

Steens Mountain and Owyhee Canyon

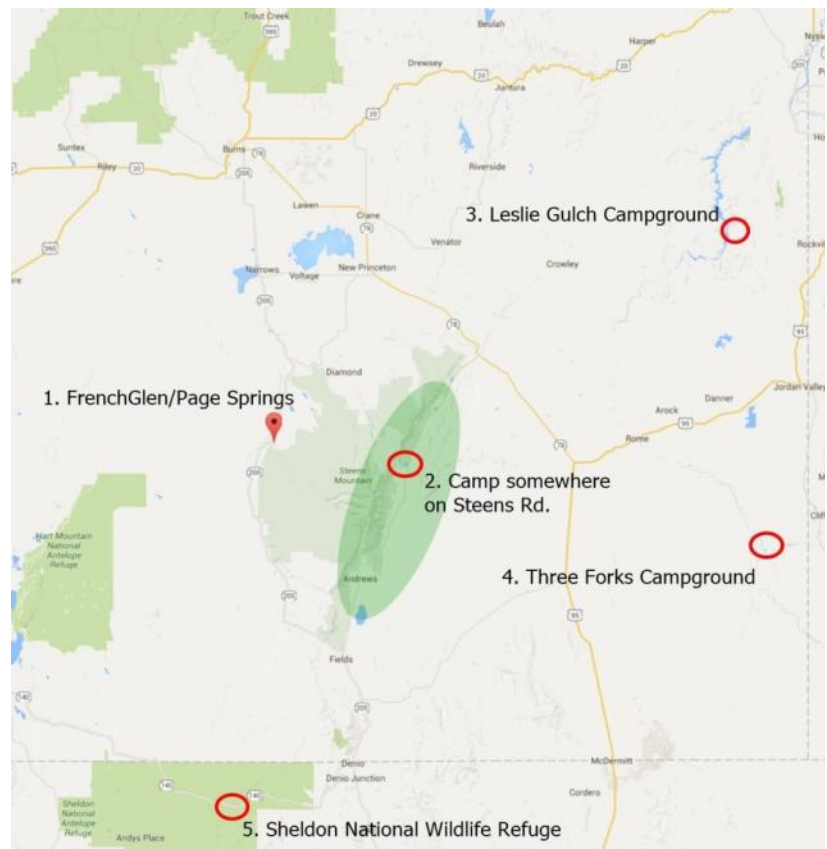
May 20 – 25, 2016

Over the past two springs (2014 and 2015) I backpacked/car-camped/hiked with Gary and Ben in the Owyhee area (2014) and biked around Steen's Mountain with Gary and Pete (2015). The things we saw and did were awesome. I figured this was stuff that Marguerite had to see, but perhaps not with a backpack on her shoulders or from the seat of a bicycle for over 200 miles. We figured a five-day excursion would just about do it, camping where it made sense, driving to trailheads and enjoying the good life with our tent set up in the back of my pickup truck. Here is a recap of that trip.

Our original plan went something like this:

1. Camp at Page Springs just outside of Frenchglen.
 - Hike the Donner und Blitzen River Trail
2. Camp somewhere on Steens Road
 - Hike around Fields or Pike Creek Trail
3. Camp at the campground at the end of Leslie Gulch Road, next to the Owyhee River/Reservoir
 - Hike Juniper Gulch
4. Camp at Three Forks Campground at the confluence of the Middle Owyhee River and North Owyhee River.
 - Hike (or 4-wheel drive) to Three Forks Hot Springs
5. Camp somewhere in the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northern Nevada.
 - Hike the Thousand Creeks Trail (if I can find it)
6. Camp (in the bedroom) in Chico, CA at Bettie's house.
 - Jump in the pool, suck gin and tonics, and sleep and sleep and sleep.

