Jordan Valley, Ore., bears my favorite highway sign anywhere: "Open Range Next 122 Miles." The number of miles is so large they had to



THERE ARE ONLY A HALF-DOZEN PAVED ROADS, BUT AN INFINITE NUMBER OF TRACKS ON WHICH RANGE ROVERS CAN PLAY.

Tyson calls the "sagebrush sea." Only pronghorn, jackrabbits and rattlesnakes are at ease in this desert.

Harney County, which centers on Steens and has but 7,000 residents, is bigger than several U.S. states and European countries. Frenchglen, the 8-house burg at the west foot of Steens, is the lower-48 spot most distant from an Interstate highway in every direction. There are only a half-dozen paved roads, but an infinite number of tracks on which Range Rovers can play.

Tourism types call this the "Oregon Outback," which is not inappropriate but overlooks its real identity. This is the northernmost bulge of the Great Basin, which is America's largest desert and one of the largest inland basins on earth from which no water leaves. This 200,000 square-mile intermontane plateau is marked by blistering heat in summer, bone-rasping cold in winter. Sage is its indicator plant, as the saguaro is in the Sonoran Desert farther

add a tab to the sign to hold all three digits.

"This is oppressive," my West Coast-born wife told me on her only trip here, on a 60-mile stretch between mountains along which there was nothing but smallish rocks and millions of sagebrush shrubs. I mentioned that sagebrush makes an excellent fire starter, a tinder with a musky smell that flares quickly beneath better cooking wood. She looked at me like I was explaining the beauty of sit-ups.

But the intervention of mountains like Steens, and its westward brother Hart Mountain, moistens and colors the desert. The high pinnacles scrape the winter sky to peel off snow that piles past ten feet, spilling it downhill from May to July in tumbling streams where cottonwoods catch summer breezes and plunging skinny-dippers can cool instantly. I do mean, instantly—10 seconds and your skin feels like sorbet, a blissful sensation in afternoon's 90 degrees.

I come here at least twice a year on a pilgrimage that involves such spiritual necessities as cooking tri-tip steak over a juniper-wood fire, aromatic and smoky. And packing fresh trout in a creel lined with the spearmint that thrives along high-meadow stream banks. Spying deer in the aspens and keeping an eye out for Western tanagers, the red-and-yellow marvels that are the West's most colorful birds. And watching pronghorn antelope take up the challenge posed by passing 4WDs on Hart Mountain back roads. No matter how good a Rover, no matter the configuration, the antelope will win this race. They top out at 50 mph; the roads are made of rock that someone failed to iron flat.

