



# Appreciation for Land, Birds, People Unites Conservationists, Locals

By Lauren Brown

January 2020

Living in Harney County comes with its own set of challenges. Residents who choose to live here navigate those difficulties because the positives of living in such an exceptional place outweigh the negatives. There are many urban dwellers who haven't experienced the wide open spaces of the Harney Basin, but there are also those who have and appreciate its importance and are working together with Harney County residents to find solutions to issues facing the birds and the wetlands.

## Changing the narrative



*Pictured above: Portland Audubon's Bob Sallinger, Rancher & High Desert Partnership Founder Gary Marshall, Rancher Dan Nichols, High Desert Partnership Founder, Chad Karges.*

These folks who live beyond the sagebrush in more urban settings are part of the High Desert Partnership community. They put in time and energy to connect with the people and land in this part of the state. The relationships they build and the community that develops through their time spent here helps find solutions to some of the complex problems we face in Harney County through their work with [High Desert Partnership collaboratives](#). [Dan Nichols](#), member of the High Desert Partnership board, an active participant in the [Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative](#) and the [Harney County Wildfire Collaborative](#) and former Harney County Commissioner, believes these folks need some recognition for doing what they do. “We’ve gained tremendously from their involvement in our community,” he said. Nichols knows first-hand the pitfalls of working with people who live outside Harney County who don’t take the time to understand Harney County people and issues. “Instead of the old style of coming in and saying what a wonderful place Harney County is and, by the way, we think this, this and this ought to be changed, they understand the complexity of it more. They’re putting a great deal into it—not only time but funding as well,” he said.

### **Making connections**

Bruce Taylor works with the [Intermountain West Joint Venture](#) and has been involved with the High Desert Partnership nearly since its inception and noted that the Harney Basin is one of the most important places on the continent in terms of providing habitat for migrating birds and therefore is a critical part of the work he does for bird conservation. “If you want birds to do well, you have to be paying attention to not just where they are born and breed or where they spend the winter but also the places that are important to them in migration,” he said.

Taylor has been coming to Harney County since he honeymooned here with his wife 37 years ago. He’s backpacked, camped and hiked in the Harney Basin and has gotten to know several people over the years. “[Former Harney County Judge] Steve Grasty never used to tire of telling us one job here was like 500 in Portland. So maybe having 20 or 30 friends in Harney County is like having 1,500 in Portland,” Taylor joked. “Just through bird conservation work, I’ve gotten to know and really appreciate a number of people out there, and there are quite a few that I consider good friends.”

### **Talking face to face**

[Bob Sallinger](#), Director of Conservation for the [Portland Audubon](#) and a member of the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative, said the basin’s relationship with the Audubon Society goes back more than 100 years. “On the one hand, we’re a long way from Harney County,” he said. “On the other hand, we have a long history out there, and we were formed with the purpose of founding the [Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#).”

When Sallinger got involved with the High Desert Partnership, inspired by its vision, he made a commitment early on to physically attend as many meetings as he could in Harney County. This meant making 10 to 12 trips to southeastern Oregon from Portland each year. “I’d stick around before and after. I’d bring my family along. My kids spent a lot of time in Harney County when they were growing up. I really wanted to make as much of an investment as I possibly could in connecting with the people and the landscape out there,” he said. “In a lot of cases, if I couldn’t stay out there longer, I would drive out for meetings and then turn around and drive back, so 24-hour round trips. In some cases, the drive was longer than the time I was even there, but I think those face to face interactions made all the difference in the world.”

In addition to making those connections Sallinger has made, Portland Audubon has made a more permanent commitment to the partnership and the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative in the form of funding a full-time, year-round biologist position at the refuge. “I hope as time goes on, we can get engaged in more and more

activities and understand better the economic factors out there because ultimately, what we need on this landscape are holistic solutions," he says.

