

Steens Mountain

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Dinner was over and the campfire was beginning. It was an old school evening. No propane or smartphone apps. Crackling flames, against a dark backdrop of Ponderosa soldiers, kept us warm on the outside. A peaty scotch whiskey would take care of the inside. Topo maps were spread out on a weathered burl table. Flakes of ash temporarily interrupted the contour lines. The topic was 'Honey Holes' – camping locations that checked all the boxes. A theme Grayson and I often gravitated towards during similar evenings. Without a prelude, Grayson simply said 'Steens Mountain' and handed me a book of the same name.

We had lived in Sisters Oregon for 7 years. Although we explored and camped at many locations up and down the Oregon Cascade Mountain range, and gems further east like the Fremont Mountains, we had never been to the Steens. It is located just shy of 200 miles east from Bend Oregon or an hour drive south of Burns. In the middle of nowhere, the prominence of a 9700' escarpment, a single mountain emerging from the Alvord desert is certainly somewhere.

During the past several years, we have been to the Steens a half dozen times. It is our 'go to' location for several days or as a waypoint into Idaho or Nevada. We always find solace there. Just last month, we visited the Steens again and were treated with warm weather, lush meadows, fast flowing rivers and an abundance of wildlife.



Most trips to Steens Mountain begins with a stop at the Frenchglen Mercantile Store – for no other reason than to take a step back in time. The owners display a sign at the entrance that reads 'Social Distancing since 1892'. You can find a little bit of everything there. Just two miles east of the Frenchglen store and historic hotel is Page Springs Campground where this brief tour begins.

Page Springs is an excellent camp for exploring the Steens. It sits at the NW base of the mountain where the Donner and Blitzen River, its tributaries, wetlands and meadows are fed from melting snowpack that flows down steep gorges. This environment is a natural haven for a

hundred species of birds complimented by antelope, deer and elk. A wildlife refuge, which can be explored on dirt roads, is just north and adjacent to the campground.

Moving in a clockwise direction, the 70 mile [full] Steens Loop Road begins outside the campground. It is the highest elevation road in Oregon! The primary loop is gravel but features countless spur roads into primitive campsites, creeks and lakes, breathtaking viewpoints and old homesteads. Some of these roads require a high clearance vehicle and/or 4WD. The final 10 miles back to Frenchglen is on pavement. Following is a general mileage chart with points of interests. It is by no means comprehensive but rather an appetizer for more.



Steens Mountain Loop Road – Points of Interest

| Mile | Roadside | Point of Interest | Notes |
|------|----------|--------------------------|---|
| 02 | Right | Page Springs CG | Large developed sites. Fishing and hiking trails. Birdwatching. |
| 12 | Right | Lily Lake CG | Primitive, large sites nestled in Aspen with small lake nearby. |
| 14 | Right | Fish Lake CG | Upper and lower lake shore sites. Fishing and hiking trails. |
| 16 | Right | Jackman Park CG | Small sites at the high side of gorge. Popular with tent campers. |
| 18 | Right | Nye Brothers Cabins | Early homestead cabins nestled in Aspen. ~ 5 mile two track. 4WD required. |
| 20 | Left | Kiger Gorge Overlook | U-shaped glacial valley half-mile deep with majestic views to the NE. |
| 25 | Right | Wild Horse Lake Overlook | At the east rim precipice, the Alvord desert is over one mile below! |
| 35 | Left | Big Indian Overlook | Trails / viewpoints into glacial gorges that feed the Donner-Blitzen River. |
| 40 | Left | South Steens CG | Large developed sites. Juniper shade trees. Hiking trail into Big Indian Gorge. |
| 41 | Right | Riddle Brothers Ranch | Historic ranch. On-site host. Several structures and antiques. Hiking Trail. |
| 50 | Right | Wild Horses | Can be viewed in 2-3 locations with the largest herd by the wetland. |
| 70 | Left | Frenchglen | The hotel serves a great family style dinner if you want to skip cooking! |

Although it is hard to choose, of the points of interest noted above our favorites are Fish Lake, the Nye Brothers Cabins and Wild Horse Lake Overlook. Spending additional time at these locations yields scenic and quiet camping on a pristine high mountain lake and a 4WD route or hike into an early and well preserved homestead. (If you opt to camp there, the forest service converted one of the buildings into a bunk house. Perfect for a gathering if the weather turns inclement. Water from a nearby spring is available.) Of course the highlight is Wild Horse Lake Overlook. The mile deep drop-off from the precipice is spectacular. We like taking the short hike to the top of Steens Mountain or down to Wild Horse Lake as a side trip. Both can be done in an afternoon. Pace yourself as the elevation is approximately ten-thousand feet.



The sun rose early as it does during the end of June. Bright yellow and orange, underlined by flashes of red, capped the mountain ridge. The dew on the lush meadow grass was already reflecting the light in sparkles. Towards the front of our camper, I heard the slap of a trout taking advantage of the morning hatch on a mirror flat lake. A chorus of approval came from the distinctive sound of red-wing black birds. They are easy to spot out the camper window, dancing from cattail perches. The day would unfold like it started – filled with surprises. We planned some off-road exploring near Big Indian Gorge. The smell of fresh-brewed coffee side-tracked my thoughts and senses. It was time to open the door and once again, welcome the Steens. June 2022

Southeast of Steens Mountain is the vast Alvord Desert and hot springs. There are endless off-road miles to explore where travelers can find century old Shepard and mining cabins. It is also a gateway into northern Nevada. On the west side, about 6 miles south of Frenchglen is the entrance to Hart Mountain – another expansive area that is home to the National Antelope Refuge. There are plenty of scenic locations for dispersed camping and several natural hot springs. And to the north, abutting the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and a network of wetlands is the Pete French Round Barn – a rare structure into today's world of sharp corners.



The Steens deserve more description than offered here, but that will need to wait for another update. In the meantime, visit the Steens and enjoy one of the rare gems that Oregon has to offer. Then, maybe, around your next campfire you may repeat the words of my friend Grayson – Steens Mountain! .



After spending decades in the high tech industry, Gary and Gretchen stepped out of work and into the outdoors. They reside in Sisters Oregon and when not splitting or stacking wood they enjoy backpacking, kayaking and motorcycle riding. Over the years, they have owned several pop-up campers and have made over 30 trips to Baja Mexico. Their favorite western states for overlanding are Montana, Idaho and Utah. They currently have a Ram 3500 equipped with a Four Wheel Hawk Flatbed camper which they custom built.