Southeast corner of Oregon



The way it went down (surprisingly close to the original plan)

Friday, May 20

We joined Gary in Bend where he had just completed the MCAT exam. We went to Deschutes Brewery to celebrate his finishing the long studying ordeal that culminated in today. Of course, if he gets into Med School, then that is just the tip of the iceberg, studying-wise.



Saturday, May 21

Saturday morning, Gary went back home and Marguerite and I continued our journey, bound for Page Springs near Frenchglen, about a three-hour car ride. Although it was late May, we hit snow, enough so that it covered the roads. I was glad to have the four-wheel drive truck.



The road was not really that bad as long as we kept the tires on the pavement. Marguerite, being the super-trooper that she is, was all smiles.

By the time we reached Page Springs, the snow had stopped, but it still looked like rain, so our first task was to put up our Redneck RV. I had done the math, measuring and theorizing at home how it would all work and, danged if it didn't all go together perfectly! The new blue tarp covered the tent and synched down nicely over the bed of the truck. We put our sleeping gear in the tent, zipped it up and decided to go for a walk.



Our Redneck RV

The walk was only a few miles and nothing very remarkable. We walked along a maintenance road that went into the nearby watershed. It was birding season, so we figured we would see some tweety-birds. We did, but didn't get any good pictures. But we did manage to see a lot of critters along the way.



Black tail deer and one Antelope



One very camera-friendly marmot and a bunch of bunnies (not jack rabbits).

We beat the rain back to our Redneck RV and took refuge under our fancy porch cover. After the rain, we made a fire, made dinner and sat back a bit. But, it was chilly and threatening rain again, so right at dark we crawled into our nest and snoozed very well until morning.



Sunday, May 22

On Sunday we packed up and headed to Fields to get gas. From there we drove the Fields-Denio Road north to Pike Creek Trail. We had to pay \$5 at the Alvord Desert Hot Springs office to get access to the trail. The road from the main road to the trailhead is only about 200 yards long, but crosses private land, so the land owners want some of your money. Not a bad deal, really, so I have no qualms with giving up \$5.

Driving on the Fields-Denio Road we had several picture ops of both the Steens range covered in snow and the Alvord Desert covered in, well, sand. Look to the west for the mountain and on the other side of the road, there is the desert. Pretty amazing, I think.



The Steens range driving Fields-Denio Road



And the Alvord Desert on the other side of the road.

The Pike Creek Trail is one of the most beautiful hikes around Steens because from it you can see both Steens Mountain and the Alvord Desert as you hike up the valley. It is an out and back of about 3.2 miles (7.5 total). I have seen other distances in other guide books, ranging from 2.5 to 3.0 one way. I think mine is more accurate – GPS you know. There is a lot of elevation gain, about 1300 feet. Hike until you don't want to hike or until the trail just sort of peters out. That is what we did. There is also Pike's Knob, a wide tower in the middle of the canyon. You can hike to that if you want, but it is beyond the end of the trail several hundred yards. I took a ton of pictures, many of wildflowers, the mountain and the desert. Nice hike! Marguerite got a bit tired, but she was okay once we made it back to the car and our final destination for the night – Mann Lake.



The trail starts at a house-sized boulder with a large pine growing out of it. The trail crosses the creek wherever you can find a good place to cross and then meanders up that ravine where the greenery is. There are rattle snakes around here, by the way, so be careful. We didn't see any; it was likely too cold, considering we got snowed on as we climbed, but in the summer, keep a good eye out, watch where you step and where you put your hand. More rattle snake bites occur on the hand and arm than the foot and leg.



The trail is long and beautiful, holding many opportunities for selfies. Stop often and take in the sights.

There is a sign on the trail that marks the beginning of the Steens Mountain Wilderness. Notice how nice and dry it is? Wait for it...

Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and before long, you run into snow (both on the mountain and falling from the sky). We hid behind a small group of pine trees to escape wind and rain, and peeled off our jackets when the sun broke out. It was a regular cornucopia of weather.



