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Great Basin is West at its wild, wild best

Modern life loses its hustle in this scenic chunk of Oregon, where the humans are few and the wildlife free. One family rediscovers quietude and moments of awe.

By Eric Lucas, Special to The Times

"INTERESTING," says my stepdaughter Kirsten as she peers at the sight before us and adopts the universal adolescent expression — one eyebrow raised — that indicates something is intriguing but not, well, cosmic.

To me, it is cosmic. We're atop 9,700-foot Steens Mountain, in far south-central Oregon, peering 6,000 feet straight down into the Alvord Desert. More than 100 miles east are the lilac rims of Idaho's Owyhee Mountains, 100 miles south, the snowy stipples of the Pueblo range in Nevada. At our feet is the craggy eastern face of Steens, a 30-mile-long massif that is one of the biggest fault-block upthrusts on the continent. It's a snow-scraper in winter, but in spring and summer the mountain spills freshets traced by green lines of willows that probe the edge of the Alvord's sparkling salt pan.

It's one of the most spectacular vistas in the United States, and I've brought Kirsten here to expose her to some of the grandeur of the West. She's 12, and the preteen code of conduct demands diffidence to most adult experiences — "It's nice," she says — but I have a plan.

We're on family safari in the Great Basin, the closest thing America has to the African veldt. Besides Kirsten, I've brought my wife, Leslie, and our Finnish exchange student, Henna Saarinen, on a four-day journey into my favorite part of the West.

We'll peer from mountaintops, up at dark buttes and down into deep chasms. We'll mark raptors above and try, as we drive on dirt roads, to match the sprint of pronghorns. We'll camp beneath rustling willows along tumbling creeks amid a **sagebrush sea**. And we'll search for one sight that Kirsten holds dear in her imagination.

I have a deeper purpose too. I'm on pilgrimage to a place I treasure for more than its scenic magnificence. Here, the sheer immensity of the land and sky erase modern life's compression and haste. Here, you can lie back at night in a hot spring in a breezy meadow and watch night birds dash across the moon. Thunderstorms rage in the distance. Hawks keen, and harriers flash.

And there's a chance on the road that you'll be stopped flat as cattle mosey by, driven by half a dozen members of a ranching family, who raise their hats amiably as they trot past on horseback.

My benediction for this trip is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship."

But the family itinerary is supplied by John Muir: "Let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star."

And walk we do, many short strolls into the sights, scents and sounds of the land. But as wild and free as the Great Basin is, one of the most practical features of a family trip here is that you can drive the best parts. That includes a fine gravel road to the top of Steens.

At the summit, we watch a pair of golden eagles soar as high as hope. On the way down, we admire a dozen shades of Indian paintbrush, from straw yellow to vermilion. We try to spot century-old Basque carvings in the trunks of 3-century-old aspens.

After driving the 59-mile Steens Mountain loop (creeping along the 1,000-foot drop-off of Big Indian Creek Gorge), we pull in for the night in Frenchglen, Ore., a bucolic vale at the west verge of Steens Mountain. There's no Internet cafe, the gas station takes only cash, and the whole town consists of 10 buildings.

The Frenchglen Hotel is a pioneer-era roadhouse operating today as it has for eight decades. Then it welcomed stagecoaches; today at the American foursquare-style building, which has been preserved by Oregon State Parks as a historic site, guests arrive by car, mostly for the 6:30 p.m. communal ranch-style supper. Though the platters of pot roast, potatoes and rolls may seem endless, there's some danger that latecomers will miss out. Especially under the tutelage of the servers, who encourage gustatory abandon.

"More meat?" one asks. "The more you eat, the more pie you can have later." No sense pondering the logic of that; I grab the serving spoon.

Thriving in the desert

THE next day, we're in Robinson Draw in Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, an hour southwest of Frenchglen. We had come up the draw to spread a blanket on plush grass and picnic in an aspen grove by a bubbling rill.

After lunch, with a prelude supplied by songbirds and aspen leaves, we hike up a ways, just to see what's to see, and it turns out to be a Western tanager, the flashiest bird in the West. Its scarlet and golden feathers catch the sunlight like neon in the green lattice of the trees. Sitting still for 10 minutes, I count a dozen types of birds in this grove.

There's only one road, a sand-and-gravel track, wending its way through hip-high sagebrush, and our progress on our way out is halted by a pair of young pronghorn bucks. Pawing the ground, tossing their heads and trotting edgily toward our car, they take their time deciding whether to let us pass. Our cameras click two dozen times, and the grins on the girls' faces are as broad as the basin.

