



# FRIENDS OF **MALHEUR** NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

## Malheur Musings - February 2018

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Steens Mountain at left, as seen from the Alvord Desert  
Photo by Peter Pearsall

### Director's Message

Dear Friends,

Winter thus far in the Harney Basin has been exceedingly mild. Where last year there were snowdrifts several feet deep even on the basin floors, this year it's mostly bare ground everywhere one looks. As I write this, temperatures have reached nearly 60 degrees in Burns, Belding's ground squirrels are waking from their winter torpor, migratory tundra swans and snow geese are gathering in the basin's ice-free waterways, and robins and Townsend's solitaires are practicing their songs from the treetops.

With scant accumulation of snow in the basin, our thoughts go to the fault-block massif to the southeast, Steens Mountain. The slopes of Steens capture much-

needed precipitation in winter, which finds its way down to the Refuge via the Blitzen River and its tributaries as spring and summer runoff.

The gradual western slope of Steens Mountain boasts an impressive 75-square-kilometer contiguous area above 8,000 feet in elevation—unique among ranges in southeast Oregon. This enormous sheet collects precipitation flowing eastward from the Pacific, up to 28 inches per year at the highest elevations. Further enhancing this effect is the fact that the northwest Great Basin experiences more winter precipitation and lower average temperatures than the rest of the Great Basin. Thus Steens acts as an enormous winter reservoir for the surrounding lowlands: Snowpack on Steens translates to life-giving water on the Refuge, even through the hottest months of summer.

This high-elevation catchment makes possible the shallow expanses of Malheur, Mud and Harney lakes; the lush meadows of the Blitzen River Valley; the aspen-choked gorges incising the mountain itself. Water from Steens courses through perennial streams that host Great Basin redband trout and American dippers, the only aquatic songbird in North America. (Read more about the dipper below.)



Steens Mountain in April 2016  
Photo by Dan Streiffert

Steens Mountain's influence goes far beyond ecological benefits. The mountain looms large in the minds of those that cherish this area; it is a lodestone that draws the gaze and attention of visitors and lifelong residents alike. The late writer Ursula K. Le Guin was a Steens devotee, and she immortalized the mountain and its environs in *Out Here*, a collection of poetry, photographs and sketches she released with photographer Roger Dorband. In her poem "Wright's Point", Le Guin describes the understated prominence of this "nothing-much-looking mountain":

Steens, that drops eight thousand feet  
on the far side, faultblock  
subtle and enormous geology  
  
structure of my deep joy

Ursula K. Le Guin passed away late last month at the age of 88, at her home in Portland, Oregon. Best known for her science and fantasy fiction, Le Guin also wrote poetry, essays, literary reviews, short stories, a writing style guide, and numerous translations of poetry and fiction. Less widely known was Le Guin's decades-long affinity for Oregon's high desert and Harney Basin in particular, areas she visited on an almost annual basis.

In the piece "Desert Visions Near and Far" (see link below), author Alan Contreras describes his longtime friendship with Le Guin and their shared love of Steens Mountain country. Contreras writes:

Le Guin's introduction to *Out Here* ends with the revelation of what the Milky Way looks like at night from the high desert: "... it was eternity made visible. I was seeing, for once, with my mortal eyes, what is always here." Few had her vision.

She helped us all see what is and what could be.

Ursula K. Le Guin's family has suggested that donations in her name be made to non-profit organizations that focus their efforts at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, including Friends of Malheur Refuge, Malheur Field Station, and Portland Audubon Society. We at FOMR are honored that the Le Guin family would recognize us in this way, and a formal acknowledgement of their recommendation will be forthcoming.

Here's to the stirrings of spring!

Peter Pearsall  
Executive Director, Friends of Malheur Refuge

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### **Winter Hours at Malheur HQ**

Visitor Center/Nature Store hours:

Open Monday - Thursday, 8:00 am - 4:00 pm

Open most Fridays from 8:00 am - 3:00 pm

Closed Saturday - Sunday (brochures will be available at Headquarters)

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### **Desert Visions: In Memory of Ursula K. Le Guin**

by Alan Contreras

The recent passing of Ursula K. Le Guin provides an occasion to look through a unique window into both the Malheur region and the creative process.

Le Guin first started visiting Harney County in the 1960s and was a regular visitor for decades, staying at the Field Station and later for many

years at a private ranch near Diamond. I knew her for about 20 years owing to this common interest in the Great Basin...[Read more here](#).



Ursula K. Le Guin  
Photo by Eileen Gunn

## American Dippers

By Peter Pearsall

The American dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*) is a dryad of the rapids, the nictitating nymph of our salmon's natal streams and the only truly aquatic songbird in North America.

Near the southern boundary of Malheur Refuge, dippers live year-round along the fast-flowing streams of Steens Mountain...[Read more here](#).



American dipper  
Photo by Peter Pearsall

## Audubon Job Opening in Harney County

Portland Audubon is currently recruiting for a full time Field Coordinator to be located in Harney County. The Coordinator will support the work of the High Desert Partnership, Malheur Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan and other Audubon initiatives in the area.

For the last several years Audubon has been able to provide seasonal support for these efforts, but this position will allow them to significantly expand these efforts. The Coordinator will ideally begin in early spring. [See the job announcement here](#).



## Volunteers Wanted for Short-eared Owl Surveys near Malheur

The Western Asio Flammeus Landscape Study is launching its pilot year of short-eared owl citizen science surveys in Oregon this spring, with many of the survey locations near Malheur Refuge. This is the largest short-eared

owl project in the world, spanning eight western states. To learn more about the project and how to participate, [go here](#).



Short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) in flight  
Photo by Dan Streiffert

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## Volunteers Needed in our Nature Center!



Hello Friends, we need your help! If you're available during the months of March, April or May 2018 and have an RV or similar set-up to stay in, we are looking for volunteers to help staff our new Nature Store/Nature Center at Refuge Headquarters.

This volunteer position involves operating the Friends of Malheur Refuge Nature Center/Nature Store at Refuge Headquarters and providing general interpretation of the Refuge to visitors. Volunteers will have some proficiency with cash registers, point-of-sale devices, etc., as well as a basic understanding of how to maintain an inventory of Nature Store items. Good communication skills are desirable, as is a willingness to interpret Great Basin natural and cultural history. We ask that our volunteers commit to at least a month-long stint, working 3 days (~24 hours) a week, but the duration of the stint may be negotiable.

Refuge Headquarters provides RV pads with hook-ups and a nearby building with communal kitchen, bathrooms and laundry. There are two RV spaces available for volunteers in March, April and May. There is also the potential for volunteers to stay in a FOMR travel trailer at Headquarters during April or May.

If you are interested in volunteering this spring, or have general questions about volunteering at Malheur Refuge, please contact us at [friends@malheurfriends.org](mailto:friends@malheurfriends.org).

As always, stay tuned to our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) for updates!

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STAY CONNECTED:

