



# THE MONO LAKE COMMITTEE

OF THE SANTA MONICA BAY AUDUBON SOCIETY

POST OFFICE BOX 2764, OAKLAND, CA 94602

Newsletter  
Edited by: David Gaines

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GREETINGS! This is the premier issue of the Mono Lake Committee's Newsletter. It is also our first effort to generate support for preserving the scenic and wildlife values of Mono Lake. The Mono Lake Committee's origins and objectives are described in the following article. Our quarterly newsletter will keep you informed of the latest developments affecting Mono's future. It will also feature articles on the natural, geological and human history of Mono and other Great Basin

lakes, updates on current research and recent publications, plant and animal checklists, and announcements of field trips and talks. We invite your comments and contributions! And we invite your support! If you have not done so already, please fill out the coupon on page seven and send it to us with your contribution. You will receive the summer, fall and winter issues of the newsletter as well as our position paper, *MONO LAKE: ITS UNCERTAIN FUTURE*. May we meet at Mono this summer! And may this fine lake continue to live on.

## *MONO LAKE COMMITTEE SEEKS TO SAFEGUARD SCENIC AND WILDLIFE VALUES AT MONO LAKE*

East of Yosemite National Park, a landscape of volcanoes, glacier-scoured canyons and snow-laden peaks is dominated by the blue expanse of Mono Lake. Its waters, filled with tiny brine shrimp, nourish millions of birds. However its wildlife and scenic grandeur, even air quality in its vicinity, are in serious jeopardy.

Those of us who return to Mono Lake year after year, who know a little of its magic and mystery, are heartbroken at the consequences of unrestricted water diversions by the city of Los Angeles. For hundreds of thousands of years clear, rushing torrents have flowed from the flanks of the Sierra Nevada into its blue waters. Now all but one of its major tributaries

are diverted into the Los Angeles aqueduct. Unless diversions are curtailed, Mono Lake will shrink to approximately 30 percent its present volume and become a birdless chemical broth thirty times more alkaline than the sea. Thousands of acres of white, barren lake-bottom will be exposed. On windy days clouds of alkaline dust will obscure Sierran peaks and pose a definite threat, not only to vegetation, but also to human health.

By November, 1977 the falling lake level had connected Negit Island, home of three-fourths of California's nesting California Gulls, to the mainland. The existence of a landbridge exposed the gulls to mainland predators and vitally certain destruction. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of David Winkler, a channel was blasted between the island

and the mainland in March, 1978 (see separate article).

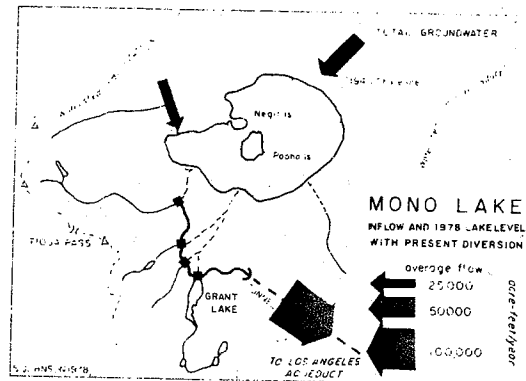
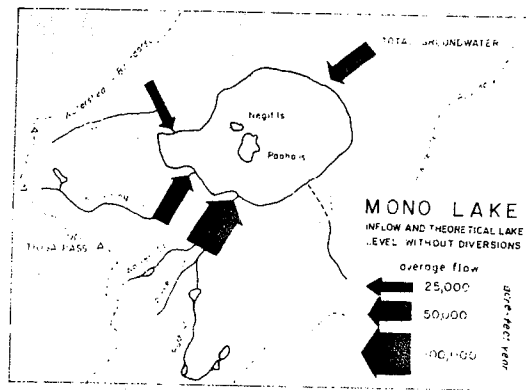
Unless diversions are reduced, however, the blasting will prove a futile gesture. Within a few years, the Negit Island landbirdge will reemerge. Within thirty years all of Mono's islands will cease to exist and rising salinities will doom all its birdlife.

In February, 1978 David Winkler joined with others who share the conviction that Mono is an irreplaceable natural treasure to form the Mono Lake Committee. We do not propose terminating water diversions completely. We feel a compromise can be reached between water consumption and environmental preservation.

