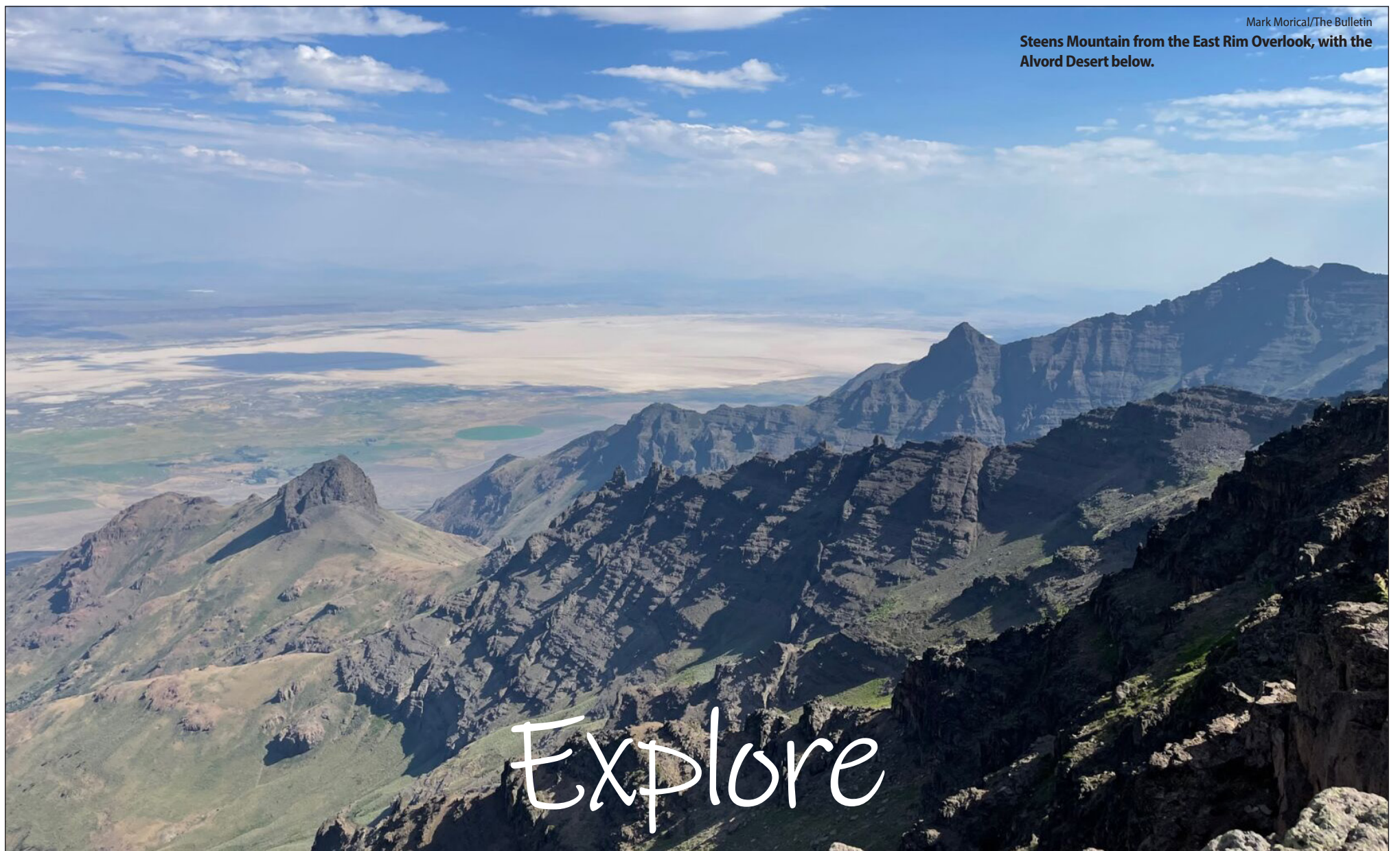


Sports+Outdoors



Mark Morical/The Bulletin
Steens Mountain from the East Rim Overlook, with the Alvord Desert below.

Steens Mountain Wilderness

BY MARK MORICAL
CO MEDIA GROUP

SOUTH STEENS CAMPGROUND — In 1999, I took a trip with some college friends to Steens Mountain. Nearly a quarter-century later, memories of that trip were beginning to fade.

But, what I did remember was plunging up and down an impossibly deep gorge and being awestruck by alpine beauty that had no business existing in the middle of a vast desert of sagebrush.

It was time to return to Steens Mountain to refresh those memories. So I planned a three-night camping trip to the remote area about four hours southeast of Bend with friend Jeremy Dickman, who was with me on that trip so many years ago when we were carefree college students.

Now well into middle age and dealing with the stresses of work, family, mortgages, etc., we needed an escape to Steens. If one is looking to get off the grid and submerge themselves in natural beauty, Steens is the place.