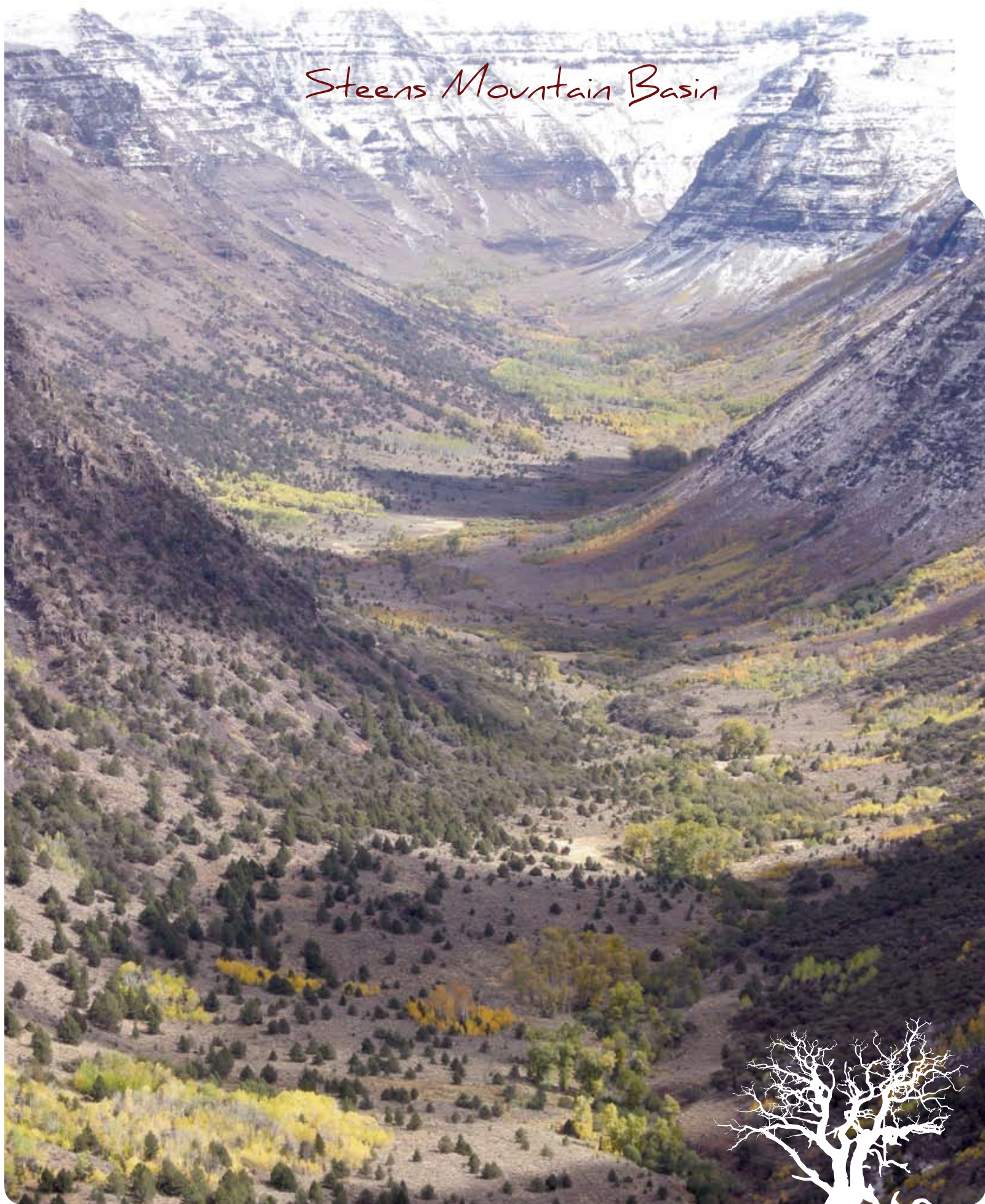
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"Oregon Outback"



Steens Mountain Basin



"Why do they do that?" my friend David asks me, watching two bucks and a half-dozen does lope past us as we bounce along the Post Meadows road at Hart Mountain.

I've asked pronghorn biologists the same question. It seems they do it for fun.

I understand cruising this country for fun, though, rather than sprint, I prefer to lie in the shade of willows along Rock Creek, the chattering stream that creases aspen-gladed meadows in hidden basins on Hart Mountain. Fourteen-inch redband rainbow trout lurk here beneath willow clumps; you must flick woolly-buggers into the shade to lure them out. Or, at the south end of Hart, on Guano Creek, fat 14-inch cutthroat hide beneath cut banks, wild blue iris march off to the mountain flanks, and grasshoppers as big as fighter-jets clack off into the wind. One doesn't play a fish here; these native trout are adapted to extreme circumstances that would tax a Navy Seal. In spring (June, at this elevation), the water glides through the flats 20 miles from the mountain, and one must gun the Range Rover through two feet of water at fords. Each year, as summer warms toward fall, Guano Creek warms, slows and retreats from these outfall meadows to the Hart Mountain foothills, and the trout follow.

