

New opportunities for birds at Owens Lake

Before its waters were diverted in 1913, Owens Lake was one of the most spectacular places for birds in California. Famed naturalist Joseph Grinnell in 1917 described, “Great numbers of water birds are in sight along the shore – Avocets, Phalaropes and Ducks. Large flocks of shorebirds in flight over the water in the distance, wheeling about show en masse, now silvery now dark, against the gray-blue of the water.” But as the water went, so too did most of the birds.

Now, there is an opportunity to restore much of the natural heritage that Grinnell witnessed long ago. After the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power agreed to rewater parts of the lakebed to reduce dust pollution, birds have been returning in large numbers. Audubon California and Eastern Sierra Audubon are working closely with government agencies and others to arrive at a permanent framework for protecting habitat for the thousands of waterbirds and shorebirds that have returned to Owens Lake.

From the dust

The 110-square-mile Owens Lake is located at the southern end of the Owens Valley, surrounded by the southern Sierra Nevada on the west and the Inyo Mountains to the east. The size and location of the valley attracted the interest of the LADWP, which was looking to provide water to support the incredible population growth in Southern California in the early 20th Century. By the mid 1920’s, Owens River and Owens Lake were turned nearly dry year-round.

In addition to devastating bird and wildlife habitat, the water diversions created a tremendous air pollution hazard, as dust from the exposed lakebed in the valley far exceeded national air quality standards. After the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency required the state to address this pollution, California’s Great Basin Air



Western Sandpipers lift off the lakebed. (photo by Michael Prather)

Pollution Control District ordered the LADWP to begin flooding portions of the dry bed and encourage the growth of native vegetation to keep the dust out of the air.

The presence of this water has created habitat for waterbirds. In the spring and fall, tens of thousands of shorebirds, waterfowl, and other migratory species now stop-over to feed on the millions of brine flies and other invertebrates that collect on the lakebed’s surface. Traveling from as far as South America to the far north of North America, the migration of these birds is one of nature’s awesome spectacles. As many as 22 different species of shorebirds have been recorded in a single day and 15 bird Species of Special Concern use the habitats on and around the lakebed.

The number of breeding Snowy Plovers (listed in California as a Bird Species of Special Concern) have tripled in the past decade with the lakebed’s rewatering. Over a thousand American Avocets now nest on the lakebed, along with smaller numbers of Black-necked Stilts. Migrating waterfowl stop at the lake, and some species such as

Gadwall and Mallard, have returned as breeders. Single day lake-wide counts in spring or fall migration tally 40,000-60,000 birds. Experts expect that the area will attract even greater numbers of birds in the future.

Conservation opportunity

In order to recognize and bring attention to the remnant bird populations still existing on the mostly dry lakebed, Audubon identified it in 2001 as an Important Bird Area, a designation that is part of a global program to recognize exemplary sites that contain significant habitat for breeding, migrating, and/or wintering birds. In 2007, Audubon California and Eastern Sierra Audubon began working with the LADWP, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Great Basin Air Pollution Control District to identify key habitats and species on the lake bed, their threats, and new conservation strategies to ensure lasting protection of the habitat and species.

In 2010, these discussions expanded, with the support of LADWP, into a formal master planning process with a goal of creating a long-term and enforceable agreement to integrate the needs of dust control, conservation, and other uses on the lake. These include recreation, mining, grazing, Native American interests, water bottling, renewable energy development, and local economic development. It is expected that an agreement and final plan will be adopted in 2013.

For Audubon California and Eastern Sierra Audubon, this is an opportunity to provide long-term security for habitat at Owens Lake and ensure that portions of the lakebed will be managed for birds and other wildlife.

Audubon's Objectives

- Secure long-term and consistent water delivery to the lake bed to control dust and maintain and enhance existing habitats and wildlife populations
- Ensure long-term funding is in place for permanent management and maintenance of an established network of wetland, meadow, and open water habitat areas
- Create an advisory body that will work with LADWP and the other stakeholders to meet annually and monitor the objectives of the Master Plan into the future
- Provide public access opportunities for interpretation of the lakes natural and cultural history and bird watching
- Ensure commitment and funding for long-term monitoring of the habitats and wildlife populations as well what those populations need to survive (water quality, food resources, etc.)



Above, Long-billed Curlews enjoy the shallow water habitat. (photo by Michael Prather).

Below, Owens Lake rests in the Eastern Sierra.

