

# Steens Mountain Recreation Lands Oregon

Wildhorse Lake

TONGUE



Cattle grazing in a Steens Mountain meadow

## Steens Mountain

Steens Mountain Recreation Lands constitute an unusual mountain retreat in Oregon's high desert country, 60 miles south of Burns, reached from Oregon State Highway 205.

Steens Mountain, often called "The Steens" for short, is a 30-mile-long fault block, thrust a mile upward 15 million years ago when layers of basalt gave way under the terrible pressures caused by the earth's cooling and contracting. The tilting of the fault block to the west resulted in a rugged eastern face rising to the escarpment at 9,773 feet, one vertical mile above the Alvord Desert in a horizontal distance of approximately three miles.

Then, 14 million years later, glaciers carved the mountain, moving down the Blitzen, Wildhorse, Kiger and Indian Creek valleys, resulting in the present U-shaped gorges. Complete erosion took place at one location between the western and eastern faces. This big "nick," called Kiger Gap, is northeast of Kiger Viewpoint.

The rugged eastern face of the Steens contrasts with the gentle western slope that gradually descends into the Blitzen and Catlow valleys.

The Steens climate is semi-arid, characterized by moderate summers and cold winters. Most of the moisture falls as snow during the winter. Access to the higher elevations is usually limited to mid-July through late October because of the heavy snowpack.

In summer, the higher elevations are quite comfortable and a welcome change from the hot lower country. However, because of the high elevation, severe thunderstorms accompanied by lightning, wind, and hail or snow are quite common. Many visitors have found it necessary to retreat to lower elevations for protective cover when a storm approaches.

The Recreation Lands (refer to legend on map to delineate) consist of 147,773 acres under the care of the Bureau of Land Management, 41,577 acres of private lands, and 4,506 acres of State lands. The Bureau of Land Management, charged with administration of the mountain, plans to keep it in its present state and avoid, as much as possible, disrupting the mountain's natural environment.

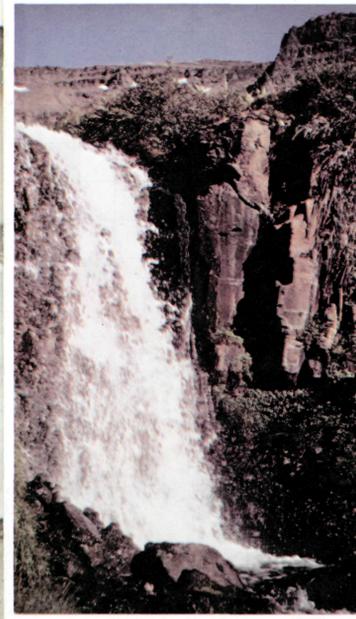
## Military, Ranchers Figure in History

In 1860, Major Enoch Steen was sent by the U.S. Army to protect the settlers from Indians and to determine feasibility of a road from southeastern Oregon to the Willamette Valley. His party named many prominent topographic features, including Steens Mountain where they pursued a band of Indians. Several military posts were established in the vicinity, but most were abandoned by 1869.

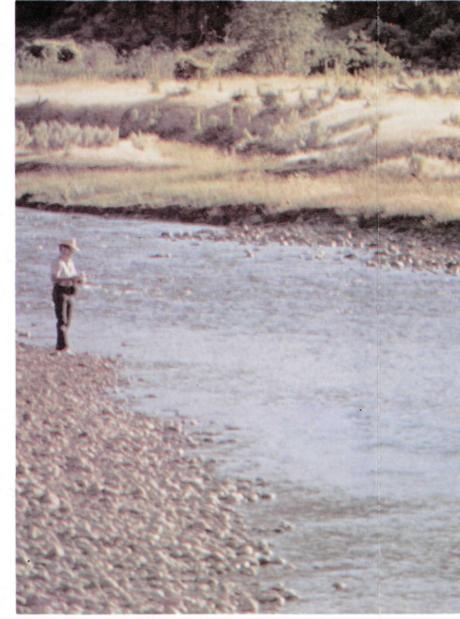
Peter French trailed 1,200 head of cattle from California to the Blitzen Valley in 1872 and set up an empire covering the western side of Steens Mountain and all the surrounding valleys. His headquarters was the P Ranch east of Frenchglen, now on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Meanwhile, on the eastern side of the mountain, in the Alvord Desert, John Devine set up another empire, centered on the Alvord Ranch which is still operating.

By 1901, severe overgrazing was apparent. Over 100,000 sheep and cattle grazed the mountain. At that time, public land was open to grazing use by local ranchers or itinerant sheepmen. These sheepmen, predominately Basque and Irish, contributed to a colorful chapter in the history of the Steens.

The 1934 passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, which regulates grazing on public lands, was one of the factors ending nomadic sheep grazing on the lands.



A waterfall at the head of Little Blitzen River



Fishing the Donner und Blitzen



Autumn color in Big Indian Gorge

## Grazing Controlled

Ranchers, under permit, continue to graze cattle on the mountain. Sheep have been shifted to other areas.

Recreational use has grown rapidly since the Steens Mountain Road was opened in 1962. Soils and vegetation of the mountain are quite fragile and particularly susceptible to off-road vehicle damage. The Bureau of Land Management asks visitors to cooperate with vehicle regulations established to protect the natural land values.

Steens Mountain Recreation Lands were dedicated on July 16, 1971. The Bureau of Land Management, through land exchanges, added key mountain sites to federal ownership.

## Wildlife Provides Interest

Bighorn sheep, once native to the area, have been re-established on the rugged east face of the Steens by the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. Pronghorn antelope use the lower slopes, while mule deer use most of the area.

Game birds on the mountain include sage grouse, valley quail, mourning dove, and chukar partridge. The chukar, an import from Asia, inhabits the steep, dry, rocky areas of the Steens.

Other Steens wildlife are coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, yellow-bellied marmots, and black-tailed jackrabbits. Beavers work the streams. Golden eagles, hawks, falcons, owls, and many species of songbirds are seen at various seasons. The alpine bunchgrass area on top of the Steens is an excellent place to watch birds of prey during the summer. They soar and glide on thermals, dipping low over the road at times.

Fish Lake and the Lower Donner and Blitzen River below Page Springs diversion are stocked with rainbow trout. Brook trout, too, have been introduced into Fish Lake. Wildhorse Lake (see

cover painting), accessible only by foot, is stocked with Lahontan cutthroat trout, an endangered species. Redband trout, species resembling rainbow trout, is the native trout of Steens Mountain streams.

The Steens Mountain off-road vehicle designation affects access and vehicles during the various hunting and angling seasons. Hunting and angling seasons and limits are established by the Oregon Fish & Wildlife Commission, P.O. Box 3505, Portland, OR 97208 (506 S.W. Mill St., telephone (503) 229-5403). Regulations may be obtained from that agency or from license agents in most Oregon communities.

Northwest of Steens Mountain is the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Information may be obtained from the Refuge Manager, P.O. Box 113, Burns, OR 97220. Telephone (503) 493-2323.

## Vegetation is Varied

Four general belts, distinguished by elevation, soils, and topography, are found in the Steens Mountain area. Recreational use restraints on each belt are established to protect the land and its resources. Certain roads and areas are closed (see map) to both standard road vehicles and off-road vehicles during some periods. Opening dates are established for roads and areas where vehicle use is permitted, but they may vary with weather conditions.

**Sagebrush Belt**—below 5,500 feet. This is an important winter range for mule deer; therefore, snowmobiling is not allowed.

**Juniper Belt**—between 5,500 and 6,500 feet. Most of this country is rocky, with steep rim-rocked canyons generally inaccessible to motor vehicles. Designated roads are open from June 15 to October 31.

**Aspen Belt**—between 6,500 and 8,000 feet. This includes groves of quaking aspen, small meadows, and patches of sagebrush and mountain mahogany. Cross-country skiing and snowmobiling are allowed with a permit from the Burns BLM District Office. Designated roads are open from July 1 to October 31.

**Alpine Bunchgrass Belt**—above 8,000 feet. This is the high country with wildflowers, open meadows, glaciated valleys, other geological features, and lakes. Soils and vegetation are extremely fragile. Precipitation is scant and the growing season is short, so any ground disturbances heal quite slowly. This area has the most restrictive vehicle regulations. Designated roads are open from July 1 to October 31. Snowmobiling is not permitted because of dangerous snow conditions.

## History is Living

Cultural features include historic sites, archeological sites, and other man-made features. A number of old homestead cabins and ranch buildings dot the area. The cabins, often built of native materials, have considerable historic interest. There is evidence of Indian and early military occupation. Artifacts and other objects of scientific importance are protected from disturbance by Federal and State laws. They may not be collected or disturbed on public lands by private citizens.

## But There Are Hazards

You can expect sudden severe storms at any time. July snowstorms are not uncommon. And summer lightning storms can develop suddenly. The East Rim and Wildhorse Lake are especially lightning-prone. During storms avoid high points, trees, and any terrain elevated above the surrounding area.

Be prepared before backpacking or hiking. Tell a responsible person your destination and expected return time. If you become lost stop in time to improvise a shelter before nightfall so you can keep warm and dry. Sudden drops in temperature are common here.

Keep your children close at hand, particularly around viewpoints with drop-offs and strong wind currents.

Hanging ice cliffs or cornices present potential danger in winter. You can break through when walking on top of them. If you are below them, tons of snow and ice can crash down on you.

The Steens Mountain Road is a seasonal drive that can become hazardous in stormy weather.

The closest commercial services are 90 miles distant in Burns, although some groceries and gasoline are available at Frenchglen.

## Driving is Controlled

The season of use on Steens Mountain is short because of early heavy snowfall, impassable snowpack and wet weather in the spring, and the need to limit mule deer disturbance on their winter range.

The Steens Mountain Recreation Lands were designated for off-road vehicle management with regulations becoming effective on September 30, 1980. Portions of the Steens Mountain road are closed by locked gates (see map) at various times of the year. Opening dates may vary, depending upon weather and road conditions. Current information on opening dates may be obtained from BLM's Burns District Office.

Here is an overview of the regulations:  
(a) The area is closed to motorized vehicle travel from approximately November through June 30 (this is subject to weather conditions) to prevent damage to the environment and road system, stress to wildlife, and for public safety. ALSO NOTE: Vehicle travel is allowed on open roads and trails. Cross-country vehicle travel is **not** permitted.

## Outdoor Manners

- Keep a clean camp. Leave the land cleaner than you found it.
- Deposit all trash and litter in covered garbage can. Better yet, pack it out. Sink water may be drained at developed sites, but toilet holding tanks must be emptied at a commercial facility.
- Bring cooking fuel with you; cut no trees.
- Protect public and private property and report vandals.
- Drive only on the roads so as not to leave ruts or damage fragile vegetation.
- Keep Oregon Green. Use your ashtray. Build fires only in designated areas. Report uncontrolled fires to BLM's Fire Control Office in Burns, phone 573-7208 or 573-7209.
- Observe Oregon state hunting, fishing, and wildlife protection laws.
- Handle firearms safely.
- Enjoy and photograph petroglyphs and Indian artifacts, but leave them as they are. It is illegal to disturb them.
- Camp only in designated sites (see other side).
- Avoid rockrolling on the east face. It disturbs bighorns and may be dangerous to hikers and livestock in the gorges below.

(b) The entire Steens Mountain Loop Road is open approximately July 1 through October 31. Some areas are permanently closed to all vehicle travel. Signs indicate closed or restricted roads and areas. Gates are installed at Page Springs, Whorehouse Meadows, Blitzen Crossing, and Black Canyon. It may be necessary to move gates or add more at other locations. The gates are opened when the roads can be used without damaging them.

Black Canyon Gate — open May 1 to October 31

Page Springs Gate — open June 15 to October 31

Whorehouse Meadows Gate — open July 1 to October 31

Blitzen Crossing — open July 1 to October 31

Additional information can be obtained at the main access points.

All East Face roads are open from May 1 to December 31 with the exception of the Pike Creek road to the Weston Brothers Mine which are open yearlong.

(c) Travel into the area during the **closure period** by snow vehicle, helicopter, and other motorized vehicle may be authorized by the District Manager when he/she deems it necessary for official purposes to save and protect life, property and natural resources as well as to allow recreation use. Access into the area by ranchers and other private landowners will be authorized by the District Manager for legitimate business purposes if road conditions permit motorized travel. Access will be allowed to and from operation of mining-related activities according to applicable laws, regulations, and Department of the Interior policy. **PERMITS MUST BE OBTAINED FROM THE BURNS DISTRICT OFFICE BEFORE ENTERING THE AREA DURING THE CLOSURE PERIOD.**



