

Lower Owyhee Watershed Assessment

VIII. Recreation

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Ecological Services

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VIII. Recreation

A. Introduction

The lower Owyhee subbasin is located in an area that is both remote and beautiful. The Owyhee River cuts through deeply incised canyons with walls towering

overhead. The area is home to a wide array of wildlife and birds. The visible cultural history includes Native American petroglyphs (Figure 8.1) and abandoned pioneering structures.

Despite the difficulty of access, recreational use is increasing. People come to admire the spectacular canyon lands and ash flows. They hope to catch sight of bighorn sheep or bald eagles. Floating the Owyhee River, boating on the Owyhee Reservoir, camping, backpacking, walking, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, soaking in hot springs and picnicking are among the recreational opportunities. The relative solitude attracts a few people to the more inaccessible areas with outstanding geological formations.



Figure 8.1. Petroglyphs on top of a boulder at Hole in the Ground. The insert shows greater contrast.

B. Owyhee Reservoir

Probably the most popular recreational area in the lower Owyhee subbasin is Owyhee Reservoir. Owyhee Reservoir is a 52-mile long, narrow reservoir. It has about 150 miles of shoreline.²⁵ The water sports at the reservoir include boating, fishing, water skiing and swimming.¹²

1. Lake Owyhee State Park^{30,35}

Oregon Parks and Recreation Division (OPRD) leases about 730 acres of land to the east of Owyhee Reservoir close to the dam from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) for Lake Owyhee State Park (Figure 8.2). In 2003 Lake Owyhee State Park was subleased to a private concessionaire for ten years. Since Lake Owyhee is a small park, OPRD felt that a concessionaire would be able to provide some of the same services that OPRD does at a larger park.²⁷

The park has two campgrounds, two day use areas, three boat ramps, a general store, and a grill. Fishing licenses can be obtained at the general store. The general store also carries fishing supplies, ice, bait, soda, ice cream, snack foods, beer and wine, and firewood. There are two pontoon boats available for rent, marine fuel, and a liquid propane refill station.¹⁶ The grill serves breakfast and a lunch/supper menu.¹⁸

Although there are only about 65 campsites at the campgrounds, the reservoir receives much greater day use. The primary attraction is warmwater fishing. There are largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, crappie, perch, and catfish.² Fish tend to be contaminated with mercury (see the water quality component of this assessment). A floating restroom is provided seven miles upstream from the park for the convenience of boaters.

The deep Owyhee River canyon walls are rocks from recent geological formations. The hill banks are at their “angle of repose”, near their limit of stability. The paved road into Owyhee State Park is narrow and winding and cut into the hill. The hill slope above the road is of relatively recent geologic origin and quite unstable. Some rocks roll down onto the road daily. However, a storm may dislodge many more rocks. For instance, following a rain storm on June 10, 2007, there were rocks and small boulders strewn clear across the road in numerous spots. An Oregon State Park employee checks the road within the park daily to remove rocks which have fallen onto the road.³⁶

2. Owyhee Dam

Owyhee Dam (Figures 8.2 and 8.3) is an attraction in itself. At the time it was constructed, in 1933, it was the world’s highest dam. Because the spillway is only one of five “glory holes” in the U.S.,¹⁹ when it does over flow, people flock to see it operating (Figure 8.4). It becomes a tourist attraction. The top of the glory hole is approximately 60 feet across and the tube narrows like a funnel as it delivers water into the river below the dam.²⁵



Figure 8.3. Owyhee Dam, Malheur County Oregon.

In 2006 there were people phoning the irrigation district from as far away as Texas to find out whether water from Owyhee Reservoir had started spilling through the glory hole (Figure 8.4). Jay Chamberlain, the Owyhee Irrigation District manager,

estimated that on the weekends when the glory hole was spilling there were as many as 2,500 people per day who drove up to the dam to see it.

3. Below Owyhee Dam

The glory hole does not operate most years. The regular outlet for water from the Owyhee Reservoir is near the base of the dam. From May through October, the water in the lower strata of the reservoir is at a much colder temperature than the water entering the reservoir. The cold water outflow has created an artificial cold water fishery below Owyhee Dam on the Owyhee River (see the fish component of this assessment). This fishery is very popular with fly fishermen.²⁵ There is angling for both rainbow trout and brown trout.¹⁷

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has designated day use areas along the lower Owyhee River. The Lower Owyhee Canyon Watchable Wildlife Area (Figure 8.2) is considered to be a "gateway" site with interpretive information for the "noted birding along [a] 12 mile river corridor."⁸ There are toilets but no drinking water. On June 10, 2007 there were no brochures available with local information. The only permanent sign contains a little, very basic information on the attraction of water to wildlife in an arid environment.



Figure 8.4. The “Glory Hole” at Owyhee Dam in April 2006.

Snively Hot Springs (Figure 8.2) on the Owyhee River below Owyhee Dam also has toilets. The source of hot water springs out of the ground near the road. It flows

about 300 feet down to the river where a circular pool about 20 feet in diameter has been manually constructed. It is dammed by rocks and occasionally a tarp-style structure. The water in the pool mixes with the cold water in the Owyhee River which has come from Owyhee Dam. The water in the pool is shallow, usually two to three feet deep, and layered from hot on the top to cool on the bottom. Usually the water temperature in the pool will be 101° to 103°. The bottom of the pool is silt/gravel. There is poison ivy growing along the bank of the river and around the parking lot.^{39,38,40} The spring gets a lot of use as it is right along the highway. It is known to locals as a dirty place due to litter and heavy use. People report lots of trash and occasional used needles at the site.