We advocate maintaining Mono Lake at its 1976 level. This will still permit an average annual diversion of about 25,000 acre-feet per year for human use. The islands will still exist, millions of birds will still have a place to nest, rest and feed, and the eastern Sierra will not be plagued with air pollution. Our descendants will inherit, not a sterile wasteland, but a living lake set in the midst of natural splendor.

To win support for our position, we are:

- \* Presenting our views at meetings, conferences and hearings
- \* Sponsoring public talks, exhibits and field trips
- \* Publishing this quarterly newsletter to keep citizens informed
- \* Promoting much needed research on the dynamics of the Mono Lake ecosystem and the impact of water diversions
- \* Working with the Bureau of Land Management, California Fish and Game and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to assure the survival of Mono Lake's wildlife.



#### CHANNEL TO PROTECT NEGIT GULLS BLASTED BETWEEN ISLAND AND MAINLAND

On March 17 and 18, a resounding series of explosions deepened the channel between Negit Island and the mainland. The blasting marked the culmination of seven months of effort by the Mono Lake Committee and the National Audubon Society's Western Regional Office. Twenty members of the California National Guard, armed with several trucks, two helicopters, a pontoon bridge, explosives and other military paraphernalia, conducted the job in cooperation with the California Department of Fish and Game and the Bureau of Land Management. Hopefully the deepened channel will protect, at least for another year, the island's nesting California Gulls from mainland predators.

Until the explosions shattered the usual stillness of the eastern Sierra, only a narrow strip of water inches deep separated Negit Island from the mainland. The channel as it now stands, while not as deep as hoped, will probably assure the gulls a safe nesting this year. Small jagged islets, however,

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## NEGIT BLASTING, continued:

protrude from the channel at its narrowest point, which is approximately 120 feet wide. Water depth is five feet or more.

Visitors to Mono Lake are asked not to walk across the alkaline flats leading to the channel, as predators might follow human tracks to the island.

We would like to thank, on behalf of the gulls, those people who brought this worthy project to fruition.

### THE CALIFORNIA GULL AT MONO LAKE

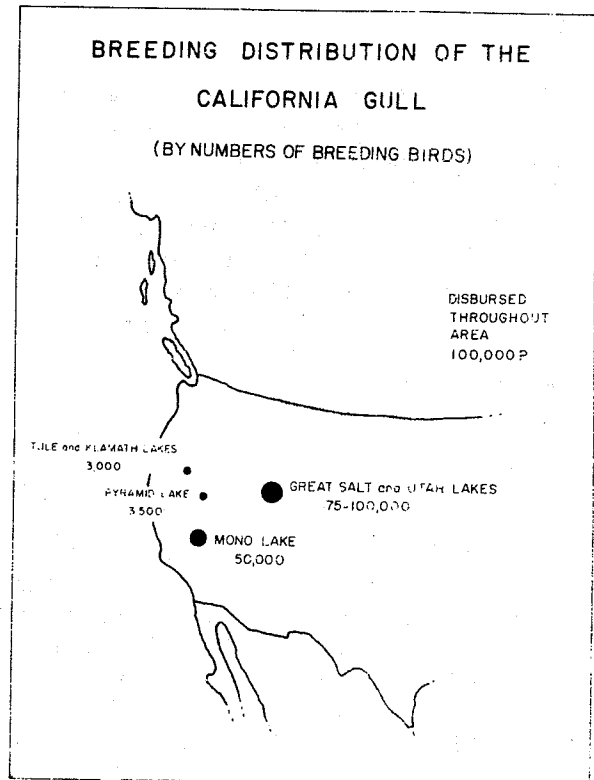
by David Winkler

The hordes of gulls which nest at Mono have long captured visitor's imaginations. "The smell of the water and the cries of the gulls," writes Galen Rowell, gave "the illusion that I was on a desert island in the South Pacific." In fact about one-fourth of the world's total population of California Gulls hatch and rear their young at Mono Lake. In this article, excerpted from "An ecological study of Mono Lake" (see recent publications), the ornithologist David Winkler discusses the gulls and their future.

... ed.

The California Gull pervades the entire atmosphere of Mono Lake during the summer months. In winter, when the gulls have returned to the Pacific Ocean where most of their relatives breed, the inland sea at Mono seems barren without them.

About 50,000 California Gulls raise their young on Mono's Negit Island and the small islets to the northeast. About 80,000 nest on Great Salt Lake in Utah. None of the colonies reported from other areas rival these in size.



