



Malheur Lake: Essential for Habitat and Culture

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Photography by Jeremy Hill

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In Harney County, where the wide-open landscape has long shaped both the culture and the economy of the local community, few places have had a more powerful influence than Malheur Lake.

Located within the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, the lake is a prominent part of why the refuge has been a haven for migratory birds. Malheur Lake is a critical stopover for more than 300 species of waterfowl migrating along the Pacific Flyway – an aerial highway between North and South America. Birders flock there each spring to catch sight of geese, ducks, and other waterfowl. It's a nice seasonal boon for Harney County businesses, especially after a lean winter.



Refuge wildlife biologist Alexa Martinez noted the importance of the lake from a historic perspective prior to white settlement and the creation of the refuge. For thousands of years, Malheur Lake was part of the aboriginal lands for the Northern Paiute people.

"The lake will always be a huge part of this county. Historically, indigenous people would use the lake for waterfowl hunting, fishing, and vegetation to create different things such as baskets or tule ducks," she said.

The refuge was created in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt to protect the lake as habitat of waterfowl and other migratory birds. Fed by Steen Mountain's Donner und Blitzen River from the south and the Silvies River from the north, Malheur Lake is located 18 miles south of Burns. Normally a shallow lake, it overflows into Mud and Harney lakes and can vary greatly in size depending on local weather and snowpack. In the 1980s, a heavy snowpack caused Malheur Lake to expand from 67 to more than 160 square miles over three years. Then, in 1992, the lake shrank to a mere 200 acres.

John Scharff, who was the refuge superintendent from 1935 to 1971, felt strongly about the need to create wildlife refuges to protect birds and wildlife. He also created an important bridge between the needs and wants of the local ranchers and the federal government's goal of preserving wildlife habitat. In the book *Steen Mountain: In Oregon's High Desert Country*, he wrote, "One of the greatest values of our national wildlife refuges is that they preserve nature unspoiled and provide a place where persons can go to repair the damage done by the rattle and clang of civilization."

And while many birders, hunters, and other recreators come to Harney County to get away from urban life, there are locals too who appreciate the refuge and Malheur Lake.

Doug Lundy has lived on the lake for the last 15 years. He likes the high desert and had always wanted to retire to this area. He decided not to wait until retirement and commutes back and forth from Portland, where he works as a longshoreman. An avid waterfowl hunter, Lundy hunts geese, ducks, and the occasional pheasant.

"It's not a big duck hunting area anymore, mostly because of the habitat," Lundy said of Malheur Lake.

Lundy has a fondness for the lake and the nearby areas where he has enjoyed the waterfowl hunting immensely.

"We've had literally hundreds and hundreds of good hunts. There is opportunity for that; it's just not right on the lake right now," he said.

Fellow waterfowl hunter and longtime Harney County resident and retired biologist Guy Sheeter agrees. Sheeter has hunted in the area for decades and has seen the lake change over the years. He recalls a time in the 1970s when the lake was treated with Rotenone (a pesticide that kills fish) to get rid of the carp, and the change was impressive. Aquatic vegetation came back in force.

"It was incredible, the change in how clear the lake became," he said.

He also remembers years where the lake was so big, hunters could get lost out there in the fog and frost. Sheeter had a preacher friend who went out hunting despite having a wedding to perform the following day. The preacher got so turned around on the lake that he didn't ever make it to the wedding, although he finally did find his way off the lake.

Sheeter would like to see the lake restored in a way that would encourage more waterfowl and other wildlife to benefit from it, but he also thinks it will take the cooperation of many different groups as well as money to fund it. He's not sure that will happen in his lifetime.

James Pearson is the refuge's fish biologist and doctoral student studying Malheur Lake. He said the highly turbid lake water caused by the abundance of carp, which uproot aquatic plants with their feeding habits, has reduced aquatic life and waterfowl activity. The high wind in the area also contributes to keeping sediment suspended and preventing penetration of sunlight to the lake bottom.

"The overall restoration that would make the most significant difference in Malheur Lake would be a shift in the aquatic ecosystem (water and plant quality) from the turbid environment (cloudy water) to a clear environment (clear water)," he said.

Pearson said he is in the process of modeling different restoration scenarios to determine which one would have the most positive effect on Malheur Lake.

Refuge wildlife biologist Martinez said that while the lake is in poor health because of the turbidity and wind, it presently has an abundance of water.

"We have around 26,000 acres full, which in terms of just having water on the lake is really good for lots of species of birds such as shorebirds, colonial nesters (birds that nest together like herons), and waterfowl," she said. "We are currently working with many partners to figure out solutions we can use to help the lake to support more environmental productivity such as better habitat for fish, birds, and other wildlife."

Lundy feels that restoring habitat around the lake would not only benefit hunters, but those who want to watch the birds as well.

"It was one of the premiere waterfowl areas in the United States," he said.

With the right support in terms of habitat management and restoration, that could certainly change. It could make Malheur Lake a more attractive place to hunt and watch birds.

"The people of this county recognize the importance of Malheur Lake for various reasons, whether that be for recreation or cultural significance," Martinez said. "We are all pursuing the same end goal: proper ecological function."

The objective is to obtain a beautiful, healthy lake with clear water and thriving aquatic plant life.

The High Desert Partnership, a Harney County nonprofit, fosters the collaborative process. Ben Cate grew up in the area and is the ecological coordinator for the partnership.

"I'm proud to call this place home. In my role with the partnership, I serve our community by helping to care for the vast landscape of the Harney Basin," Cate said. "I spend a lot of time at Malheur Lake to help with research, and I want our community to feel the connection to this lake that I feel. While we can hunt, we can't boat, swim, water ski, or do the typical fun recreational lake activities at Malheur Lake. There is a majesty in appreciating something just for what it is and what it provides to our home."

Cate noted that the reality is that Malheur Lake needs help. The lake has visitors who return year-after-year, and these visitors help feed Harney County's rural economy. The waterfowl also need the habitat of the lake to survive.

“For the people of Harney County, I know we take pride in caring for the land that surrounds us. We’re one of the largest counties in the U.S. with the fewest people, and like Steve McQueen said, ‘I would rather wake up in the middle of nowhere than in any city on earth,’” Cate said. “There are lots of people who consider Harney County the middle of nowhere, and that’s just the way I like it. Because it’s here in the middle of nowhere where great things can happen. We can be the community that saved a world-renowned freshwater marsh that, in turn, contributed to saving hundreds of species of birds and continued to be an economic resource for middle of nowhere Harney County for generations to come.”

A High Desert Partnership collaborative, the Harney Basin Wetland Initiative is a diverse group dedicated to restoring Malheur Lake. Thanks to funding from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the work happening at Malheur Lake is possible and could lead to answers for restoration.

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

