



A herd of steers  
takes over a road  
near Alvord Lake in  
southeast Oregon.



# THE DESERT IN WINTER

## OREGON'S ALVORD DESERT OFFERS WRITER AN ADVENTURE

By **RON BALDWIN**



Rabbitbrush and big sagebrush dominate the landscape in most of southeast Oregon.

Photos by Ron Baldwin



**LEFT:** The playa of the Alvord Desert near the town of Fields. **RIGHT:** Cars head east from Burns on U.S. Highway 20 in the morning light. Many of the roads east of the Cascade mountains are straight and flat. **BELOW:** Potholes and hot springs, like this one near Brothers, are scattered across the Oregon desert east of the Cascade Mountains.



**D**esert. The word itself makes my lips feel sandy and salty, and my hands dry. My hair blows even though the wind is calm.

I have long ventured to Oregon's desert in the spring to experience the fantastic blooms and the warmer breezes that grace the state's southeastern corner.

I have rarely ventured there for a stay in the winter. Inspired by my colleague David Campiche's experience at the Alvord Desert, I set off to get a feel for winter desert life.

When prepping for the trip I found that the term "desert" is relative. As one High Desert Museum docent says, the definition of desert "depends on who you talk to."

Much of Oregon east of the Cascade mountains is popularly known as the High Desert. Only a small portion of that acreage is considered true desert.

A desert is defined as a place that experiences less than 10 inches of precipitation per year. Oregon has a significant amount of acreage that fits the model. Most of that lies in Malheur, Harney and Lake counties, with smaller acreages in Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties. A large portion of Gilliam, Morrow and Umatilla counties bordering the Columbia River are classified as true deserts.

As I steer my old Volkswagen bus down U.S. Highway 197 into Maupin, prospective images of deserts excite me.

As I exit the bus, I give a cursory look to the tires and notice that the right rear is low. When you drive as many miles on gravel roads as I do, it is always a possibility. The only auto service in sight is Richmond's Service, a 1940s roadside station that evokes old movie vibes.

The place is operated by owner Rodney Woodside. After a few VW bus stories and a cup of coffee, Woodside takes pity on me and has the flat fixed in a half hour.

Soon I'm back on the road. The sun is warm. I'm through Bend in no time and headed east on U.S. Highway 20. The sun slowly sets in the west behind me. In an hour it is 30 degrees. I press on for another two hours until reaching a spot near the junction of U.S. Route 395 for a warm snooze under 10 inches of layers.

At around 4:30 a.m., I reach for the flashlight and look at the clock and thermometer. It is now six degrees inside the bus.

I pull the blankets back over my head and rue the morning. At dawn, I jump out like a flash and start the bus, which is fighting back. But nevertheless, old faithful starts.

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### DESERT TYPES

Scientific names of desert environments

**Subtropical** — Caused by a wind current emanating from the tropics. The Sahara Desert and Kalahari Desert in Africa are examples.

**Coastal** — Cold air currents from the ocean help create coastal deserts. Atacama Desert in western Chile is an example.

**Rain shadow** — Formed on the leeward slopes of large mountains. Death Valley Desert and the Oregon High Desert are examples.

**Interior** — Found in the heart of continents far from oceans. The Gobi Desert in Mongolia and China are examples.

**Polar** — Cold deserts with limited moisture. All of Antarctica and parts of the Arctic are polar deserts.