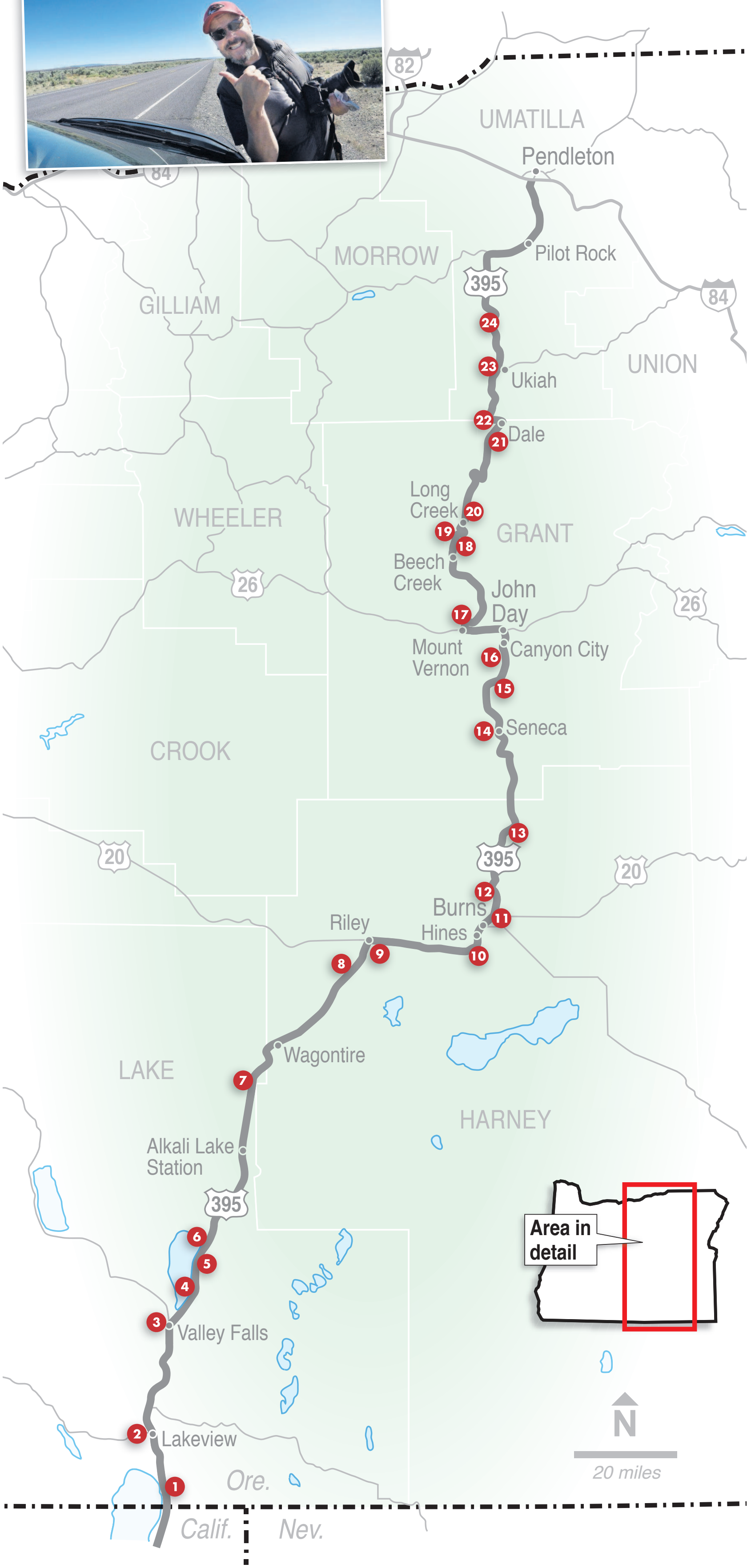


# A Challenging Journey

Story and photos by E.J. HARRIS ♦ East Oregonian



We all need to be challenged in order to grow. Whether it be a professional endeavor or a passion project, it is by challenging ourselves that we are truly able to test our mettle and become stronger.

In my photography, I go through many peaks and valleys of growth. Sometimes I feel as if I'm in these never-ending periods of stagnation where I cannot honestly tell whether I'm getting any better at my craft, no matter how hard I try to improve. Then there are the times it seems that every image coming out of my camera is golden and creating those images seems effortless. That is my artistic journey: a bipolar roller coaster ride of chasing the elusive highs and dreading the impending lows. It is not easy on the soul. The one constant through all of it, though, is that I always keep moving. Never afraid to take a bad photo, and I have more than a few of those.

So I recently talked my editors into doing a project — a challenge if you will — where on the summer solstice I would drive the whole length of Highway 395, from the California border to Umatilla, documenting my journey along the way. The only rules were that I couldn't stray too far from the highway, and to get to Umatilla by sunset. Secretly though, I just thought it would be a great way to get my bosses to fund a road trip. But the moment I was given the go-ahead, the challenge began.

The first part of the challenge came in the form of the enthusiasm my bosses had for the idea. "That's great, let's take your idea and make it bigger." It went from a simple lifestyle to a four-page spread on high-bright paper. And it needs a graphic element, of course. Multi-media too. What had started as a beautiful snowflake began to feel like it morphed into an avalanche and I was directly in its path.

The second part of the challenge seemed to come from the crippling anxiety that afflicted my mind for the month leading up to the road trip. In my sleep I would have apocalyptic nightmares. Visions of impending doom haunting my nightly slumber. And in my waking hours the voices in my head were telling me that I will find a way to screw this up. My subconscious doesn't always seem like it is an active partner in my artistic journey.

But, through all of the stress I seemed to have heaped upon myself, I pushed through. Making preparations for the trip. Learning how to use a GoPro. Scouring over the route in Google Maps Street View to see what I might find on my journey. Making calculations about drive time, total hours of daylight, how long I could stop based on how many total stops I made... math, basically. I did math. A challenge to all art majors.

And then the day came, June 20, 2016. I woke up before dawn (a fact that might startle my co-workers, who have had to deal with my protests about waking up for early-morning assignments), and headed down the highway. But I never made it to Umatilla. The sun set as I was driving about 15 miles from Pilot Rock.

So, did I fail my challenge? I guess that depends on how you look at it. In a black and white world I did fail to meet the goals I had set out for myself. I did, however, drive for 370 miles, through some really beautiful country. I stopped over 60 times taking more than 1,000 photos (that is an average of one stop every six miles). I petted two dogs and got paid for all of it. The most important thing about my challenge is that I learned something about myself driving down that lonely highway: that success isn't always measured by crossing the finish line, and true failure is never challenging yourself at all.

Contact E.J. Harris at eharris@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0837

# Each number on the map represents a stop made along Highway 395.

**More online**  
For video of E.J.'s journey up 395 visit [eastoregonian.com](http://eastoregonian.com)