



VIGILANTES, SKIERS, AND OUR PUBLIC LANDS.

by David Hanson
photography by Michael Hanson

A ski tour on Steens Mountain above the same wildlife refuge where Bundy and his “patriots” staged an armed resistance reveals a way forward in our public lands culture war.

On December 4, 2017, President Donald Trump flew into Salt Lake City, Utah,

held a press conference, and without laying eyes on southern Utah, undesignated 85 percent of Bears Ears National Monument and 45 percent of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The news has conservationists and recreationalists throughout the West justifiably apoplectic. While not unprecedented, shrinking a National Monument is extremely rare—it hadn't been done since Kennedy slightly reduced Bandelier, New Mexico in 1963—and, in this case, potentially illegal. In the tire fire that is our ongoing culture war, though, Bears Ears was a predictable flare-up. One side feared their ancestral lands would be sold or leased to mining companies and left unprotected from artifact thieves. The other assumed a Monument designation would restrict all access and turn the keys over to D.C. bureaucrats. To negotiate, apparently, is to admit defeat.

Lawsuits are in the works, but there's a better way to protect our federal lands, and, ironically, one lesson comes from the same remote Oregon county that brought us the Malheur armed-militia occupation of 2016. You might remember Ammon Bundy, a valet car fleet owner from Arizona, who led a gang of self-proclaimed "patriots" in the anti-government siege of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. The occupation fit neatly into the 24 hour news cycle, but it never really posed a threat to Harney County's public lands. Still, while East Coast media chase the Russia scandal, a Bundy-esque political shift toward an anti-government White House and Congress is methodically assaulting our public lands.

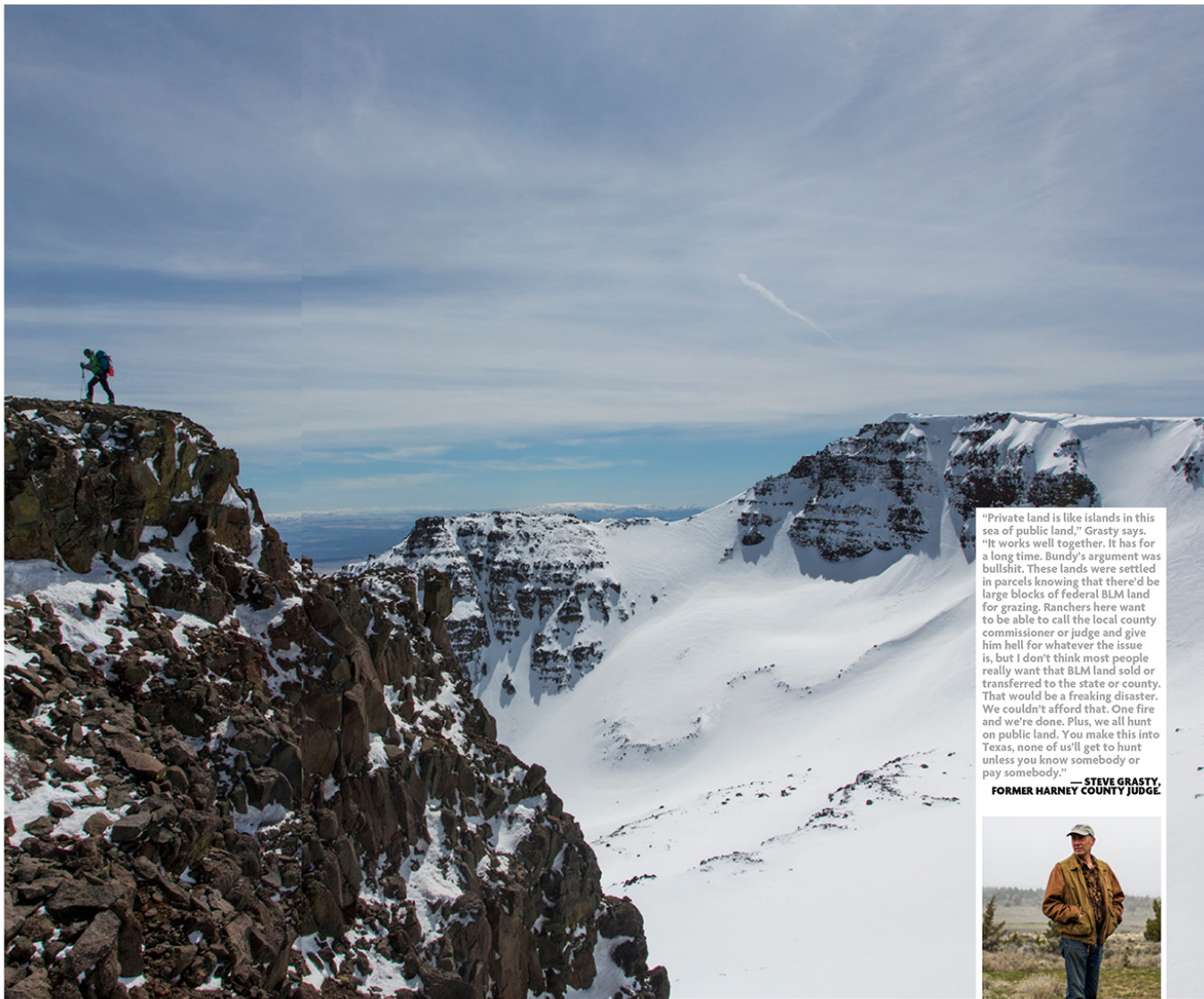
SO LAST WINTER, I TRAVELED TO HARNEY COUNTY

