



Staff photos by Kathy Aney

TOP: A white-faced ibis flies earlier this month at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The refuge supports around 20 percent of the world population of this species. **LEFT:** From the Buena Vista Overlook, one can see the wetlands of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. **RIGHT:** Some sleepy-eyed great horned owlets perch in a tree near the headquarters of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge.

MALHEUR MAGIC

Armed occupation brings attention to beauty of wildlife refuge

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

For many people, the Malheur Wildlife Refuge simply wasn't on their radar until the armed 41-day occupation of the place by anti-government protesters in 2016.

And that's a shame.

I, a native Oregonian, am embarrassed to count myself among this group. Recently, I righted the wrong by traveling to the bird and wildlife mecca that is 30 miles south of Burns. After experiencing a full day of its magic, I was stunned that it took six decades to come. The refuge, a dream destination for any photographer or bird lover, has a mystique that is hard to put into words.

Even before reaching the entrance, my husband, Bill and I started identifying birds. A flock of white-faced ibises had Bill looking skyward instead of at the road ahead. We pulled over so he could look through his binoculars and I could aim my camera at the birds. It was a gorgeous sight. An ibis is a work of art in flight with maroon feathers, white face, reddish legs and a long curved bill. Bill and I grinned happily at each other.

As we approached the refuge headquarters, we noticed the old fire lookout tower in which anti-government protesters had stood guard around the clock during the standoff. A red-tailed hawk soared overhead. A couple of hikers walked on a trail that skirted the tower, chatting softly as they ambled along. Thoughts of militants with guns entering this serene scene seemed far-fetched and absurd, and yet it had happened.

We parked at the visitor center, a complex of buildings that includes the headquarters, the Friends of Malheur Nature Shop, restrooms and other buildings. Near the pathway leading to the headquarters, we spotted a family of great horned owls sitting sleepily in a large grove of trees. One swiveled his head and looked at us with round, yellow eyes.

The path eventually led to the edge of Malheur Lake, where a Canada goose sunned herself on a log near the shore. A couple of visitors peeked at the goose from a nearby bird blind.

I wandered into the headquarters where Alan Contreras sat behind the information desk eating a late breakfast between customers. Contreras, who lives in Eugene, was almost through a monthlong stint of volunteering at the refuge. After a few minutes of chatting with Contreras, I realized I had hit the jackpot. The man is a bird aficionado, author of several bird books, such as

"Afield: Forty Years of Birding the American West" and "Handbook of Oregon Birds." He also edited "Edge of Awe," a book about the 187,000-acre refuge and nearby Steens Mountain.

The Malheur Wildlife Refuge has drawn Contreras back for 49 years straight since his first visit at age 14.

"I'm a birder, and if you're a birder, this is where you go," he said.

Every day, Contreras keeps a list of birds he spies at the refuge. One spring day, he identified 67 species from the information center deck.

The door swished open and a couple approached the desk. Contreras traced a route on a map for them and pointed out the restrooms. As they walked away, he said the most common tourist questions deal with the armed occupation and the condition of the refuge.

"The refuge still has some work to do," Contreras said. "The damage was not to the wildlife. The damage was to the facilities and the people in the community. The refuge moves forward and does what it needs to do."

After talking to Contreras, I walked to the Friends of Malheur Nature Shop. Inside volunteer Eileen Loerch, of Boise, said she has been coming to the refuge since the 1980s. She said the place has a crazy attraction for her.

"I would call it magical," she said. "I'm always in awe here."

Pumped up for my day at the refuge, I hopped back in the car. We started driving the gravel Central Patrol Road, which knifed through a marshy area for miles and miles with expansive views of the desert and Steens Mountain. Out our open windows, we saw birds darting, soaring, swimming, floating and diving. Birdsong provided a soundtrack. My camera shutter clicked as I took shot after shot. We wrote the name of each bird species we identified in my reporter notebook: eastern kingbird, ruddy duck, American coot, black-necked stilt, yellow-headed blackbird, trumpeter swan. The list grew and grew. By the time we pulled into the parking lot at the Frenchglen Hotel on the other side of the refuge, we had spotted almost 40 different species, including bald eagles in a nest.

John Ross, the hotel keeper, greeted us. He said about 70 percent of his guests are from Oregon, but the others hail from all over the world. They come in the spring for birdwatching at the refuge and later in the summer to explore the Steens.

Ross is an ebullient guy who served a family-style dinner to guests seated at three deluxe, high-gloss picnic tables in the main room. The guests outnumbered the population of Frenchglen, which is approximately 12. Ross, who honed his cooking skills for six years aboard a fish processing ship in Alaska,

now cooks on a 50-year-old propane range in a kitchen that has a view of the Steens. His guests ate everything he put down in front of them.

We dropped into bed, sated by the food and the day.

The next morning, we headed out for a day at the Steens. Snow still covered the 9,738-foot mountain, so we stayed low. Over several hours, we hiked the Indian Creek Trail, visited the Riddle Brothers Ranch (a two-story home and outbuildings that now belong to the Bureau of Land Management) and ogled herds of wild horses that roamed the South Steens. My husband, a wildlife biologist, argued that the horses are technically "feral" horses, not wild, because they have domesticated ancestors. I told him I would continue to call them wild, but in the sense that they are untamed. We agreed on one thing, though — the horses are beautiful and mesmerizing.

We will return to this part of the state, maybe in May during the peak of migration or later in the summer when we can look down at the white Alvord Desert or Kiger Canyon from 2 miles above sea level.

This won't be my last visit. The armed occupation of 2016 might have spurred me and others to visit the Malheur refuge, but its beauty will pull me back.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0810.



LEFT TO RIGHT: A yellow-headed blackbird perches on a post at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge. The century-old Riddle Brothers Ranch, near Frenchglen, is operated by the Bureau of Land Management as an open-air museum. A wildflower blooms at the base of the Steens Mountains.