Those at Mono are thus at least the second largest in the world.

Mono Lake's gull nestlings are nourished on a diet of brine shrimp and brine flies. By August the young and their parents may be seen soaring westward over the Sierran crest on their journey to coastal wintering areas.

Several lines of evidence suggest that the California Gull population which breeds at Mono, Pyramid and other lakes in the western Great Basin is genetically distinct from populations which breed farther to the east. Gulls leave the coast for their Canadian prairie and Utah breeding colonies a full month before the Mono birds. In Utah they usually arrive at their nesting sites in late February or early March, in Alberta in the last week of March, and at Mono in the first half of April. The average clutch size in the Canadian prairies and Utah is three, while that at Mono, Pyramid and Klamath Lakes is two. These facts taken together strongly suggest that there are significant genetic differences between the colonies.

In considering the fate of the California Gull colonies at Mono Lake one must bear  
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CALIFORNIA GULL, continued:

LADWP VIEWPOINT ON MONO'S GULLS

in mind that their disappearance will mean more than the loss of "just another gull colony." It will mean the demise of a population which, over the thousands of years since the last ice age, has evolved fine-tuned reproductive timing and orientation mechanisms geared specifically to breeding at Mono Lake. This is a population unlike any other in the world.

The dropping level of Mono Lake poses a grave threat to the California Gull colonies. Gulls, like other colonial water birds, are highly susceptible to predators. Up to now Mono's briny waters protected the island-nesting gulls from coyotes, weasels, raccoons, snakes, rats, mice and even humans. The emergence of a landbridge between Negit Island and the mainland, however, has breached the gulls' most important sanctuary.

No colony near the size of that on Negit has ever been reported on anything but an island. The tendency for gulls to avoid nesting on areas which are connected to the mainland and the ability of land predators to destroy a colony are well documented. Unless Negit is restored as an island, it is only a matter of time until its gull colony is obliterated.

What are the chances that the gulls will move to Paoha or other islands if predators invade Negit? The islets northeast of Negit are already crowded with gulls, and Paoha is plagued with violent summer dust storms. Furthermore, the gulls may not abandon their ancestral nesting sites until it is too late.

In any case, the gull's future is bleak. If diversions continue unabated, all the islands, including Paoha, will be connected to the mainland within 30 years. By this time rising salinities will likely have doomed, not only gulls, but all of Mono's birdlife.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the agency which diverts Mono's tributary streams, is mandated to provide water at the lowest possible cost. It is therefore not surprising that the department considers water development more important than preserving scenery and wildlife. What is surprising is that they should resort to half-truths in minimizing the impact of their policies.

In the July, 1974 issue of their newsletter *Intake* and again in their 1974 report entitled *Water Rights and Operations in the Mono Basin*, DWP claims that "the California Gull is not considered a rare or endangered species; they are, in fact, predators of the less numerous Sage Grouse." If gulls prey on grouse at all, it must be an exceedingly rare event. There is no substantiation in the scientific literature. Grouse were, in fact, much more abundant than gulls in the Mono Lake region prior to the overgrazing and overhunting which accompanied white settlement.

Though not officially classified as "rare" or "endangered," Mono Lake's gulls constitute one-fourth of the world's population and are genetically attuned to breeding in the Mono Lake - High Sierran environment (see David Winkler's article). The other major colonies in Utah are being decimated (details in a future newsletter). If Mono's gulls perish, we and the Sierra Nevada will lose an elegant, ecologically important species.

*PLEASE do not vist Negit Island or any of the islets where California*

*Gulls nest between April and August!*

*Disturbance of gull colonies inevitably leads to the death of many young birds.*

## ONGOING RESEARCH AT MONO LAKE

Mono Lake is an invaluable natural laboratory for studies in biology, ecology and the earth sciences. During the past fifteen years, 12 doctoral dissertations and numerous articles have centered on the lake or its basin. This summer scientists from across the country are pursuing a wide variety of important and fascinating studies.

In April David Winkler and Gary Page of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory will initiate an intensive study of Mono Lake's shorebirds. They will focus on the breeding biology of the Snowy Plover, a diminutive beach-swelling shorebird, and on the migratory biology of the Wilson's Phalarope, a colorful relative of the sandpipers. As the Snowy Plover has vanished from many of its ancestral haunts on California's beaches, Mono Lake may prove an important breeding area. The Wilson's Phalarope is another bird whose dependence on Mono may be critical. About one-third of the world's population stop to rest and feed on Mono during their southward migration to Argentina. This summer's research will help determine how important the lake is to these dainty shorebirds. A progress report will highlight our next newsletter.