C. Wild and scenic river

The Owyhee River from the southern boundary of the lower Owyhee subbasin to the Owyhee Reservoir is designated as a wild and scenic river (Figure 8.5). The river was included in the National Wild and Scenic River system in 1984 because of its outstanding scenic, recreational, geologic, wildlife and cultural values. There are no motorized boats allowed on the river in this section.

1. Commercial rafting groups

In the spring during snow melt, the Owyhee River can be floated in kayaks, rafts, or canoes. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issues special recreation permits to commercial operations. Rafting and fly fishing are the most publicized recreational activities in the lower Owyhee subbasin.

The length of the float season depends on the water flow and may run from March 15th through June 15th. In a low water year, there may be almost no time with enough water running in Owyhee River to safely float down the river. In a high water year the BLM may extend the controlled use period past June 15th. In 2006 there were 25 commercial operations with permits to float the Owyhee River.⁷ To spread out the use of the river, each outfitter is assigned one day of the week on which they can launch float trips. Each float group below Rome is limited to 20 people, including the guides.

Float groups are required to abide by a number of rules. Some of these are carrying portable leakproof toilet systems, using fire pans for fires, removing unburned wastes from the canyon, and straining kitchen and personal hygiene water. All garbage must be carried out, including the particles strained from water, dental floss and cigarette butts.^{9,6}

A typical float trip includes about four or five hours on the river each day. There is a stop for a picnic lunch, and possible stops to swim, explore historic sites, scout rapids, or hike up scenic side canyons.³⁴

2. Individual rafting use

Advance permits are not required for private parties, but all individuals or groups floating the river must register with a self-issue permit at the put-in location prior to launch. All the same regulations apply to private parties as apply to commercial

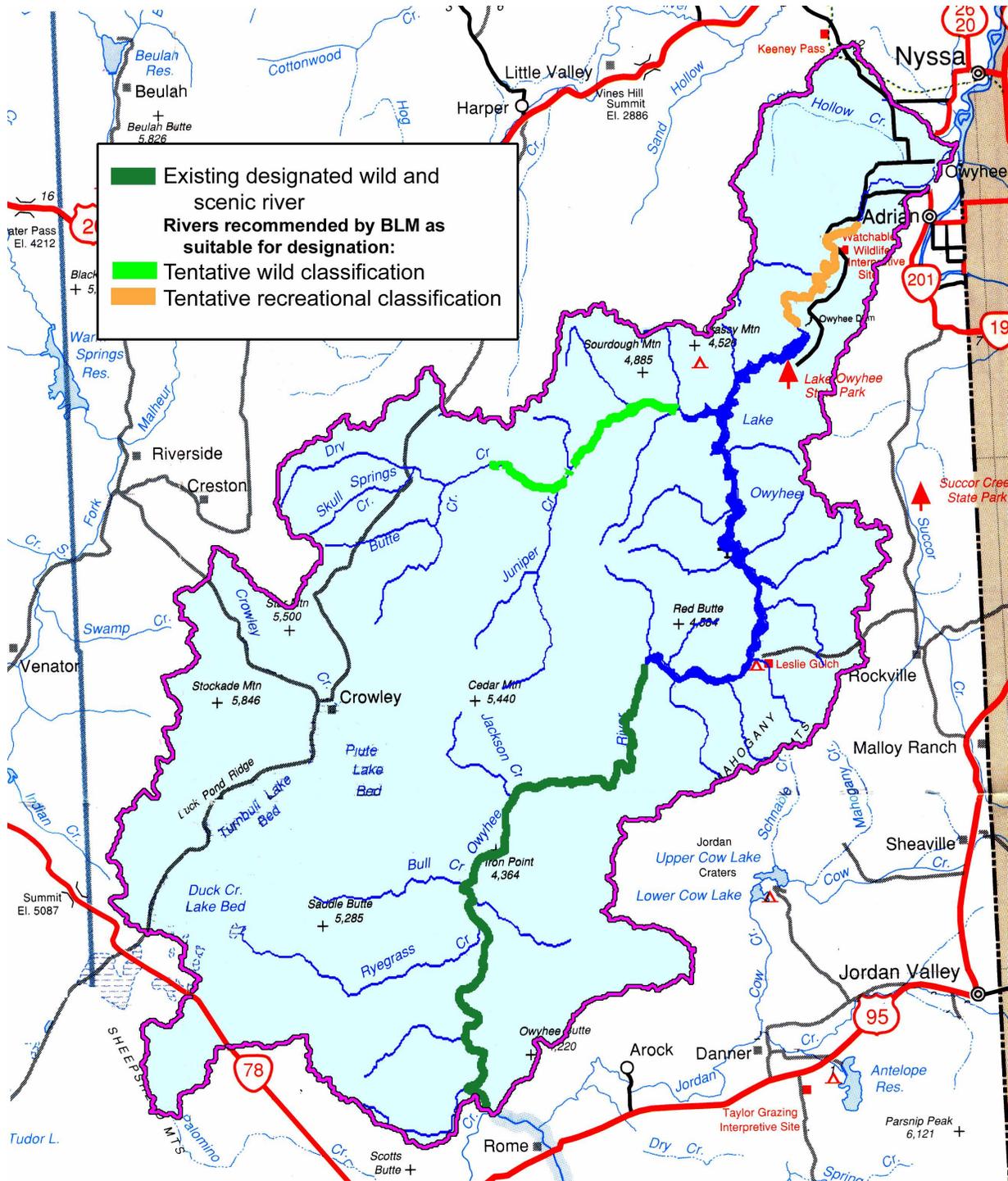


Figure 8.5. Existing and recommended wild and scenic rivers in the lower Owyhee subbasin .