We found the first trickles of Pike Creek and then the trail began to peter out, looking downright sinister on us. So, we decided to call it good at about 3.2 miles. We managed a nice lunch under a tree during more rain.

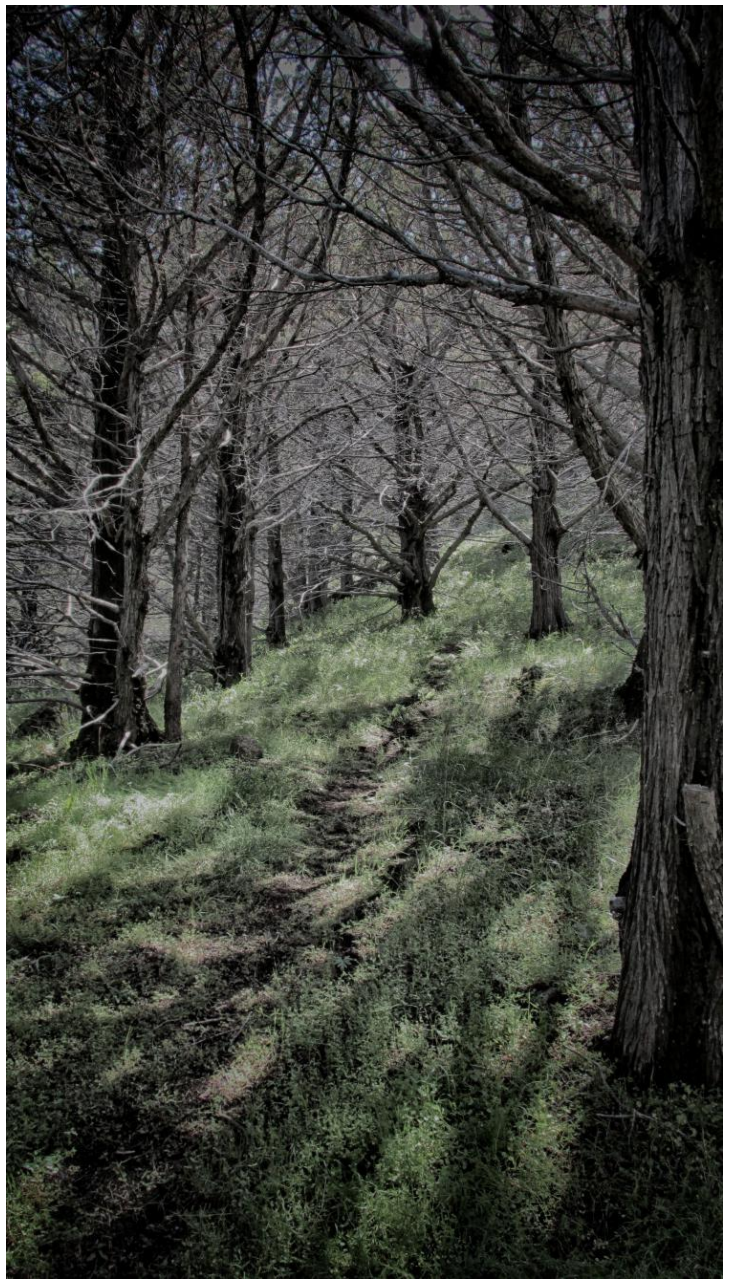




On our way back, we noticed that where there was no stream at the beginning of our hike, now there was. The snowfields are melting.

I like the picture to the right, by the way at the end of the trail...sinister.

Back at the trailhead, we had to take one more selfie. We were both pooped but still smiling.



Following are some nice landscape and flower pictures.





Pretty wild rose
and a nice wild
bouquet.



Flowers on this page, starting at top and clockwise: Yellow Lupine, Yellow Lupine with visitor, Ash Penstemon (I think), Slender Hawksbeard with visitor and Yellow Salsify.