Backpackers in Little Indian Gorge in July



Kiger Gorge



Pronghorn antelope

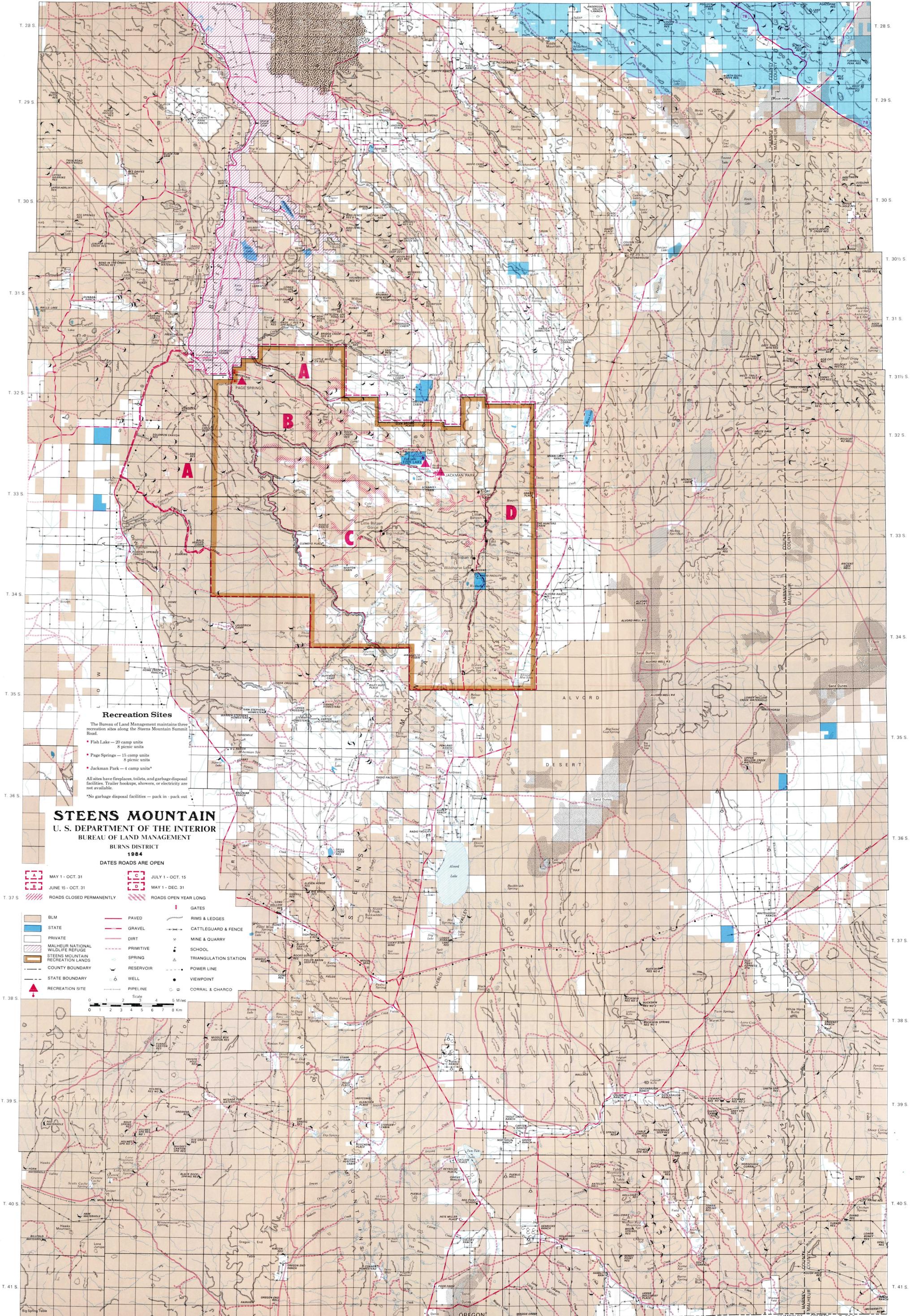


The east face of Steens Mountain

## Resource Conservation

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interest of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Bureau of Land Management—Burns District  
74 South Alvord Street  
Burns, Oregon 97720  
Phone (503) 573-2071



**Recreation Sites**

The Bureau of Land Management maintains three recreation sites along the Steens Mountain Summit Road.

- Fish Lake — 20 camp units  
8 picnic units
- Page Springs — 15 camp units  
8 picnic units
- Jackman Park — 4 camp units\*

All sites have fireplaces, toilets, and garbage disposal facilities. Trailer hookups, showers, or electricity are not available.

\*No garbage disposal facilities — pack in - pack out

**STEENS MOUNTAIN**  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

BURNS DISTRICT  
1984

**DATES ROADS ARE OPEN**

- |  |                   |  |                  |
|--|-------------------|--|------------------|
|  | MAY 1 - OCT. 31   |  | JULY 1 - OCT. 15 |
|  | JUNE 15 - OCT. 31 |  | MAY 1 - DEC. 31  |

- |  |                          |  |                      |
|--|--------------------------|--|----------------------|
|  | ROADS CLOSED PERMANENTLY |  | ROADS OPEN YEAR LONG |
|--|--------------------------|--|----------------------|

- |  |                                  |  |                                  |  |           |  |                       |
|--|----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|--|-----------|--|-----------------------|
|  | BLM                              |  | PAVED                            |  | PRIMITIVE |  | RIMS & LEDGES         |
|  | STATE                            |  | GRAVEL                           |  | SPRING    |  | CATTLEGUARD & FENCE   |
|  | PRIVATE                          |  | DIRT                             |  | RESERVOIR |  | MINE & QUARRY         |
|  | MALHEUR NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE |  | STEENS MOUNTAIN RECREATION LANDS |  | WELL      |  | SCHOOL                |
|  | COUNTY BOUNDARY                  |  | STATE BOUNDARY                   |  | PIPELINE  |  | TRIANGULATION STATION |
|  | RECREATION SITE                  |  |                                  |  |           |  | POWER LINE            |
|  |                                  |  |                                  |  |           |  | VIEWPOINT             |
|  |                                  |  |                                  |  |           |  | CORRAL & CHARGO       |

Scale 0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles  
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Km