I can't explain the name; the nearest guano is on another continent. I can explain why it's called "desert" when there are so many oases and pockets as lush as fresh rain. The sagebrush flats get about 10 inches of moisture a year, much of it in brief cloudbursts that roar through like airborne waterfalls. But the mountains spill and bubble water everywhere. Each gully is lined with aspen, cottonwood, willow and beech; steep slopes reveal springs by downslope ribbons of green.

Desert though it is, those slopes have been carved into vase-sections by Ice Age glaciers that long ago reached their peak on Steens. One of the surrounding gorges on the south end of Steens, Big Indian Gorge, was a favorite of the Paiute people who lived here first; they'd come up in summer, enjoy the mountain breezes, race horses on the flat and camp beneath old cottonwoods at creek's edge. The hike into their old campground is one of my favorites, a five-mile jaunt through sage and aspen and coyote mint to an Edenic lunch spot with a perfect plunge pool beneath a grandfather cottonwood's roots.

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Steens Mountain Basin

Best of all, certain special geologic creases beneath both Hart and Steens yield up hot mineral water. Much as I adore campfire dinners of mint-scented fish, as well as antelope races and high-mountain scenery, this is what I love most of all. Levering myself down into 108-degree, sulfur-scented water at dusk, I lean my head back against the meadow grass and watch the distant ridgeline for moonrise.

First comes the evening star, a small, brisk garnet flash that reveals itself in the deepening indigo sunset. A couple of mule deer stroll by 15 feet

away. "They're not worried about us?" David asks, gazing at them from the cooler eastern end of the pool. "You look pretty harmless right now," I inform him. "Probably I do too."

Then the moon hauls itself over the ridge. In the clear desert mountain air, even at three-quarters full, its light scissors the night so brightly that I could read a prospectus. If I had one. Such things are far away, though. Only crickets and nighthawks and owls make promises here, and I listen as intently as possible, filling my ears with the evening's market report.



Eric Lucas writes for the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, Michelin Travel Publications and other outlets. He lives in Seattle and believes grilled on a wood fire is the best way to cook fresh trout.

IF YOU GO TO THE AMERICAN OUTBACK



Steens Mountain is in southeast Oregon, approximately 60 miles south of Burns, Ore. The nearest airports are in Redmond/Bend (RDM), about a three-hour drive from the west side of Steens; and Boise (BOI), about four hours from the east side of Steens and the Alvord Desert.

Frenchglen, the little hamlet at the bottom of Steens, has one accommodation: the delightful, historic Frenchglen Hotel, which is owned by Oregon State Parks. Its frontier roadhouse-style facilities have compact rooms with baths down the hall; the ranch-style dinner each night is a legendary, all-you-can-eat repast (oregonstateparks.org, 541-493-2825). About an hour away, the Hotel Diamond is another small historic hotel, privately owned, at the north end of Steens (central-oregon.com/hoteldiamond, 541-493-1898). Book far ahead at both hotels from May through October.

The Steens Loop road climbs from Frenchglen to the mountain summit, then returns down past Big Indian Gorge. The north half of the loop, from Frenchglen to the summit, is well graded gravel passable to all vehicles; the south loop, from the summit down to the Catlow Valley, is very steep and rough rock road, not for travel by those with low-clearance vehicles or a great fear of heights. Numerous side roads on Steens are passable only to 4WD vehicles.

The three excellent campgrounds along the Steens Loop road are maintained by the Bureau of Land Management, and spaces are usually available to drive-up campers.

Hart Mountain is 65 miles southwest of Frenchglen via a well-graded gravel road. There are no lodging facilities at the antelope refuge, but the refuge campground is a delightful spot, with aspen glades along sparkling streams. For more information, visit fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn. Numerous side roads at the refuge (some closed much of spring and early summer to protect habitat) are passable only to 4WD vehicles.

Gas is available in Burns, Frenchglen (some of the time) and at Fields, at the southernmost end of Steens. Be sure to fill your tank before heading to Steens or Hart, and bring cash to top off when you pass the stations in Frenchglen or Fields.