Above: Mule ear and Lupine
Right: Canadian Milk-vetch (I think)
Below: Indian paintbrush and Lupine





Above: Thistle
Right: Ash Penstemon
Below: True Forget-me-not





Above left: Globe Penstemon

Above Right: Unknown

Left: Fleabane (daisy) and Lupine

Right: Mule ear and Lupine

Lupine seems to be a nice harmonizing wildflower





At the end of the day, we found Mann Lake, set up our Redneck RV and enjoyed the scenery. Wow! Not bad, not bad at all. We slept very well that night, both quite tired from the over seven-mile hike into Pike Creek Valley. Worth it!

Monday, May 23

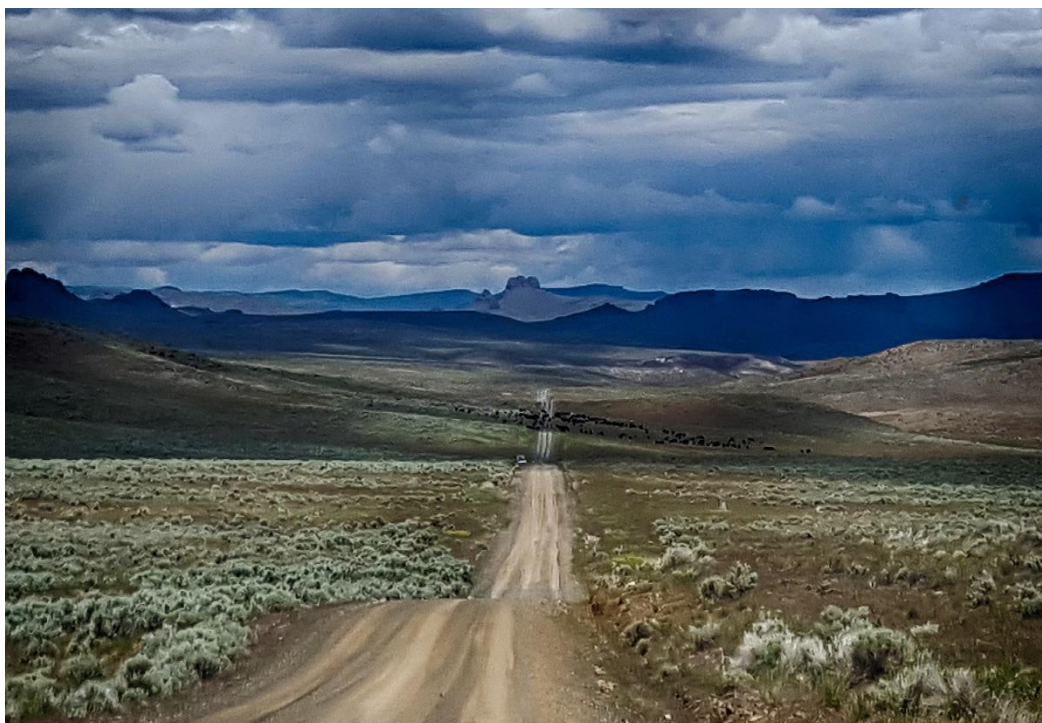
Monday found us bound for Leslie Gulch and an easier hike into Juniper Gulch – only about a mile in, if that, unless you want to make it a harder 5-miler. We didn't want to.



We woke up bright and early and were greeted by a beautiful morning.

On our way into Leslie Gulch, we ran into open-range cattle. When you see them, slow down, way down. A bunch of new calves.

Below: Going down Leslie Gulch Road, you run into what I like to refer to as the Leslie Gulch sentinel. Those formations are at least 10 stories high.