operations. At the Rome launch site the regulations are also posted near the restrooms. Every person is required to have an approved, serviceable flotation device. Personal pets are allowed under control, but all solid pet waste must be cleaned up and removed from the river canyon. Any one group is limited to 20 people below Rome. In addition, a maximum of 20 people is allowed to share any camp, hot spring, or other

stop, regardless of the number in each group. “The Owyhee desert environment is quite fragile and could easily be damaged by overcrowding with even the most careful campers.”^{9,6} Camping areas have not been established along the river, but rafters tend to use the same locations repeatedly because there are very few flat, wide, sandy areas along the narrow canyon corridor.

D. Established camping, picnicking areas

There are a few other established camping and picnicking areas in the lower Owyhee subbasin. All of the camping sites are remote. Not only do they not have drinking water available, there are no telephones and definitely no concessions such as snacks and soft drinks. BLM allows camping on any public land for no more than two weeks at a time in any location. Unestablished camping spots have no amenities.

1. Leslie Gulch

After Lake Owyhee State Park and the lower Owyhee River, probably the most heavily used recreational site in the lower Owyhee subbasin is Leslie Gulch (Figures 8.2 and 8.6). An improved gravel road into Leslie Gulch from US highway 95 makes it very accessible. It is open from March 7th through November 15th. Increasing traffic on this road is a major concern to local residents.

The Slocum Creek campground, the only place camping is permitted in Leslie Gulch, has 12 camp sites. There are toilets several places in the gulch, but no potable water.⁸

Leslie Gulch is the most readily accessible location to view some of the more spectacular geologic formations. Big horn sheep have also been reintroduced into Leslie Gulch and can sometimes be seen from the gravel road. Leslie Gulch has been designated an area of critical environmental concern by the BLM.



Figure 8.6. Rock formations in Leslie Gulch.

Leslie Gulch ends at the Owyhee Reservoir so boats with motors are permitted in the water. There is a boat ramp at Leslie Gulch.

2. Birch Creek Ranch

The BLM maintains two other established campgrounds in the lower Owyhee subbasin, one at Birch Creek Historic Ranch and the other at Twin Springs (Figure 8.2). Birch Creek Ranch has four developed campsites along the Owyhee River (Figure 8.7). A four-wheel drive vehicle with high clearance is recommended for the drive into the

ranch. Birch Creek Ranch is open all year, but access is dependent upon road conditions.

"Of the twenty-six buildings and structures at the ranch, nineteen contributed to the property's inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, where it is in prestigious company. Contributing elements include stone walls built by the Basques (one of which runs straight up the east slope of the mesa behind the caretaker's house; look for it); Mr. Morrison's 70 year-old, 30 feet diameter irrigating water wheel, still in place, but not working (Figure 4.7); several stone root cellars; the systems of irrigation ditches; the barn; and others."⁴



Figure 8.7. Campground at Birch Creek Ranch.

The Birch Creek Ranch was placed on the National Register in 1997 as "an historic rural landscape with Basque ethnic associations."

Washington State University conducts an archaeological field school at the Birch Creek Ranch. Seven of the last eight years undergraduate field schools or smaller more concentrated teams of graduate students and researchers have conducted investigations at an

archaeological site at the ranch. The site dates from approximately 800 years ago to 3000 years ago.^{10,11} Some of the early results of the studies are available on the internet. Several graduate students are publishing master's theses with their findings.⁴²

The students and researchers occupy some of the houses at the ranch during the field school.

3. Twin Springs

The Twin Springs campground (Figure 8.2) is open from May 1st to October 30th. BLM recommends only using high clearance vehicles on the road into the campground. There is water and restrooms, but no garbage collection.

4. Cow Hollow Park

Cow Hollow Park (Figure 8.2) was originally a Civilian Conservation Corps camp site. During World War II it was used as a Japanese work camp. For years it was owned by the BOR and maintained by the nonprofit Cow Hollow Park and Recreation Association. The Association raised money for maintenance by the sale of hunting rights on area farms and other community fundraisers.

Following a transfer of most of the BOR land below the dam to BLM, the Cow Hollow Park and Recreation Association no longer operated the park and maintenance was limited. In 2007 BLM transferred ownership of the park back to BOR. Currently there are discussions being held between the BOR, Malheur County, and the

Association to determine how the park might be transferred to the Association for at least management, if not ownership.

The park is primarily used for local little league baseball and other community events, such as a local easter egg hunt. It has continued to be used for class reunions, weddings, other family events and church activities. The cleanup after the BLM assumed ownership was done by the people using the park.

The situation of Cow Hollow Park was still in flux at the time this assessment was finished.⁴³

E. Recreational use

1. Who uses the developed areas

The heaviest use areas for recreation in the lower Owyhee subbasin are Owyhee Reservoir, Owyhee River downstream from the dam, and Leslie Gulch.

