

# Mono Basin Journal

A Roundup of Quiet Happenings at Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



The first big snowfall of the season came in December, a fine start to a hopefully wet winter. As white flakes fell onto faded orange fall leaves the sun stayed hidden and Mono Lake lay quiet, cold, and steely grey. But the Eastern Sierra is ever changeable; by noon, weak sunlight snuck through the clouds, making the snowy ground bright with light. Winds high overhead began to pull thin tendrils from smooth lenticular clouds, sculpting them to look a bit like spiders, and Mono Lake had abandoned its gloomy morning attitude for a new look of blue water and sun sparkles.

Prior to the snow, several of us were out roaming the western lakeshore, comparing the paper plans for the highway expansion to the real world. A strongly flowing spring, surrounded by willows and squishy wet ground was one of the highlights. Quietly, day after day, its waters flow to Mono Lake, offering deer, birds, and all manner of wildlife a fresh drink along the salty lake's shore—all while traffic zips by not 60 yards in the other direction, drivers focused on the road,

glancing at the panoramic view, oblivious to these smaller hidden rhythms of Mono Lake.

One of the joys of working for the Mono Lake Committee is the opportunity to stand at the edge of an intriguing natural feature like this near-shore spring and look into its multiple dimensions. Every place has history, and aptly named Lone Olive Spring has its own. The steep three-foot bank next to it tells of Mono Lake's fluctuations decades ago and is a clue to the underground water movement that creates the spring itself. Battered paths through the grass tell of the animals that use the spring, while the quality of the springwater can be divined in the diversity of the resident invertebrate community. The water and surrounding willows hint at the possible attraction of the site for endangered Willow Flycatchers, recently sighted nearby. Peering into all these facets of the spring is a reminder of both Mono Lake's deep significance and the larger, complex, alive, interwoven world in which we live. ❖

## The Mono Basin Christmas Bird Count

by Chris McCreedy, PRBO Conservation Science

It is winter the Mono Basin, which means snow storms, less daylight, and freezing temperatures. If I had wings, and it was autumn, I would fly to Ecuador, Costa Rica, or maybe I would spend my Januaries in Oaxaca with millions of other Neotropical migrants. Yet for many migrant species of boreal North America, such as Rough-legged Hawks or Tundra Swans, latitudes like the Mono Basin *are* their Oaxaca. For year-round residents such as Steller's Jays and Mountain Chickadees, the Mono Basin is as good as it gets—none of this quixotic migrating stuff. So in the fall, when many birds go, quite a few stay, and quite a few more arrive. And for 27 years now, dedicated adventurers have been counting them.

On January 3rd, twenty souls gathered for the 27th Mono Lake Christmas Bird Count (CBC). There have been over 100 years of CBCs organized by the Audubon Society. All over North America, including at Mono Lake, brave bird counters pour into their thermals and earmuffs, and with binoculars and a checklist, jump into the winter side of the bird world.

This year the team was indeed lucky—the weather was amazing—clear and cold, no wind, and incredibly, no fog. Ten of us cross-country skied, three snowshoed, two scoped Mono Lake's western shore from Highway 395, and five did bird feeder watch—a respectable number for one of the highest-elevation counts (from Mono Lake up to Mt. Warren at 3758 m above sea level) in North America.

We all saw amazing things, and for the second year in a row, we broke the Mono Lake CBC's record for total species observed. There are stories of things like a Great Blue Heron in a tree, the first crow (crows are surprisingly rare in the Eastern Sierra, inhabiting only urban areas such as Bishop) seen on a count since 1980, and a radio-collared Sage Grouse followed into the count circle by the United States Geological Society. It was a completely beautiful day. Yet, one of the best parts was saved for last, when drooling from exhaustion we gathered for the Mono Basin standard: the celebratory potluck.