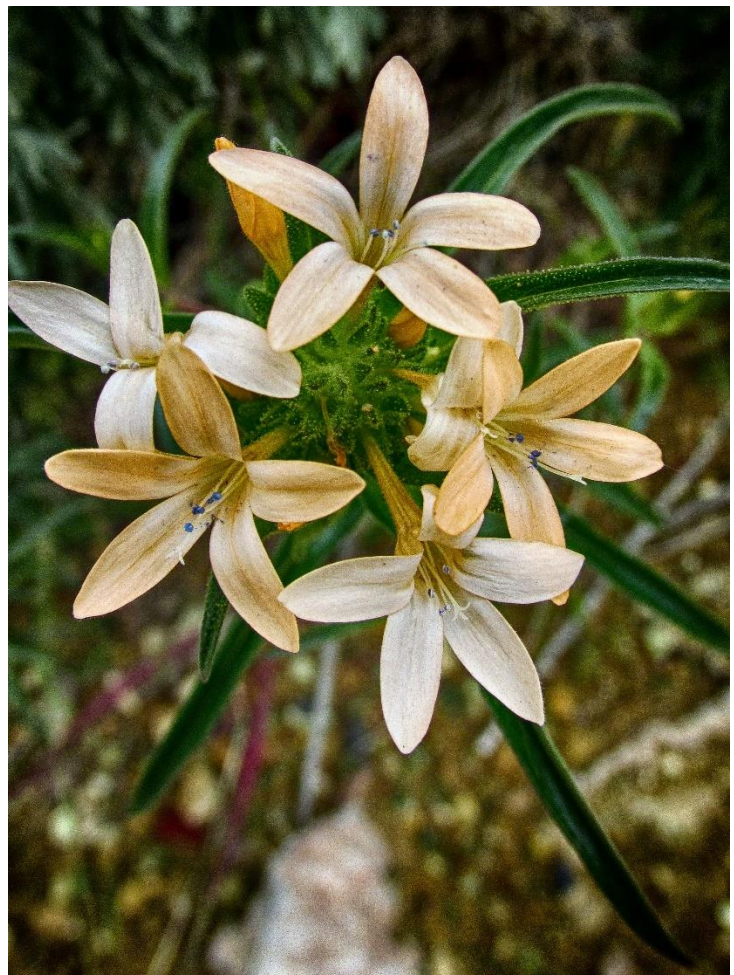
Near the end of Juniper Gulch trail. We could have gone further, but I did that two years ago with Gary, so this time, we decided to take it easy. The view was still just as beautiful as it was two years ago.

We saw very few new flowers, but did manage to find this one, which I am not sure what the name is. I guessed after some online searching that it might be a Tiny Trumpet.

And, as is our way, we found several opportunities to take selfies. Are selfies passe? Oh well, how can we go wrong with such beautiful subjects...ha ha.



Pictures of Juniper gulch and the rock formations on the next page.





At the end of our hike, we walked down to the Owyhee River to have a look. It was much higher than when the boys and I did the hike two years earlier – MUCH higher. Marguerite washed the Juniper Gulch dust off her face. I watched all the fish jumping. Rather amazing just how many there were. I think they were all trout. Should have brought my fishing pole.

The Owyhee is very beautiful. It runs south to north, by the way.



Our Day Three camp in Leslie Gulch provided yet another beautiful view to go to sleep to. It looked like rain, but I don't think it rained a drop. Still, we set up our Redneck RV and slept safe and sound. But then again, with scenery like this, how can you not sleep well?



Tuesday, May 24

Although the weather was not what you could call stellar, we decided to tackle the 35 miles of gravel and dirt road to 3 Forks. If those roads get wet, the nice, dry dust and gravel become mud bogs with just the slightest rain. It looked pretty nice though, so we decided to do it; I really wanted to show Marguerite the best (in my opinion) hot springs on earth. The boys and I had discovered them two years earlier and I figured Marguerite would love them as much as we did.

On our way in we saw
field after field of
white lupine. Just
beautiful!





3 Forks Campground. We camped down there in one of the little light-colored spots.

Before even finding a campsite, since there was no one there but us, we decided to take our hike to the hot springs...or, if we could get the truck across the river, drive to the hot springs. Alas, the river was (maybe) too high and we didn't want to take a chance. If I would have had the boys with me, we would have definitely tried it, but I couldn't see Marguerite pushing the truck while its wheels spun in the sand and mud. We walked.