On Saturday May 12, 2007 a morning survey of the vehicles parked in Leslie Gulch showed 42 boat trailers with Idaho license plates, two with Oregon plates, and one with a Montana plate. There were six vehicles from Idaho with no boat trailer and four from Oregon.

The next day, Sunday May 13, 2007 (Mother's Day), an afternoon survey of the vehicles along the Owyhee River below the dam and at Owyhee Reservoir counted 148 Idaho plates, 47 Oregon plates, and two from other states. Fly fishing was slow. Not included in the above count were the vehicles in campgrounds, 15 with Idaho plates, seven with Oregon plates, and three from other states. At Snively hot springs there were three vehicles with Oregon plates and one with an Idaho plate.

So, on these dates, 89% of the vehicles at Leslie Gulch were from out of state, 75% of the vehicles using the lower Owyhee River and Owyhee Reservoir were from out of state, and 72% of the vehicles using the Lake Owyhee State Park campgrounds were from out of state.

2. Use and income

Recreation use in the lower Owyhee subbasin generates little income for local agencies and considerable liabilities in costs to provide services and clean up after recreational users. The Malheur County Road Department and the Nyssa Road District are responsible for road maintenance. Emergency medical services may be provided by the Adrian Quick Response Unit or the Adrian Rural Fire Department. Provision of these services is a financial drain.

3. Law enforcement

Although most of the land in both the lower Owyhee subbasin and in Malheur County is public land managed by the BLM, most law enforcement and all search and rescue missions are the responsibility of the Malheur County Sheriff. Recreational use of the area is responsible for 95 percent of all search and missions. Approximately 75 to 80 percent of the search and rescue missions involve individuals from out of state.⁴¹

There is only \$2500 in the Malheur County general fund for search and rescue operations of the sheriff's department. There are 80 volunteers with search and rescue. They provide their own equipment. Any money required above the \$2500 is raised with fund raisers, "mostly burger flipping."⁴¹

The sheriff's department also provides the equivalent of 1½ deputies to patrol boating activities on Owyhee Reservoir. Fifty percent of the cost for this enforcement is paid by the state marine board and 50 percent comes from a local match from the BOR. The sheriff estimates that approximately 75 percent of boating is by people from out of state.⁴¹

4. Litter

A number of recreational users find the litter deposited along recreational corridors, around recreational sites, and around Owyhee Reservoir offensive. Litter cleanup and removal constitutes a continual cost.

F. Other recreational uses

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department conducted a study in 2002 to see what the participation was in 76 outdoor recreation activities. Malheur and Harney Counties were lumped together in gathering the data, so the information is not specific to the lower Owyhee subbasin.³³

An analysis of the data in the OPRD report shows that there were significant differences between the activities in which residents of this region engaged as compared with the average for the state. Activities where local residents were more than one and a half times as likely to be involved included water skiing, fishing from a bank or shore (fly fishing was not a separate option), big game hunting with either a rifle or a bow, upland or small bird hunting, waterfowl hunting, rifle or pistol target shooting, skeet/trap/sporting clay shooting, tracking animal signs, horseback riding, driving four wheel vehicles, and bicycle camping.

Not surprisingly many of these activities are ones which are provided by the wide open spaces and reservoirs of the area. This is further demonstrated by the activities which residents are one and a quarter times more likely to be involved in: fishing from a boat, fishing from a dock or pier, power boating for pleasure (excluding fishing and water-skiing), boat camping, archery target shooting, riding all-terrain vehicles, picnicking, and backpacking.

1. Hunting

Many people travel to the lower Owyhee subbasin and surrounding areas to enjoy some of the best hunting in the Northwest. Wild game includes chukar, Chinese ring-neck pheasant, quail, grouse, ducks, geese, mule deer, American pronghorn antelope, Rocky Mountain elk and bighorn sheep. ²⁵ There are fairly limited seasons for all game and specialized tags are required for some of the animals (see the hunting section of the wildlife component of this assessment).

One hunter evaluated the different ways of getting to areas for hunting chukar in the lower Owyhee subbasin. "In my opinion, the perfect chukar hunting vehicle is a

4WD Toyota T100, V6, 5-speed, extra cab with camper shell, winch and tow rope. It will go almost anywhere. . . An ATV, as its name implies, will go just about anywhere. But just because it can, doesn't mean you should. . . Exercising common sense, using your ATV appropriately, and staying on established roads and trails should keep you out of the [ATV hunter] . . . category."¹⁴ (Figure 8.8).

He also pointed out one of the problems introduced by hunters. "When the roads in chukar country are muddy, big trucks leave huge ruts behind. The ranchers who use the roads year around are forced to contend with the ruts long after the fool who made them is gone."¹⁴

Although most hunting is limited to public lands, private landowners may give permission to hunters to hunt on their land. If the Cow Hollow Association takes over management of Cow Hollow Park, the association may again sell hunting rights on private land in the Cow Hollow area.

2. OHVs and ATVs

In Oregon there are two types of off highway vehicles (OHV). A car, jeep, or other four wheel drive vehicle which is designed to use the highways and an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) which is not designed to go on the highways. The State of Oregon refers to both types as ATVs.

In the lower Owyhee subbasin, BLM has restricted ATV use in some areas where they are limited to either designated or existing routes (Figure 8.9). In areas limited to designated routes, only designated routes are open to motorized use. Existing routes are routes which have been around for a while, not recently created by OHVs. Data on existing routes is compiled from county data, state data, and data from other agencies as well as satellite or photo imagery.⁵

On public land, any vehicle designed to use the highways must be titled as whatever type of vehicle they are (pickup, sport utility vehicle, etc.). However if these are solely operated off-road and are not street legal, there is a special ATV permit. These vehicles, either registered or permitted, must be operated only by an individual with a valid driver's license.