Sallinger wanted to give credit to Nichols, rancher and High Desert Partnership board chairman [Gary Marshall](#), Bruce Taylor and former refuge manager Chad Karges for putting in the time to make the High Desert Partnership happen. "They were the ones who really reached out first. It felt different from the get-go. People really worked hard and spent a lot of time to talk more about where others were coming from," he said. He noted that Portland Audubon is involved in a lot of collaborative processes. Many of them are not very effective and are collaborative in name only. "What I like about this one is it has set a high standard for being substantive," he said. "Sometimes when we talk about collaboration, the emphasis is on what we agree upon, but I think an equally important part of collaboration is learning how to disagree respectfully. There are some places where we disagree, but the relationships we're building, the understanding we're building, the trust that we're building helps us navigate those disagreements and allows us to move forward to places where we do agree and make progress."

### **Amazing landscape**

Ken Bierly, a contractor with the High Desert Partnership, said he first visited the Malheur Basin as a junior high student in 1958. "I was awestruck by the wetlands system," he said. "It was an incredible and life-altering experience for me personally. It was just the richness of the aquatic life and the openness of the desert. It's become clear that there are very few people who live in Oregon who've ever experienced that."

Esther Lev, a contractor with the High Desert Partnership and former director for [The Wetlands Conservancy](#), agrees with that sentiment. "It's an incredible place because it is in the middle of the high desert and then there's wetlands, and it's full of life," she said. "It really requires the human element to keep those wetlands going to allow the birds to be there."

In his work with the partnership, what has made an impact on Bierly is the passion Harney County residents have for the land. "The people in the basin care deeply about the resources in the basin," he said. "They struggle with how to balance the concerns and how to wrestle with issues that other people spend a lot of time suing and fighting over."

For Bierly, driving to Harney County from Salem is an experience. "You get out past Bend and you get into the open space of the high desert and your soul opens up out there," he said. "The unique thing about the Harney Basin is in the middle of this arid high desert, in the northern end of the Great Basin, is this huge wetland system. It has been massively altered through time, but it's still a functional wetlands system. We're trying to figure out how to keep it in a state that we can understand and help manage in a way that would provide resources for our children, our grandchildren and their grandchildren."

### **Working toward the same goals**

[Chris Colson](#) works with [Ducks Unlimited](#) out of Idaho but travels to Harney County regularly as part of his work with the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative. He is currently working on dam improvement projects on private land that are helping to maintain flood-irrigated wet meadows, which provide migratory bird habitat in the spring. He said it has taken time to foster relationships with folks in Harney County and to build trust. He said honesty is important. "I don't pretend to be a rancher or a cowboy. I'm pretty upfront with who I am," he said.

What he enjoys about working with Harney County residents is that the focus is on agriculture, and it is easy to find common ground. “We’re very fortunate in that what I want and what they want is the same thing, and they’re complimentary of each other,” he said. “Every landowner and every ranch have its own little nuances, but still generally speaking, we know what we’re trying to do, and it’s shared by everybody.”

[Ed Contreras](#) is a conservationist for the Intermountain West Joint Venture and has been involved with the High Desert Partnership for several years. His office is out of Klamath Falls, and he makes several trips a year to Harney County, which he notes, is a friendly environment in which to work. “The people I work with have been super welcoming and take in outsiders’ input, perspective and assistance just like they would a lot of the people who live and work there,” he said.

While he is primarily concerned with the migratory bird habitat in his line of work, he noted that sustaining a rural community and supporting ag commodities on private wetlands as well as the people who work and manage those private wetlands is just as important.

High Desert Partnership board member Nichols is grateful for the work these conservationists have done and continue to do in Harney County. “They’ve made a concerted effort to listen to the people here and understand what is important, what is not important and how some of the conservation agenda may not be compatible in some regards,” he said. “The most important thing is, through the collaborative process, we’ve found that basically everybody wants the same thing—it’s just how you go about achieving those goals. It gets to be controversial at times and through these people who have been engaged in coming to our community, they’re starting to understand that it can be a win-win situation for everybody.”

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney Basin Wetlands Initiative.*