for a ski tour on Steens Mountain, the massive snow-capped summit that overlooks the same Wildlife Refuge where the FBI waited out the paranoid militia. It turns out that Steens and the surrounding country are managed like no other piece of the federal portfolio. A ski tour across the Steens' orchestrated patchwork of public and private land, all open for recreational use, might, I thought, make a handy physical exploration of how public lands could be managed in some distant nonpartisan utopia.

Regardless of my heady plans, my brother and a few buddies agreed to join. We all wanted to ski as far from resorts and lift lines as Oregon would allow. Harney County sits five hours and 250 miles east of Portland. It's home to less than 8,000 humans and more than 100,000 cows. A full 75 percent of Harney is public land, interwoven in a mostly cohesive tapestry of private ranches, hay and dairy farms, and BLM and Forest Service managed acreage. Other than locals, the occasional birders, bikers, hikers, hunters, and ATVers make brief visits.

Steens, in other words, is a strange and lonely mountain with a topographic prominence that had fascinated me for years. I'd read about it in *National Geographic*, biked a long tour around it one spring, and gazed at it often on maps—a north-south shadow of relief in the otherwise brown, nearly roadless high desert of eastern Oregon. The mountain rises gradually from its western base in Frenchglen (4,200 feet) to its crest at 9,700 feet. Its eastern escarpment then plummets more than 4,000 vertical feet down to the Alvord Desert. The vertical change is so dramatic from the surrounding ranchland that Steens creates its own weather and casts a rain shadow over the barren alkaline desert in its leeward wake. The eastern escarpment is also windblown, scoured, and, when there's good snow, too avalanche-prone for many reliable ski turns. A ski tour on Steens, therefore, is a fittingly strange and lonely proposition.

In addition to my brother, Michael Hanson, a Hood River photographer, I'm with Chris Emerick, a videographer and snow-kite ninja from Mosier, Oregon. Nick Silverman, a hydrologist who's joined me on adventures since our college days in Virginia's Appalachians, is en route from Missoula. We stop at the local BLM headquarters to retrieve one of four keys to the locked gate at the base of the Steens Mountain Loop Road. The other three keys are in the drawer—we're the only visitors this week. How far we'll get up the paved road is another story. The rangers tell us patchy snow starts at 5,500 feet. A guy had to get hauled out recently



"Private land is like islands in this sea of public land," Grasty says. "It works well together. It has for a long time. Bundy's argument was bullshit. These lands were settled in parcels knowing that there'd be large blocks of federal BLM land for grazing. Ranchers here want to be able to call the local county commissioner or judge and give him hell for whatever the issue is, but I don't think most people really want that BLM land sold or transferred to the state or county. That would be a freaking disaster. We couldn't afford that. One fire and we're done. Plus, we all hunt on public land. You make this into Texas, none of us'll get to hunt unless you know somebody or pay somebody."

— STEVE GRASTY,
FORMER HARNEY COUNTY JUDGE



when he buried his axle in a drift. Later that night, through the windows of the historic Frenchglen Hotel, a full moon reveals the mercury landscape of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge's winter grasses leading to the vast sage slope of the Steens.

The next morning, we cross the Malheur wetlands to the gate, still 20 miles from the summit. This is big country. Nick, Chris, Michael and I are originally East Coasters and public land back east is sparse: Nick's Florida is 30 percent public; Chris' West Virginia is 16 percent, and my Georgia is 10 percent. Sixty percent of Oregon is state and federally managed, which ranks it fifth after Alaska (95 percent), Nevada (88 percent), Utah (75 percent) and Idaho (70 percent). From the moment we pass through the locked gate we have three days to explore an entire massif. We shovel tire tracks through the light drifts so we can continue gaining elevation until, at 6,200 feet, a broad snow-covered plateau finally eats the pavement for good. We gear up to ski tour under blue skies.

In the late '90s there was a fight over the Steens—as Oregonians refer to it. Conservationists, led by the Bend-based Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) saw the Steens as national park potential. Ranchers, though, many of whom came from families that had grazed cattle on Steens rangeland since the 1860s, worried that such a designation would impose untenable regulations and bankrupt them.

By 2000, the two sides settled on a unique compromise signed by Bill Clinton and approved by Congress. The Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA) is the only one of its kind in the U.S. The designation allowed for the BLM to manage the majority of Steens' land, with a third protected as Wilderness, and a portion available for grazing under consultation with a group of local stakeholders. Mining and geothermal extraction were prohibited on nearly a million acres; three rivers received Wild and Scenic protection, and private landowners could trade their lands in order to consolidate or attain better grazing, mostly lower on the Steens. As compromises go, no one felt like they'd won, but in the years since, the Steens CMPA has built small-town relationships into effective land management. If you followed the Bundy story, you know that he and his patriots were not from Harney County. The real story here is of people working together.

