



## Walking the High Desert: Encounters With Rural America Along the Oregon Desert Trail, by Ellen Waterston

Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020, 248 pp., 5.5 × 8.5 in, 1 map, ISBN: 9780295747507

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Walking the High Desert: Encounters With Rural America Along the Oregon Desert Trail**, by Ellen Waterston, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020, 248 pp., 5.5 × 8.5 in, 1 map, ISBN: 9780295747507

Rarely does a hiking trail guidebook suggest that readers will be channeling their “inner Carlos Castaneda” (6). In *Walking the High Desert*, environmental humanist Ellen Waterston provides an engaging commentary on many aspects of life and land in southeastern Oregon. The book’s subtitle, *Encounters With Rural America Along the Oregon Desert Trail*, helps orient the reader toward a discussion of the values and distinctiveness of the people and communities that dot the arid landscape along the recently established Oregon Desert Trail. The resourceful local residents work hard, get ‘er done, as they learn to figure things out for themselves.

Geography’s human-environment identity is on full display in Waterston’s discussions as she weaves description of sections of the trail with the history of human use and abuse of the Northern Basin and Range section of the Great Basin Desert. The book is beautifully written and engaging. Waterston, a former High Desert rancher, weaves her regional knowledge and experiences into a captivating journey across space and time. Her writing style conveys a sense of place(s), illuminating the 750-mile-long trail which was inspired by the Hayduke Trail of similar length in Utah and Arizona. The book is organized geographically (from west to east), with four major sections (groups of chapters that each cover about 200 miles) that address the Central Oregon Volcanics, the West Basin and Range, the East Basin and Range, and the Owyhee Canyonlands. A single map, positioned after the table of contents, provides a limited, but useful reference.

Material and ideas in *Walking the High Desert* can inform/advance geography education in several ways. Those teaching the regional geography of the United States can use examples from the book to convey specifics about this desert environment. Individuals who teach about the social and political aspects of human (mis)use of landscapes will find several good examples. In addition, the book does a very nice job of sharing considerable geographic information to a broader audience.

Many geographers are intrigued with and have a desire to explore (perhaps wander within) the less traveled and more wide open spaces. Their goal may be to reach a spot with an inspiring vista that enables deeper thinking. Some travelers might hope to find solace. Still others may be driven by a goal to set foot in every county across the United States. Whatever motivates one to travel to the High Desert country of southeastern Oregon, *Walking the High Desert* will provide insights and inspiration to plan and execute a visit. Relevant landscape photographs are available on a website about the trail maintained by the Oregon Natural Desert Association (2020), which also provides more information and a few helpful maps. I found myself frequently using

Google Maps to gain a clear sky satellite view of the natural landmarks, vegetation cover, and human settlements mentioned along sections of the trail.

Writing about a desert environment frequently gets an author discussing the availability of water. The resource is of considerable importance for those who scrape out a livelihood in the area. Situated in the rain shadow to the east of the Cascades, some of the cold desert weather stations in the region receive an average of less than 10 inches (254 mm) of precipitation each year. Playas help document the seasonality of snow melt and water availability. Seasonality of water availability also drives the timing of wildflower life cycles and the arrival of migratory birds. Access to potable water is an important theme for those who will need to restock their supply while hiking the trail. Waterston also identifies the selective availability of hot springs for a good, relaxing soak following a few days of rugged hiking.

Trail hikers who want to learn more about the geologic history of the local basalt flows and fault block mountains should plan to tap into other sources. Rock hounds, on the other hand, will find a few good suggestions for places to look for thundereggs, agate, jasper, and other gemstones. Steens Mountain, a 50-mile (80-km) long fault block escarpment is a high point along the trail at 9733 feet (2966 m). Rising 4200 feet (1280 m) above the Alvord Desert, a diversity of flora exists including the ubiquitous sage brush and several bunchgrasses. Junipers, aspens, and mountain mahogany are among the trees and shrubs that can be found. Plan to check out other sources for information about the physiology of the dominant plants in the region. Wildlife hazards include snakes and ticks. Discussion of four-legged animals, in addition to cattle, includes the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge where one might spot bighorn sheep and mule deer. Waterston informs readers about wild horses and burros in the region, along with historical and contemporary political challenges the Bureau of Land Management faces in managing corrals and a program for animal adoption.

In her discussion of High Desert people and places, Waterston addresses issues that are local in context but have implications for regional to national conversations. How best should public lands be managed? Do certain species (e.g., sage grouse) need federal protection? How best can we tap into the common sense/local knowledge/wisdom of the ranchers who inhabit this harsh landscape? What should we make of the incident/confrontation at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge? Will the development of the hiking trail alter the character of the region? The author’s commentary helps the reader understand the larger context of the complex character of the many issues facing the region.

The Oregon Desert Trail is entirely on public land in a region that some describe as the empty quarter. Others suggest the area is a sage brush ocean. Advantages of the openness will be appreciated by those who want to partake in stargazing. The region provides the majority of top dark sky sites within Oregon and is one of the better locations within the lower 48. Unfortunately, concerns exist about a trend toward increasing light pollution, especially for locations near the western end of the trail.

Waterston shares her wisdom and wit related to local linguistics, including knowledge of Paiute words for some of the features and colors of the region. She does a very nice job discussing the sometimes humorous distinctiveness that can be heard when listening to the conversations among ranchers in the area. Waterston, an award winning literary artist, greatly appreciates and supports the local arts community. Within each section of the trail, we learn about resident artists and/or opportunities to appreciate environmental humanism.

Waterston even discusses the question: What is a trail? Clearly there are utilitarian aspects (e.g., a pathway to get from here to there). However, the author's writing style highlights the trail as an opportunity to engage with the

environment, finding locations to pause and ponder. That reflection might result in a better appreciation of the need for wilderness areas. Waterston suggests that traveling through High Desert country will enable you to find new ways to connect with the environment and yourself and gain a sense of shared humanity. For those with an appreciation for humanistic connections, this book will be a wonderful companion if you walk along the Oregon Desert Trail.

## References

Oregon Natural Desert Association. 2020. Oregon desert trail. Accessed November 16, 2020. <https://onda.org/regions/oregon-desert-trail/>.

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