At 189,000 square miles, the Great Basin is larger than every U.S. state save Alaska and Texas. It encompasses most of Nevada and part of Utah and Idaho. John Frémont named it in the 1840s, when he discovered that no rivers or streams leave this huge countryside.

A century and a half later, it remains one of the least developed landscapes in America. My favorite highway sign is along a stretch of U.S. 95 in eastern Oregon: "Open Range Next 122 Miles." It is actually even more miles than that, but the Nevada state line intervenes.

This is one of North America's largest deserts, but calling it a desert skims the skin of its nature. The leading arid-lands institution in the United States, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, defines desert as "a place where water is severely limiting to life," but here that doesn't quite capture it.

The Great Basin is riven with sky barriers, north-south ranges such as Steens that snare moisture from the atmosphere and siphon it down to the valleys where it sometimes ends in intermittent lakes. More often, the streams just disappear. Thus, there are innumerable lengthy oases along spring- and snow-fed waterways.

These places are biologically intense, and Hart Mountain, a sturdy range just north of the Nevada line, is typical. Our pastoral picnic retreat in Robinson Draw is lush forest, breathtaking wildflowers, a stream, just 30 feet from the edge of 50 miles of sagebrush plain.

Hart's chief draw is the pronghorns (technically not antelope but antelope-like ruminants), which are North America's fastest land animals.

I've been here eight times and have seen pronghorns each time; it's a wildlife safari park that's free, open and real. Aside from those two bucks, we saw dozens of other pronghorn groups, including families with two fawns and groups of as many as 30. They can speed along at up to 50 mph — and they like to, often racing alongside cars on the refuge as if in a friendly contest.

Invariably, cars lose.

"Eric," Kirsten warns me, "you're going to shake the car to pieces. Then what'll we do?"

What indeed? Cellphones won't work here — there's no reception.

So I stop our trek by a stream in the desert, a broad rush of cool water that reaches from the snow-specked ridge 15 miles away to a low sage-and-grass gully 500 feet wide. I show off an ecological marvel, Lahontan cutthroat trout, thriving here in a stream that sometimes retreats in late summer 10 miles to the foot of the mountain.

That night, at a little-known hot spring by the wide knees of the Trout Creek Mountains, we spread ground cloths and sleeping bags on the sand and watch the embers of daylight on the summit of Steens 50 miles northeast. As dusk brings an indigo sky and an ocean of stars, dark hunters flash above: night birds diving for moths, their wings making a distinctive vibration.

"What are those?" Leslie asks.

"Mom! They're nighthawks," Kirsten says.

I don't know how she knew that, but I think she'll remember the moment half a century hence.

With the nighthawks, Kirsten's species list passes 40 animals, including pronghorns, buzzards and woodpeckers. Some are mundane, like robins. Some are magnificent, like northern harriers.

The next day, we meet an iconic sight along Hogback Road, near Plush, Ore.: a rattlesnake basking in the afternoon sun. We pile out of the car to admire the reptile from a respectful distance, and, as rattlers usually do, it hustles away. Henna is agog, camera clicking.

We stop for supper at the Cowboy Dinner Tree, a ranch-repast retreat near Silver Lake, a sage-filled valley town whose namesake fills about once a decade. The restaurant is named for the huge juniper in back, beneath which cattle drovers parked their chuck wagons a century ago.

The menu is fixed price but old-fashioned. No arugula. Twenty bucks gets you salad, vegetables, steak and dessert. The second course is beans, which arrive in a foot-wide Dutch oven that the proprietress sets at my elbow.

"You're in charge of distributing these," Shelly Strong tells me, "so these ladies best be nice to you."

I don't think it'll be a problem; there are enough beans here to help Hannibal cross the Alps. The third course brings a chunk of 30-ounce sirloin, which we share but no one finishes.

Shelly's husband, Paul, is a lean post of a man in ranch hat and handlebar mustache. Henna is shy, but some things are too interesting to pass up, so she asks Paul to pose for a picture that will amaze all back in Finland.

Finally, the big payoff

THOUGH pilgrimages are journeys more important than their outcomes, they also have objectives, and we don't reach Kirsten's until the end of our trip when we pull off to the side of the road in the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in north-central Nevada.

There, spread along the shoulders of a low range of hills, grazing as calmly as monks, are my stepdaughter's fondest hope for this safari.

The herd of wild horses is big. We count more than 40, including foals, dams and the lead stallion, the latter the only one to raise its head and check us out. They're big, rangy animals, bays and roans and paints, mostly the descendants of ranch and cavalry mounts let loose on this range a century ago. The northerly breeze that holds the breath of their freedom holds ours too, and I believe Kirsten realizes this.

Her eyes are alight.

"Yes," she says, "that's cool."