To operate an ATV on public land the ATV is required to have a permit. To be permitted the ATV must meet specific equipment standards. In addition to the ATV permit, the operator must have either a valid driver's license or a special ATV operator permit. There are slightly different requirements for operators under 18 years old.

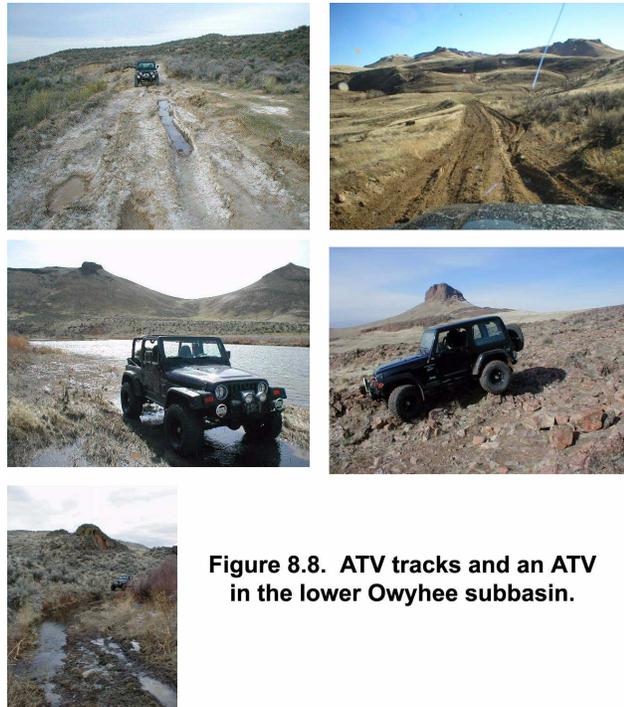


Figure 8.8. ATV tracks and an ATV in the lower Owyhee subbasin.