We left the truck on one side and we waded across. I think we could have made it, but slinging mud all over marguerite was likely not a good idea, what with making her push the truck and all. No, that just didn't seem like a good idea.

We ran into three snakes: two gopher snakes and one pretty good-sized rattle snake. Here is a picture of a very pissed off gopher snake. Gopher snakes look a lot like rattlers, but they lack the rattles and the poison.



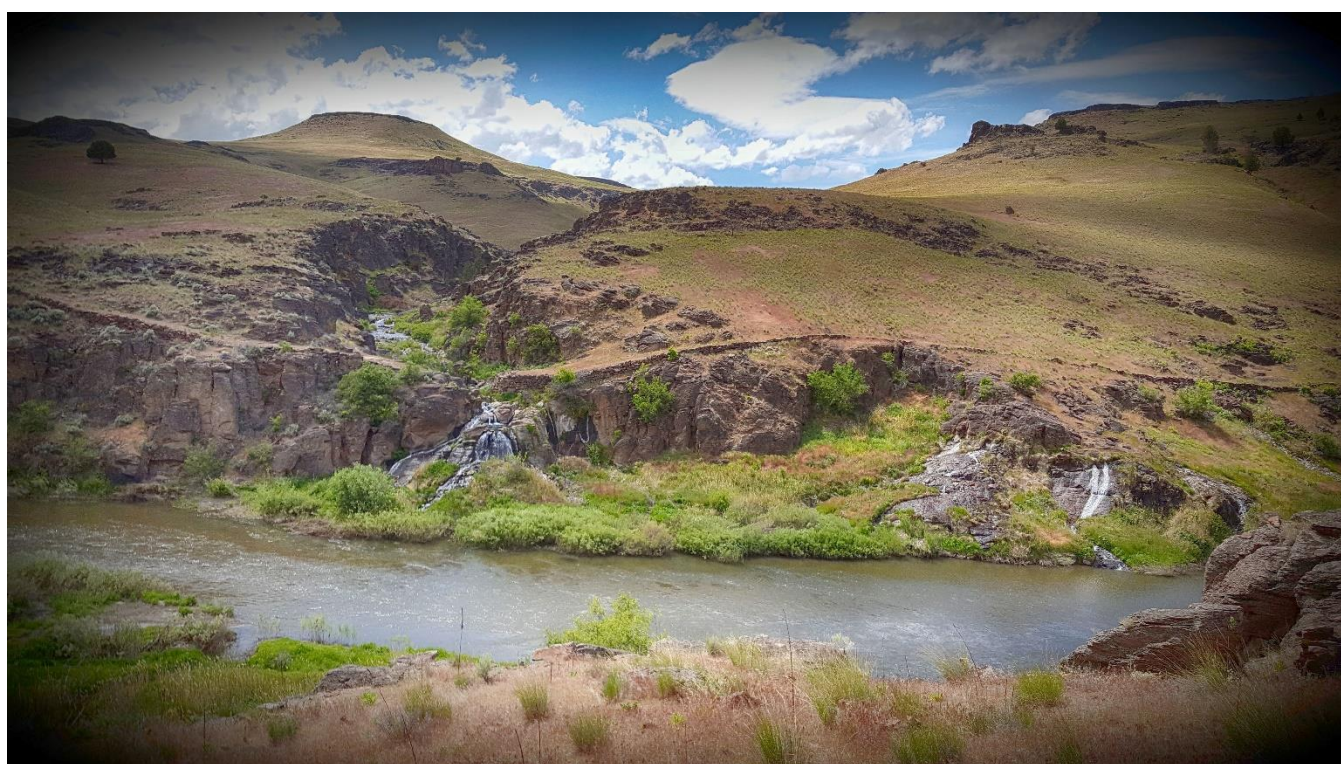
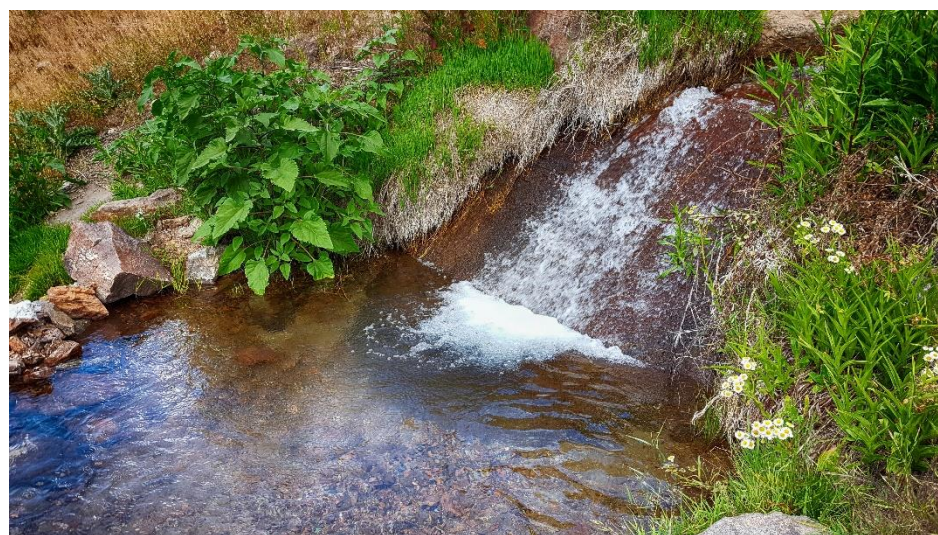


