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MONO LAKE GULLS CONTINUE NESTING COMEBACK -- FOR NOW

LEE VINING, CA. -- After several disastrous breeding seasons in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the California gulls at Mono Lake are making a strong comeback. Some 85% of the state's California gull population breeds on the rugged volcanic islands of this million year-old lake east of Yosemite National Park.

Ilene Mandelbaum, Eastern Sierra Representative for the 12,000 member Mono Lake Committee, reports that 19,644 nests with eggs were recently tallied on Negit Island and adjacent islets by Point Reyes Observatory biologist Jan Dierks.

"Especially significant," said Mandelbaum, "was the discovery of 2,041 nesting pairs on Negit Island, up from last year's total of 1,502.

This discovery marks the fourth sequential year that the gulls have returned, in dramatically increasing numbers, to nest on Negit Island.

Negit was once the lake's primary nesting site, but it was abandoned in 1979 when declining water levels uncovered a landbridge to the mainland for coyotes and other predators.

Since 1979, most of Mono Lake's nesting gulls have crowded onto small islets where their reproductive success has fluctuated greatly.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has been diverting water from Mono Lake's tributary streams since 1941, causing the lake level to drop more than 45 feet at its lowest ebb in 1982. The high snowmelt years of 1983-86 raised the lake about nine feet, restoring Negit to island status and permitting the return of the nesting gulls.

Two dry winters in a row, coupled with DWP's continuing diversions, could cause re-exposure of the landbridge by late 1989, spelling disaster once again for Negit's recently returned gull colony.

The recently released study, "The Future of Mono Lake", produced by the University of California for the State Legislature recommended that, in order to avoid "major effects on breeding populations," Mono Lake should be maintained at a level at least four feet higher than its present elevation, 6,378 feet. The report warned that, as early as next year, "a decline in the status of the ecosystem" will occur due to increasing salinity levels.