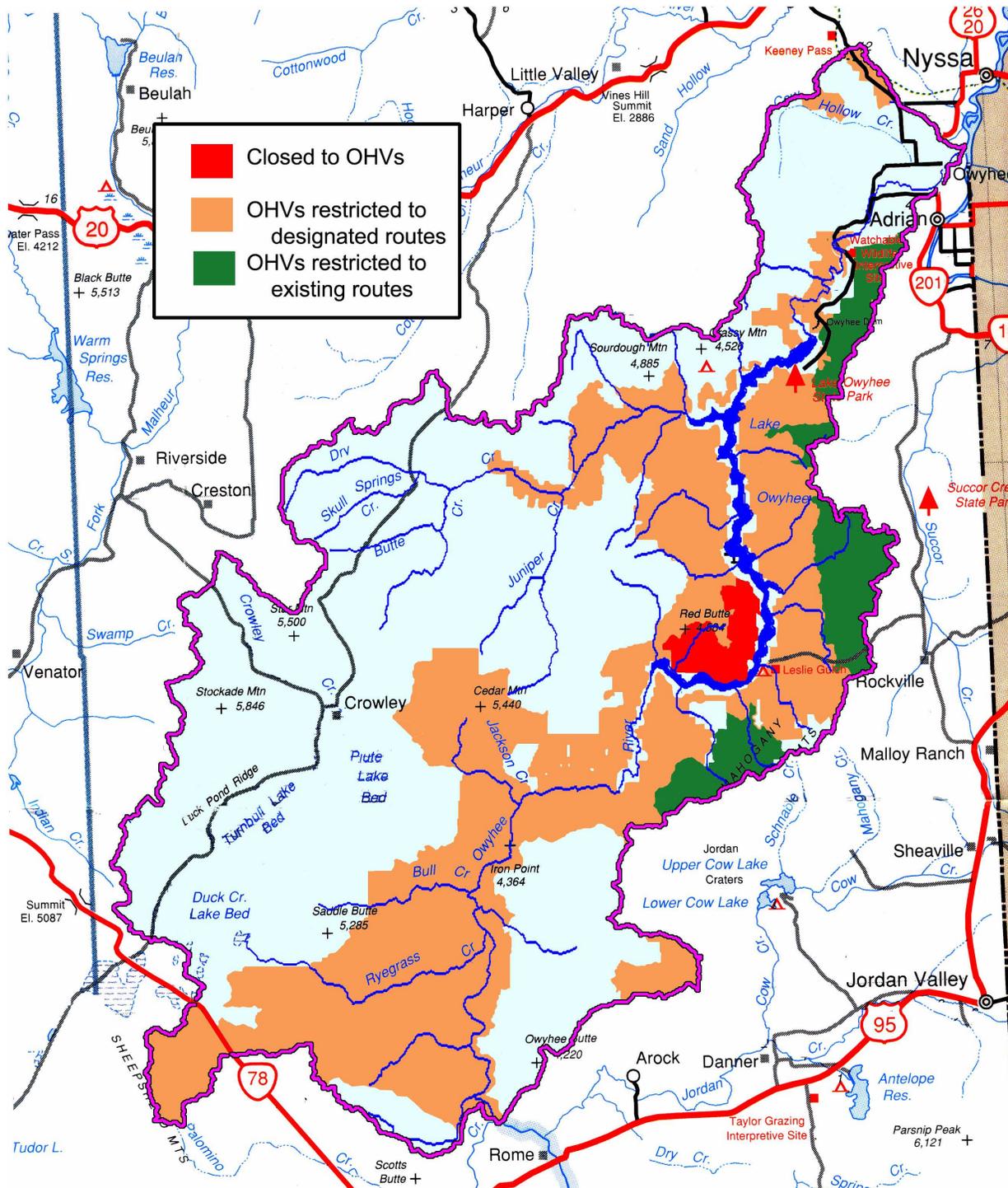


Figure 8.9. Areas managed by BLM in the lower Owyhee subbasin with Off Highway Vehicle restrictions.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) administers the ATV program. They recommend that riders also check with enforcement officials in the area where they intend to ride for any special requirements. Operators must also abide by state laws specific to ATVs including not using the ATV to hunt, run down, harass,

chase or annoy any game or domestic animal or bird; not exposing the underlying soil or vegetation, or injuring, damaging or destroying trees or crops; and not operating an ATV in possession of a loaded firearm or bow and arrow, unless all arrows are in a quiver.^{31,28,29,26}

3. Hiking and backpacking

“Tucked away on the east side of Owyhee Reservoir is a land of striking beauty. In the dry canyons of this desert country are a collection of oddly shaped rock pinnacles, towers, and cliffs painted in a colorful array of browns, reds, and oranges. In spring, especially after a wet winter, the sagebrush and grasses turn green, and wildflowers like balsam root and paintbrush add yellows, reds and other colors to the scene. Hikers familiar with the canyonlands of southern Utah will feel right at home.”^{22,21}

a. Hiking

From Leslie Gulch, there are several paths for hiking up different directions.¹ Many of the lower Owyhee subbasin’s most spectacular scenic attractions are only accessible by foot or horseback. Road access to many of the spots to start hiking is not maintained. There are very few designated hiking trails. The landscape is so complex that even for extremely experienced hikers it can be difficult to determine where one is on a topographic quadrangle. Many of the more spectacular hikes are in the dry gulches below the rock formations.

It can be exceedingly dangerous for a lone hiker. Standard safety precautions include hiking with a companion, letting someone know where you are going and when you expect to be out, and carrying excess drinking water. There is no drinking water and virtually no shade. Cougars are human predators.

With these caveats, the lower Owyhee subbasin offers some fantastic day hikes for a prepared hiker. The Malheur Experiment Station web site suggests the Honeycombs, Carlton Canyon, and Painted Canyon.³⁷ Andy Kerr adds the Chalk basin, Lambert Rocks, Saddle Butte lava tubes, and Slocum Creek - Schoolhouse Gulch.¹⁵ Douglas Lorain includes Lambert Rocks and the Chalk Basin in one hike.^{23,20}

b. Backpacking

Backpacking is generally done in areas which can not be reached in a day hike. However, with proper preparation for a more extended stay in a landscape with no water, any hike can be taken more slowly and turned into a backpacking trip. In *Backpacking Oregon*, Douglas Lorain suggests two backpacking routes in the lower Owyhee subbasin, one a loop through the Honeycombs and Carlton Canyon and the other in the lower Owyhee Canyon.²¹

4. Rockclimbing

Although the parent material (rock) in much of the lower Owyhee subbasin is volcanic tuff, sedimentary, or layers of unconsolidated basalt, there are two places where there is some known rock climbing: Leslie Gulch and Three Fingers Rock.

a. Leslie Gulch rock climbing

“Leslie Gulch is a strikingly aesthetic vastness of volcanic tuff towers in the Mahogany Mountains of southeastern Oregon. The rock is similar to, but not as solid as, the volcanic tuff at Smith Rock. There are more than 80 established routes at Leslie Gulch. The majority of these routes are sport climbs but there are also some crack climbs. “The Windy Tower 5.11a” is an outstanding crack climb that can be seen on the right side of the road as you approach the Einstein parking area. The sport routes are clustered on the Einstein wall and the Asylum wall and others are scattered throughout Dago Gulch. The infamous manufactured routes on the Einstein and Asylum were responsible for a moratorium on route development and BLM plans for bolt removal. The bolts have remained and climbing has been allowed to continue. Despite the questionable nature of the routes' origins, many of these climbs are exceptionally good. But, if climbing on drilled pockets is not for you, skip the Einstein and Asylum and head straight to the naturally featured sport routes in Dago Gulch. . . . The approach to the Einstein and Asylum begins at a small pullout, by a cattle guard, near the Leslie Gulch ranger hut. The Asylum is the giant flower pedal shaped tower looming above the road and it is approached via the trail up Leslie Gulch. Hike about a quarter mile up Leslie Gulch and look for a trail that veers off right and up to the Asylum. The Einstein is a little further up the Leslie Gulch trail and you can't miss it. Dago Gulch is slightly further down the road from the pullout, by the ranger hut. There are primitive campsites at Dago Gulch. The climbing season at Leslie Gulch is the same as Boise's.”³

The above description mistakenly identifies the small cabin on private land as a ranger hut.

b. Three Fingers Rock

From the Succor Creek - Leslie Gulch road, take the turnoff between Round Mountain and McIntyre Ridge and go north to the vicinity of Big Hill Spring. Three Fingers Rock lies about a mile west of Big Hill Spring. To climb the east and middle finger you go around the east side to the north side of Three Fingers Rock and ascend the divide between the east and middle finger. It is safer to climb the middle finger with ropes and technical gear. A rock climbing enthusiast says it involves some “dicey rock-climbing moves.”²⁴

5. Horseback riding

There are no commercial stables with established routes for horseback riding in the lower Owyhee subbasin. Many local residents with horses use parts of the subbasin for horseback riding.