Now *this* is a rattlesnake. I typically like to irritate rattlesnakes so I can get good pictures of them. But this guy just had that “don’t tread on me” look about him. I agreed and let him go on his merry way. I count 14 rattles. That, by the way, does not indicate a rattler’s age. Generally, a rattler puts on a new rattle every time they shed and they can shed two, sometimes three, times a year. This snake is probably 4 to 6 years old.

We didn’t see as many flowers on this hike as yesterday’s, but we found a few, to include the Orange Globemallow below and the Monkey Flower further on at the hot spring.



We hiked along on the trail (which was really a jeep road). The Owyhee River paralleled our trek, snaking its way through rhyolite cliffs. We trudged on and soon found our hot springs. One small one on our side of the river and *the most wonderful hot springs on earth* on the other side. The river was a bit too ugly looking to wade/swim, so we chose to relax in the smaller one on our side, leaving the other for another time. We will definitely be back. Both hot springs are without sulfur – they are clean, without that sulfur smell that often comes with hot springs.



I really like this Monkey Flower so probably have too many pictures. We found it at the hot springs where we took a refreshing dip.



We took our dip in the hot spring, packed up, took a couple more pictures of all the pretty scenery, and headed back to make camp.



Our Day 4 camp at 3 Forks had just as many people around us as the other camps: almost none. Around 7pm one lone car came down the boulder paved slope and found a place to camp a few hundred yards from us – our only visitors for the night except for the occasional passing critter.



A few more day 4 pictures.



Wednesday, May 25

With the break of dawn came rain, not that much, but enough to make a constant pattering on the tarp of our Redneck RV and to give us cause to “get a move on.” We had no desire to get stuck in some mud bog on our way out. We packed up fast, just rolling up the tarp, tent and other gear, stuffing it all in the back of the truck and jumping in the truck – EVEN WITHOUT COFFEE AND TEA! Even with just the few drops of rain that landed on the roads, mud was already forming and we slid and kicked up debris as we pushed out way back to pavement – sorta fun, really, at least for me.

