

RARE OPPORTUNITY TO SAVE THE SALTON SEA

There's just no way that you can talk about doing flyway-level bird conservation in California and not throw your weight into finding a solution at the Salton Sea

by Garry George

Located about 130 miles east of San Diego, the Salton Sea is a study in contradictions. It is massive, yet practically unknown to most Californians. The landscape is barren and apocalyptic, but full of life. It is natural, but man-made. The environment puts birds at risk, but it is also vital for their survival.

More than 300 bird species rely on the deep water, shoreline, mudflats, and wetlands at the Salton Sea, as well as the river channels and agricultural drains leading into it. Tilapia live in the deeper waters, providing essential food for many species, including California Brown Pelican, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, and Caspian Tern.

Perhaps the sea's greatest value for birds is its ability to support very large numbers of waterbirds during the winter months, including up to 90% of North America's Eared Grebes, 50% of Ruddy Ducks, and 30% of the American White Pelicans. The mudflats and shorelines are also essential for hundreds of thousands of shorebirds.

The Salton Sea has hosted two Christmas Bird Counts for decades, and the lake draws thousands to birding festivals and other events.

Beginning in 2018, thanks to a 2003 agreement between the State of California and Southern California water districts, the Salton Sea will get a lot less water from the Colorado River, eventually up to 40 percent less. The shrinking sea will also expose up to 64,000 acres of the lakebed and result in massive dust storms that could create the worst air pollution crisis in North America. Tens of thousands of acres of habitat will disappear.

The State of California hasn't fulfilled its promise to pay for habitat restoration and dust mitigation in advance of the 2018 deadline. But in the last year, the state named an assistant secretary for Salton Sea policy to build stakeholder support for a new management plan for the sea. Gov. Jerry Brown included \$80 million in his budget for Salton Sea restoration.

Audubon California and a number of other conservation groups believe that now is a rare opportunity. "There's just no way that you can talk about doing flyway-level bird conservation in California and not throw your weight into finding a solution at the Salton Sea," said Audubon California Executive Director Brigid McCormack. "The challenges are daunting, but **there hasn't been a better time to make real progress than right now.**"

Audubon California is fully participating in the state process, offering testimony before the State Water Resources Control Board and the many subcommittees created as part of the management planning process. Audubon California is also working with Point Blue Conservation Science to provide the state with detailed habitat map and develop a monitoring program to measure change in the sea to bird populations.

“Ultimately, the state of California is going to need to make a substantial, sustained investment in restoring the Salton Sea,” McCormack said. “Our engagement now will help ensure this is done right—that critical bird habitat is protected, and the toxic dust no longer threatens local communities.”

Garry George is Renewable Energy Director and Chapter Network Director at Audubon California. Hear Garry George speak at Ventura Audubon’s Jan 10 program at 7:30 pm. Address: Poinsettia Pavilion, 3451 Foothill Rd., Oxnard. Join Ventura Audubon’s field trip to the Salton Sea on Jan 21. See venturaaudubon.org for details.

Please join Audubon California in thanking Governor Jerry Brown for including \$80 million for projects to create habitat and reduce dust pollution at the Salton Sea. The \$80 million in the budget is the most that the State has ever committed to this problem.