6. Mountain biking

Although bike camping is listed as engaged in more frequently by residents of Harney and Malheur Counties, in writing this assessment we have found only a couple of mentions of biking in the lower Owyhee subbasin, although bikes are used some in the campgrounds of Owyhee State Park. A couple of intrepid bikers with trailers for their camping gear followed a loop which included Leslie Gulch. They had not anticipated the lack of water in dry stream beds.¹³

G. Concerns, unknowns, and data gaps

Although there are regulations for groups floating the Owyhee River that require them to pack out all evidence of their presence, this is frequently not done. Float groups do not necessarily follow all of the rules. Local residents comment that trash and toilet paper is not an uncommon site along the river canyon.

Likewise, although OPRD prohibits ATVs from exposing the underlying soil or vegetation, it is obvious that this regulation is frequently ignored and rarely, if ever, enforced.

The real costs of recreational use of the lower Owyhee subbasin to local governmental bodies is unknown. Recreational use by individuals from outside the lower Owyhee subbasin causes county organizations such as the Malheur County sheriff's office, the Nyssa Road District, or the Adrian Quick Response Unit to incur increased costs.

How will the increasing population of the Boise metropolitan area affect the level of use of the lower Owyhee subbasin? Who will be responsible for higher costs?

Is there adequate monitoring of the wild and scenic river corridor to ensure that improper use of some areas will not result in those areas becoming off limits to rafters?

Are there adequate resources and administrative concern to ensure that weeds that are introduced and expanding in the area do not end up compromising the values of the area?

Are private float parties bringing all their refuse out of the canyon?

The continued encroachment of tamarisk (see the weed section of rangeland and riparian components) along the lower Owyhee River many interfere with the vegetation

needed for the insect life which provides food for the fish in the artificial cold water fishery below the dam. The disturbance in the food chain could possible affect the availability of fish for fly fishing.

The old abandoned, rusted, antique farm implements in the equipment yard near the water wheel contribute to the aura and historic value of the Birch Creek Ranch



Figure 8.10. Antique agricultural implements at Birch Creek Historical Ranch and some newly discarded materials.

(Figure 8.10). The disposal of modern rubbish such a water heater, barbecue, and septic drain pipe amongst the antique equipment devalues them. The area would benefit from the removal of the newly discarded material.

How would the potential wild and scenic river designation of the lower Owyhee River for recreational purposes affect the ability to maintain access through the river corridor to the recreational activities at Owyhee Reservoir (Figure 8.5)? How would it affect the ability to quickly gain access for maintenance or repairs on Owyhee Dam by enlarging the roadway to support heavy construction equipment and supplies? How would it affect grazing? Would it complicate the control of tamarisk that is poised to compromise native riparian vegetation?

Trash and garbage frequently accumulate at Snively Hot Springs and other locations along the lower Owyhee River below the dam.

Will the designated camping facilities at Leslie Gulch be adequate to accommodate increased recreational use?

Recreational use of OHVs is not limited to existing routes (Figure 8.8). How can operators of OHVs be made aware of which routes are acceptable? We were unable in writing this assessment to find on line or from BLM where the designated and existing routes were. Is there any enforcement of the BLM restrictions on ATV use?

Do recreational uses of the lower Owyhee subbasin contribute to the spread of noxious weeds? The road from Rome to the Chalk Basin has halogeton growing along both sides in the disturbed soil. Halogeton is poisonous to cattle.

Appendix H of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's 2003-2007 Oregon statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plan has a comprehensive list of concerns about the development of recreation in the region encompassing Malheur and Harney Counties.³²

H. Descriptions of and access to some attractions in the lower Owyhee subbasin

1. General precautions

Be careful to protect the formations, carry out your trash, and follow personal safety precautions. There is no drinking water and virtually no shade. Much of the land is administered by the Vale District Bureau of Land Management and many of the areas are off limits to motorized vehicle traffic.

2. Leslie Gulch

Leslie Gulch is a strikingly aesthetic vastness of volcanic tuff towers in southeastern Oregon. Leslie Gulch is known for its wind erosion in the tuff rock formations, wildflowers, camping, and access to Lake Owyhee (Figures 8.11 and 8.12). This is a picturesque



Figure 8.11. Wind eroded rock pillar in Leslie Gulch.



Figure 8.12. Wild flowers and Owyhee Reservoir at the end of Leslie Gulch

place where wind, water, and time have created spectacular panoramas of unusually sculpted conical towers, honeycombed pinnacles, and intricate multiple layered spires.

The drive to Leslie Gulch can be made in a standard two wheel drive vehicle. However, it is fairly long and over rough road. The scenic rolling hills and the rock formations are breath taking and make the drive worth while.

Leslie Gulch is accessible either through Succor Creek from Oregon Highway 201 south of Adrian or from US Highway 95 north of Jordan Valley near the Oregon-Idaho border.

3. The Honeycombs

The Honeycombs are scenic geological structures in the lower Owyhee subbasin. The Honeycombs lie on the east side of the Owyhee Reservoir. They were formed by volcanic activity followed by wind and water erosion. The red and yellow cliffs have been pocked with holes resembling a bee hive's honey comb and eroded into irregular pinnacles (Figures 2.28 and 8.13).