Our goal for day 5 was to “Camp somewhere in the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northern Nevada. Hike the Thousand Creeks Trail (if I can find it).” Well, we could find it if we wanted to, but the weather was so rainy, snowy, and just crazy that we figured we had had enough. As with *the most wonderful hot springs on earth*, the Sheldon trip would wait for another day.

Once we got back on solid pavement, we stopped at a little roadside pullout and historical marker to make some water for tea and coffee. The historical marker was pretty cool, describing the life of Sarah Winnemucca of the Northern Paiute tribe. We got a good history lesson.



Sarah Winnemucca

Sarah Winnemucca played a major role in shaping development of the American West, and specifically what is known as the I.O.N. country: the Idaho, Oregon and Nevada state junction. During her lifetime, Sarah became well known as an Indian activist and educator. Her influence on Indian interests was unprecedented.

Sarah Winnemucca, daughter of the celebrated Chief Winnemucca of the Northern Paiute tribe and granddaughter of Chief Truckee, was born in about 1844 near the Humboldt River in western Nevada. She spent much of her childhood and early adulthood living among white settlers and soldiers. She learned the culture of the Europeans during this time, and applied the knowledge upon her return to Nevada as an adult. "The old ways were gone forever," she told her fellow Paiute. "Your survival depends upon education because ignorance is the Indian's greatest enemy."

Taking an active role on behalf of the Northern Paiute tribe in this era of great transition, Sarah traveled extensively all over what would become the United States giving lectures describing reservation conditions, and addressing inequities in federal Indian policy and corruption by government agents. For about two years she ran a school that she herself established for Northern Paiute children near Lovelock, Nevada. This was the first effort toward self-determination in Indian education. In addition, Sarah wrote a book about her life: *Life Among the Paiutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. The book was likely the first written by an Indian woman in the U.S. and its territories.

Sarah's influence in I.O.N. country, her home area, was especially strong. Sarah acted as interpreter for the military from 1866 through 1875 at Fort McDermitt, Nevada and Camp Harney, Oregon. In 1875 she moved on to the Malheur Reservation in Oregon. She continued interpreting through 1878, as well as working as a teacher's aid. In 1878 the Bannock War broke out, and she worked for the military again as interpreter and courier. Throughout these years, there is evidence that she capitalized on her position as interpreter, acting as an advocate for the Northern Paiute tribal interests (Fowler 2003).

In 1880 Sarah traveled to Washington DC to petition for the release of Paiute prisoners being held in Yakima, Washington, and for restoration of the Malheur Indian lands. That effort bore no fruit, but she continued her lecture tour throughout the Eastern states. Sarah Winnemucca's efforts took her to the homes of some of the most prominent Americans of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Massachusetts senator Henry Dawes, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and her sister Mary Mann, the wife of Horace Mann. Her efforts were rewarded when these people



Sarah Winnemucca was an unusual woman for her time. Monuments have been dedicated to the great Indian chiefs; books have been written of their exploits and screenplays perpetuate their legends. Very little fanfare has attended Thoc-me-to-nay, "Shellflower", the woman who had a direct and lasting impact on the political stage of 19th Century Indian affairs. Among her own people there were those who opposed her accommodations to Anglo-American culture, but she was clearly acting throughout her life in what she believed to be their best interests. Her achievements were limited only by the times in which she lived.

The faint road running east-west across the current U.S. Highway 95 is the old Hill Beachy Stage Road, or I.O.N. cutoff. Sarah Winnemucca used this road on her diplomatic missions within the lands of the Paiute tribe.

A fine view of the lands that Sarah Winnemucca so frequently traversed can be seen from this location: to the west is Steens Mountain; to the east the Owyhee Mountains; to the south is Blue Mountain and the Santa Rosas in Nevada, and to the north is the Owyhee Upland country and the Owyhee River canyon.



The weather over the mountains going into Nevada was just plain down gnarly, so we agreed that we should camp out in Chico on day 5 instead of the Sheldon Wildlife Refuge. Good choice.

The End

