

State of the Lake Report Inspires Audiences

Third Annual Presentation Focuses on Birds of the Mono Basin

by Craig Roecker

Mono County covers approximately 330,000 square miles, and with so much going on in the area—who can keep track of it all? Local understanding of the protection and restoration of Mono Lake is essential, so the Committee developed the State of the Lake report. Local officials don't always have time to keep up to date on how the lake recovery is going, the progress of restoration, and the Lee Vining economy. So, the State of the Lake brings the highlights of the year's happenings and findings to the local agencies and policy makers to keep them in the loop.

The State of the Lake report uses the Sierra Business Council idea that healthy communities and environmental health depend upon three kinds of wealth—environmental wealth, social wealth, and economic wealth.

Each year the report details the status of popular measures of lake health such as lake level, precipitation predictions, the Negit landbridge, water diversions, and air quality. Additionally, the 2002 report focuses on a popular resident of the Mono Basin—birds. Birds are not just an indicator of the natural health of the region, they can also be used as an indicator of both social and economic health.

Annual Measures of Mono Lake's Health:

- The lake level fell one foot between April 1, 2001–April 1, 2002, to 6382.6 feet above sea level.
- The Negit landbridge is still submerged, but is becoming more exposed as the lake level falls. The lake would have to fall another five feet for it to be fully exposed again.
- The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power is allowed to divert 16,000 acre feet of water from Mono Lake's tributary streams this year. If the lake drops below 6,380 feet, the allowed diversion will be reduced to 4,500 acre feet annually.
- PM10 air quality violations continue to occur at Mono Lake and the severity of the storms is great. Particulate concentration during the largest violation last year measured 4,482 μm^3 , while the standard is 150 μm^3 .

Birds and Birding as Measures of Basin Health:

- Over half of the 600 bird species indigenous to North America are found at Mono Lake. While we don't know the exact number of birds that visit Mono, there are over two million grebes, gulls, and phalaropes alone.
- California Gull reproductive success greatly improved in 2001. The fledging rate was 1.19 chicks per nest, the fifth highest in 19 years of monitoring.
- Negit Island is being recolonized. Last year 271 pairs of gulls were found on Negit, 100 were found the year before, and only 14 in 1999. That's almost a 1000%

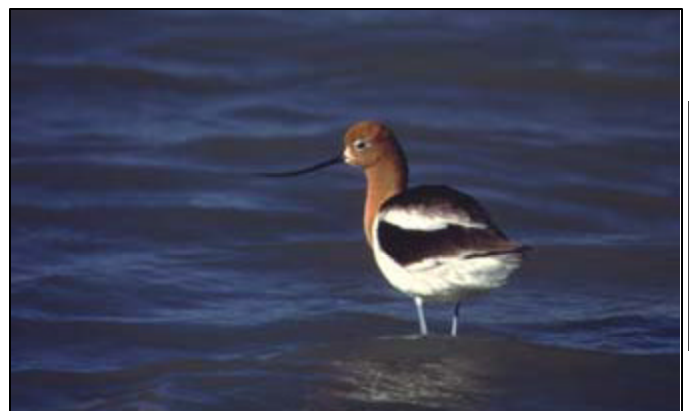
increase over three years!

- Interest in birds is flourishing. More birding walks and seminars are being offered and the demand continues to increase. This year the first annual Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua was held at Mono Lake and brought approximately 200 avid birders to the basin in June.
- Bird research has been ongoing at Mono Lake for the past 20 years. In addition to the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (PRBO) gull research, there is also the PRBO Eastern Sierra Riparian Songbird Conservation Project that is now in its fourth year. This study has found 130 species of songbirds in the Mono Basin.
- Birds bring economic benefit to the community too. Birding has grown rapidly over the past 20 years. Approximately 50,000 birders come to Mono Lake annually, spending over three quarters of a million dollars in the local economy.

This year's presentation has been very well received. Audiences have been amazed to learn just how important birds are at Mono Lake and have been especially wowed by the wonderful slides that are part of the show. Many of the bird photos are courtesy of Tom and Jo Heindel who donated 34 excellent slides of birds common to the Mono Basin. There have even been contests among the audience members for who can identify the most birds.

So far this year the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, Mono County Collaborative Planning Team, Mono County Board of Supervisors, Mammoth Lakes Chamber of Commerce, Sierra Nevada Alliance, and Mammoth Lakes Town Council have all seen the presentation, and seven more local groups are signed up. ❖

Craig Roecker is the Committee's Eastern Sierra Policy Coordinator. He's already having a blast this soccer season with both of his kids on the same team.



The American Avocet is one bird species that depends on Mono Lake.