Steens Mountain is a 30-mile-long, 1-mile-high fault block that is often mistaken for a chain of mountains, but is actually one contiguous monolith, according to the Bend-based Oregon Natural Desert Association, which works to preserve and maintain the Steens Mountain Wilderness. It rises above the Alvord Desert to the east and sagebrush plains to the west and features numerous deep gorges.

Due in large part to the efforts of ONDA, the Steens Mountain Wilderness was designated in 2000 and is now more than 170,000 acres, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

We decided to plan our tour of Steens Mountain via two approaches, from the bottom and from the top. From the bottom, hiking along the floor of the Big Indian Gorge, was a 17-mile bugs-in-your-face, burs-in-your-socks immersion in nature.

From the top, along the highest road in Oregon at nearly 10,000 feet, was a daydream of a trip to the jewel of the Steens — Wildhorse Lake — and the area around the 9,734-foot summit that features sensational scenery of craggy gray peaks and steep green canyons

lined with aspen trees.

Popular campgrounds at Steens Mountain include Fish Lake on the north end, where we camped 23 years ago, and South Steens on the south end. This time we chose South Steens for something different, and because the trailhead for Big Indian Gorge starts from South Steens Campground.

From Bend, we drove through Burns, then turned south toward Frenchglen. Those who are going to the north end and to Fish Lake can turn onto the Steens Mountain Loop Road at Frenchglen. We continued 10 miles down the highway to turn onto the loop road at its south end and drove for 20 miles along the gravel road to South Steens Campground.

We chose a campsite shaded by juniper trees with a view of the west side of Steens just a few steps from our tents.

In the morning, we headed out along the Big Indian Trail, thinking we would hike maybe 10 to 12 miles total. The 8.5-mile trail (17 miles roundtrip) ends just below the Steens summit. After three creek crossings that required careful negotiation from rock to rock, the trail took us east into the mouth of the gorge. Walking along sagebrush, aspen trees and juniper trees, we gazed up onto the steep walls of the canyon. Aspen trees grew in green lines up and down the walls. A thin waterfall cascaded down the rocky ledges.

The bird and bug life was rampant as we trekked among yellow and red wildflowers. At the 6-mile point, we made the decision to hike the entire 8.5 miles. We still had energy as the route is relatively flat with about 2,000 feet of elevation gain.

At the end of the trail at a headwall, we looked out across the gorge toward the summit and took in the view before heading back. We arrived back at the campsite about 17 miles and eight hours after we started, having seen just

two other hikers the entire time.

A WALL OF SWITCHBACKS

The next day would be easier, as we planned to drive the Steens Mountain Loop Road to near the summit and Wildhorse Lake. Topping out just below the summit, the road is the highest in Oregon.

From the campground we drove up to the Big Indian Overlook, gazing out across the green valley that we had plodded through the day before. From there we continued several more miles to a parking area near the summit.

The trail to Wildhorse Lake is 1.3 miles straight down a rock wall of switchbacks. We were leery of the hike back up, but we were too engrossed in the scenery before us to worry much. Carpets of yellow and red wildflowers lined the way to the lake, which sat like an infinity pool in a basin lined by rocky peaks and crags. On the far side of the lake, Wildhorse creek plunged down through an emerald valley toward the Alvord Desert.

After relaxing by the lake for an hour or so and viewing trout in the clear water, we made our way back up, encountering about 10 other hikers. Back at the top, we realized we still had some energy, so we turned onto a trail along an exposed ridgeline that has to be one of the most memorable trails I have ever hiked.

To the south, Wildhorse Lake gleamed in the sun, the desert in the distance. To the north, Big Indian Gorge took up the horizon, and we looked out at where we had hiked and turned around the day before.