Later, I spoke with Andrew Shields, the wildlife biologist for privately held Roaring Springs Ranch, which grazes on more than a million acres of deeded land and land leased from BLM. "People can say whatever they want, but the reality is, it's hard to manage land for multiple use. I don't envy the BLM guys at all—balancing wild horses and sage grouse and cattle and mining and extraction. Can the county do it better than the BLM? I don't know. I couldn't."

Steens isn't perfect, but it works. And by all accounts, Bears Ears would have worked too. Nobody would have lost the ability to graze or forage or even ride their ATVs under Monument status. A Colorado uranium company had only expressed interest in a small fraction of the northern and southeastern tips of the Monument—one to two percent of the entire acreage. But something has fundamentally shifted since 2000 and the establishment of the Steens' CMPA. John Freemuth, Director of the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State, brought some historical context when I spoke to him recently: "The public land transfer issue comes back like the cicadas. Every 20-30 years a new generation gets all fired up. It's been happening for over a century."

I'm not sure if that's comforting or if it just induces more nihilism. You can't point to any one thing to explain why Bears Ears became a proxy war for the current public land debate. The alt-right battle against truth and science-based policy is freshly disturbing. And the fact that a black President designated monuments in the largely white Intermountain West can't be ignored either, especially considering the Bundy-fueled protests were aided in large part by an AK-47-clad, all-white, nationalist militia not all that dissimilar from the tiki torches who marched on Charlottesville. Maybe it is just animosity building over a generation like underbrush ahead of a wildfire, but the Trump era feels more feverish and dieseled up.

Perhaps a solution is as simple as rethinking loaded terms like Monument, Refuge, and Wilderness. Justified or not, the fear of a government takeover (despite the fact the land is already publicly owned) is real in the Intermountain West. Softening the language could ultimately yield more conservation-oriented solutions. And then there's the Steens Cooperative Management and Protection Area. If the Bears Ears and Escalante lawsuits filed by environmentalists fail to overturn Trump's de-designation, I wonder if any of the players will look at a similar alternative. The Steens has



"The Trump campaign was clearly rooted in populism, so one thing I find odd about the actions of his administration is that they're using populism to undermine public lands. The idea that we can all hunt, fish, hike, and ski on public lands that aren't reserved for the rich is one of the most fundamentally populist ideas in this country. The fact that Trump's team is using populism to attack that notion is more than ironic. It's dangerous."

—BRENT FENTY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION (ONDA).





"I wear two hats. I work with agencies and I deal with natural resource issues on our land so we can operate into the future. An example of the cross-pollinating of management is with sage grouse. We entered into conservation agreements with local BLM managers and environmental groups to coordinate the Oregon Sage Grouse Plan. We need a seat at those tables to provide input so plans work on the ground."

**—ANDREW SHIELDS,
WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST,
ROARING SPRINGS RANCH.**



no geothermal plants or mines, the ranchers manage grazing lands for invasive weeds and fire, and occasional ski tourers like me can keep skinning upward.

As we slog up Steens, it feels at times like we're in the rolling sandhills of Nebraska, then the slope ramps-up and silvery patches of aspens reveal themselves up high. Buried road signs and the top lines of a barbed-wire fence mark our way. Leaving a basin, we pass a sign notifying us that we're entering private land, the trail made public through an easement. But public and private now look the same. Four feet of snow silences the political dog whistles.

Past Fish Lake we climb to 8,000 feet to a short, almost skiable pitch and dig out camp in the deep snow. The winds are a whisper, but Chris pulls out his snowkite and eventually finds a breath of late afternoon wind that hauls him up the surrounding hills. In the morning we pack light and skin again, hoping to find skiable lines from the rim. The terrain remains open and relatively mellow, but there's an alpine feel to the thin air and expanding views. Tiny ice crystals glint against the blue sky. It takes an hour to navigate the final ramp to a sharp horizon. Near the top, the Kiger Gorge drops away to the north, carved into a U-shaped valley by ancient glaciers. This vantage might have been what prompted former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to say in the '90s that the Steens was the "only place I've seen where you have alpine glacial valleys end in the desert."

We scout the knife-edge traverse above the Kiger, the crux of an eastern descent off the Steens. It's corniced, wind-blown and sketchy as hell. Our party is enveloped by a squall. The winds pick up to 30 mph and we debate turning around in the whiteout. Then, just as suddenly as it came, it's gone, leaving blue skies and wispy clouds. We lizard out on sunny rocks overlooking the Alvord Desert and eat lunch. There's maybe one or two skiable lines off the rim, but they start in deep and slabby wind deposits and we won't tempt the stability this far out in the wilderness. It's satisfying enough to sit at 9,000 feet, boots off, sun warm, bourbon cold, knowing we're the only ones on this vast mountain island that I've wanted to visit for years. There will be no face shots or adrenaline gut checks on our way off the Steens. It'll take another half day to ski back to the truck in the morning.

You have to really want to go to the Steens. But if you want it bad enough, it's there. You can go. It's ours. 