There is access by boat. Travel south on the Owyhee Reservoir from the boat launches near the dam or travel north from the boat launch at Leslie Gulch. Arriving at the Honeycombs, there is a ravine that rounds the south end of the formations and affords access. To explore the east side of the Honeycombs, follow the bottom of the ravine. There is difficult access by four wheeled drive vehicle to Juniper Ridge and then by foot from the northeast of the formation.

No motorized vehicle traffic is allowed. The US Bureau of Reclamation land on the east side of the reservoir adjoining the Honeycombs has a campsite at the north end of Bensley Flat.

4. Carlton Canyon

Carlton Canyon is an ordinarily dry tributary to the Owyhee River and lies between the Owyhee Reservoir and Three Fingers Rock. Carlton Canyon is a scenic geological area. The canyon was formed by volcanic activity followed by erosion. Two main



Figure 8.13. Rock formations in the Honeycombs.



drainages enter Carlton Canyon from the north. Both the west drainage and Painted Canyon (northeasterly drainage into Carlton Canyon) are spectacular.

There is access by boat to the mouth of the canyon and then by foot from the east. Travel south on the Owyhee Reservoir from the boat launches near the dam or travel north from the boat launch at Leslie Gulch. The mouth of the canyon is attractive but not spectacular. The more spectacular formations are further to the east. Arriving at Carlton Canyon, follow the bottom of the ravine to the east.

There is access by vehicle and then by foot from the east of the formation. Follow the ravine to the west. Not all paths provide unobstructed access.

No motorized vehicle traffic is allowed. It is possible to camp on US Bureau of Reclamation land on the east side of the reservoir at the mouth of Carlton Canyon.

5. Painted Canyon

Painted Canyon, is a normally dry canyon that runs south into Carlton Canyon and lies between the Owyhee Reservoir and Three Fingers Rock. Painted Canyon is a scenic geological area. The canyon was formed by complex volcanic and sedimentary activity followed by erosion.

There is foot access from Carlton Canyon to the south or foot access from the extreme northeast of the Painted Canyon drainage. Since there are no trails, follow the bottom of the ravines. Foot access is partially obstructed by several sharp drop offs that require short rock scrambles.

No motorized vehicle traffic is allowed. There are no convenient campsites and no water. It is possible to camp on US Bureau of Reclamation land on the east side of the reservoir at the mouth of Carlton Canyon, many miles by foot from Painted Canyon.

6. Lambert Rocks and Chalk Basin Loop Trail

“This hike explores one of the most spectacularly beautiful places in the state of Oregon. The colorful badlands of Chalk Basin rise above the Owyhee River in a



Figure 8.14. Owyhee River canyon.

stunning display of eroded cliffs and spires. Enhancing this photographer’s paradise are the nearby volcanic crags of the Lambert Rocks and the deep chasm of the Owyhee River Canyon. But getting there is a challenge. More than any other trip in this book, the access road tests the limits of the rule that all hikes must be accessible in a typical passenger car. Not only that, the window of opportunity for visiting this area is small. Most people arrive on rafts in April and May, when the water is high enough for floaters on the Owyhee River. But the road then is usually muddy and impassable. By midsummer, temperatures soar above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, which is too hot for most hikers. That leaves September, after the temperatures cool

and before winter rains turn the powdery dust into miles of mud. Fortunately, this is also when rabbitbrush and sunflowers add splashes of yellow to the desert's browns and grays.”²³

Chalk Basin is across the Owyhee River from Lambert Rocks. Chalk Basin entered from the west is not spectacular.

7. Owyhee River

The headwaters of the Owyhee River are in Nevada. After flowing through Idaho, it crosses the Owyhee uplands of southeastern Oregon, eventually flowing into the Snake River. The river has cut deep canyons into the landscape which reveal a geologic history beginning nearly 14 million years ago (Figures 8.14 and 8.15). The river exposes strata of Miocene, Pliocene, and Pleistocene eras. The Owyhee offers breathtaking cliffs towering above the river, picturesque multicolored geological formations of basalt flows interspersed with sedimentary rock and fossil deposits.



Figure 8.15. The steep walls of the east rim of Owyhee Canyon at a bend in the river.

The Owyhee Canyon offers a wide variety of recreational pursuits: scenic, geologic, biologic, and historic. The area attracts hunters, fishermen, boaters, tourists, and scientists. Wildlife in the gorge includes mule deer, bighorn sheep, chukar, quail, golden eagles and a variety of hawks.

8. Birch Creek Ranch

“Birch Creek Ranch, the collective name for two ranches founded about 100 years ago, is an oasis in the arid, scenic Owyhee River Canyon. Its green fields contrast strongly with the sun-drenched cream- and chocolate-colored formations and the red and black volcanic rocks that soar up from the edges of its narrow meadows. Prepare yourself for an astonishing, world-class beauty that changes through the day.”⁴

Eight miles north of Jordan Valley, turn east from Highway 95 onto the road to Jordan Craters and Birch Creek Ranch. A four-wheel drive vehicle with high clearance is recommended for the last 11.5 miles of the drive into the ranch. The last couple of miles into Birch Creek Ranch can be impassable in wet weather due to slick clay. There are four developed campsites and bathroom facilities at the north of the ranch past the old waterwheel and equipment yard.

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