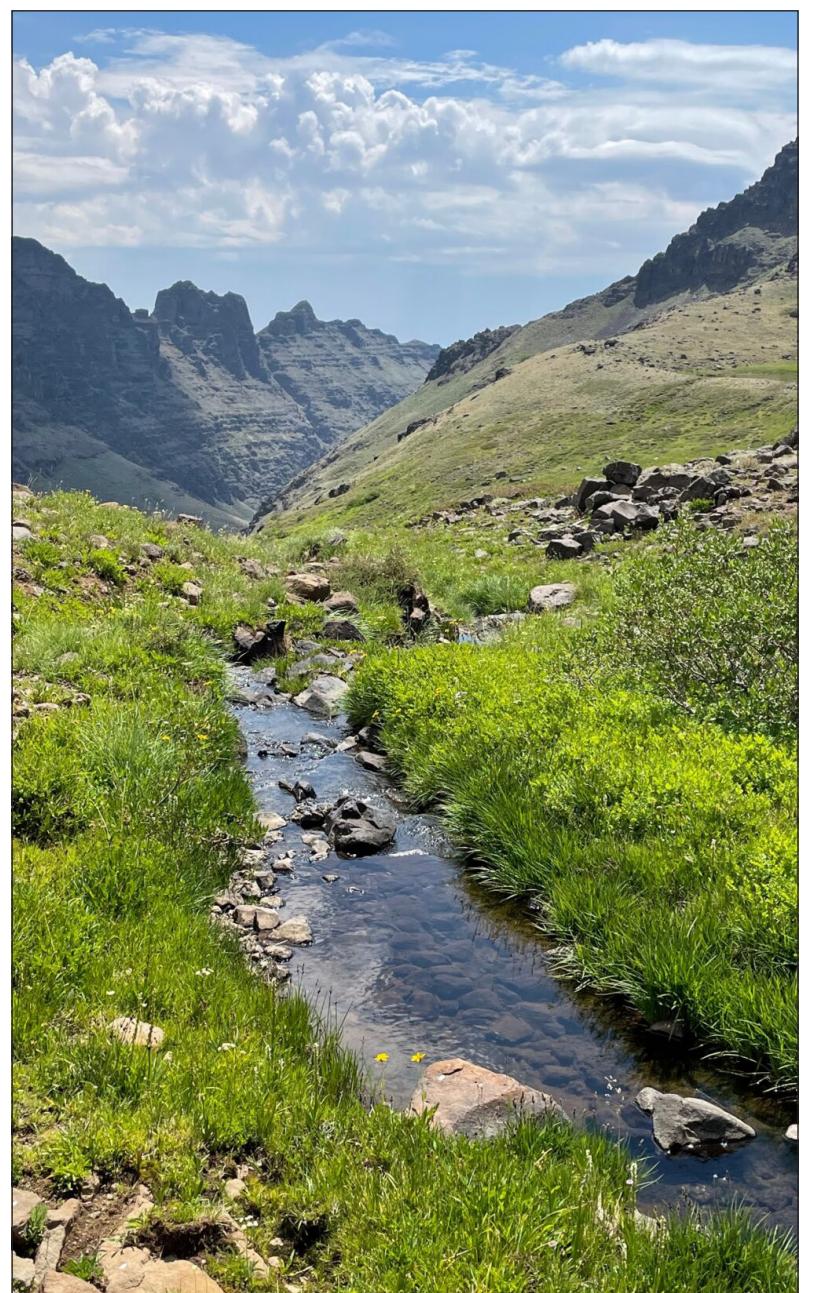
After nearly 6 miles of hiking, we arrived back at the car and drove a couple miles to the East Rim Overlook. This spot includes more dramatic alpine scenery and shows just how sharply the Steens fault block rises up from the Alvord Desert.

After another night under the stars, we were ready to head back to Central Oregon and back to our families. Our memories of that college trip long ago were refreshed after experiencing Steens Mountain from the bottom and from the top.

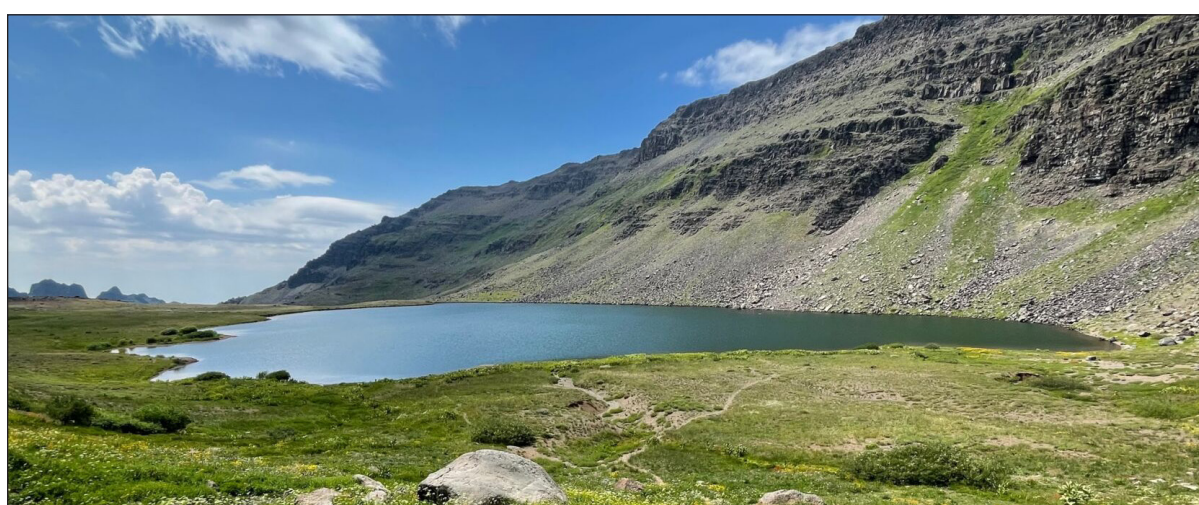
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Mark Morical/The Bulletin
Jeremy Dickman of Sisters, walks along the Big Indian Trail in the Steens Mountain Wilderness.



Mark Morical/The Bulletin
Wildhorse Creek flows out of Wildhorse Lake on Steens Mountain.



Mark Morical/The Bulletin
Wildhorse Lake in the Steens Mountain Wilderness.