

Lower Owens River Settlement

by Mike Prather, Owens Valley Committee Outreach Coordinator

Editor's note: For those keeping track of the progress of restoration of both the Lower Owens River and Owens Lake, here is an update with good news on the horizon from Mike Prather of the Owens Valley Committee. Owens Lake is located 150 miles south of Mono Lake and was drained by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power starting in 1913. Since 1984 the Owens Valley Committee has served as a watchdog and advocate for the lake and its tributary waters.

A settlement of important obstacles may have been reached for the Lower Owens River Project (LORP), ending delays that kept promised flows from beginning in June of 2003. The LORP is planned to rewater 62 miles of the Lower Owens River as mitigation for destructive groundwater pumping impacts by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) from 1970–1990. During that period of time the Owens Valley suffered the loss of major springs such as Blackrock, Fish, Seely, and Hines as well as acres of marshlands and spring fields.

As a result of court action by the Owens Valley Committee, Sierra Club, and the California Attorney General, tentative agreement was achieved in December 2003 by the above

plaintiffs and Inyo County and Los Angeles. If approved by all parties the settlement provides for the following:

1. DWP will build the 50 cfs (cubic feet per second) pumpback station that it had previously agreed to in 1991 instead of the 150 cfs pump that it unilaterally changed to later. This pump will return water from the lower end of the LORP to the aqueduct or to on Owens Lake for dust control. A small volume will flow past the pump into the delta habitat area.

2. DWP agrees to release the Final Environmental Impact Report in June of 2004.

3. DWP agrees to start beginning flows in the river by September of 2005 and to have full flows of 40 cfs running by April of 2006.

4. DWP will report their progress on all tasks to the Inyo Superior Court based on an agreed upon schedule.

A settlement would be a bittersweet victory since it results in an agreement to accept a two-year delay for flows to begin in the Lower Owens River Project, but the alternatives

could have been a ten-year delay or possibly never.

Don't forget to "Remember the Owens Valley," because now we hope it will be for positive reasons and not only the tragic ones from the past. ❖



American Avocets in winter plumage.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PETER MAAPP

More Shallow Flooding for Owens Lake Means Good News for Birds

In November 2003, as required, the plan created in 2000 for dust control at Owens Lake was revised by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) and the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District. The final work to be done before the Clean Air Act deadline in 2006 will now go forward. Ten additional square miles of the lake bed (6,400 acres) will be shallow flooded in an effort to suppress the hazardous dust that escapes from its surface. This will bring the total area of shallow flooding to approximately 25 square miles by 2006 and the area of native salt grass plantings to 3.5 square miles.

The great news for birds is that shallow flooding, the release of trickling water across the playa surface, promotes the growth of algae mats and alkali/brine flies that "set the table" for many species. Shallow flooding mimics the miles of shoreline that the lake once possessed and what made it a major

wildlife stopover site. This water serves the dual purpose of suppressing the regional dust problem and sustaining wildlife. Thousands of migrating shorebirds stop at Owens Lake to feed each spring and fall during their marathon migration. The lake is host to the largest number of nesting inland Snowy Plovers in California. Clouds of thousands of Least and Western Sandpipers undulate over the lake seeking foraging areas and avoiding falcons also looking for a meal.

To learn more about Owens Lake's history and future look for Eastern Sierra Audubon and Owens Valley Committee field trips to Owens Lake in spring and fall. You won't want to miss the spectacular birding action that occurs there. To help efforts to have the shallow flooding be officially designated for dust and wildlife, and for more information on Owens Lake visit www.ovcweb.org or www.esaudubon.org.