Dr. Robert Holmes, U.C.S.B., will be comparing fossil diatoms from Paoha Island with those surviving in the lake today. Dr. Roger West, U.C.B., will be studying fossil pollen. Dr. John Melack, U.C.S.B., will be pursuing limnological studies which will include the brine shrimp. Dr. Joseph Liddicoat, Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, New York, Dr. Charles Dehnam, Woods Hole Marine Institute, Massachusetts, and Dr. Kenneth R. Lajoie, U.S.G.S., Menlo Park, will be pursuing paleomagnetic studies on sediments on Paoha Island and the mainland. Dr. Lajoie and Dr. Stephen Robinson, U.S.G.S., Menlo Park, will also be dating sediments and fossil and modern tufa formations through isotope studies. Dr. Kieth

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## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

During the summer of 1976 the Mono Basin Research Group, 12 university students supported by the National Science Foundation, investigated the geology, hydrology, limnology, botany, entomology and ornithology of Mono Lake. The end result, a 185 page report entitled *An Ecological Study of Mono Lake, California*, contains invaluable information on the lake's biology and the probable impact of unrestricted water diversions. Available for \$3.50 postpaid from: Institute of Ecology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

Information on the occurrence and seasonal abundance of birds at Mono Lake may be found in *The Birds of the Yosemite Sierra* by David Gaines, published in 1977. It is available for \$6.75 postpaid (California residents add .36 sales tax) from: Cal-Syl Press, 1494 MacArthur Bl., Oakland, CA 94602.

Two interesting and very different articles appeared in March: *Mono Lake-Revelation in the High Desert* by Rob Schultheis in *Outside*, and *Mono Lake: Silent, Sailable, Shrinking Sea* by Galen Rowell in *Audubon*. Rob's poetic prose conveys the mood and mystery of this stark, dramatic and seemingly timeless landscape. Galen concentrates, very effectively, on the problems clouding Mono's future. He errs, however, in suggesting that John Muir did not appreciate the lake (see below).

### JOHN MUIR ON MONO LAKE

John Muir was sufficiently impressed by Mono Lake to propose extending the boundary of Yosemite National Park eastward to its shores. "A country of wonderful contrasts," he wrote in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, "hot deserts

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ONGOING RESEARCH, continued:

Kvenvolden, U.S.G.S., Menlo Park, will be working on amino-acid dating of sediments on Paoha. More information on these studies will appear in future newsletters.

WAUCOBA NEWS

Anyone interested in the natural history of Mono and Inyo Counties will want to receive the *Waucoba News*. This informative and interesting quarterly publication is edited by Enid A. Larson, the east side's most eminent naturalist. To receive *Waucoba News*, send four stamped, self-addressed envelopes to Box 265, Big Pine, CA 93513.

OLD PHOTOS SOUGHT

Do you have photographs that illustrate the Mono Lake landscape before the water diversions began to take their toll? We would like to assemble a series of "then" and "now" pictures to be used in our public talks, exhibits and a future publication.

OUR MONO LAKE DISPLAY, which consists of color photographs of the lake and its wildlife, was well-received at the Western Regional Conference of the National Audubon Society at Asilomar March 18-21. Thanks to Ken Lajoie, Stephen Laymon, Sharon and Steve Johnson, Christine Weigen, Dean Taylor and the folks at 620 D. Street for helping us get it together.

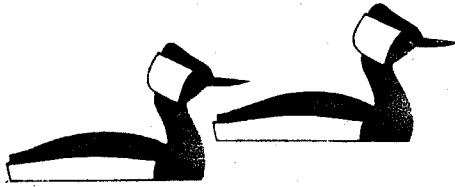
JOHN MUIR, continued:

bounded by snow-laden mountains, cinder and ashes scattered on glacier-polished pavement, frost and fire working together in the making of beauty." At the behest of mining interests, however, the Mono Lake drainage was excluded from the park. Muir's principal concern at the time was preservation of the Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne River watersheds. He did not foresee that water diversions would one day jeopardize Mono Lake.

MONO BASIN EXTENSION COURSE

A two quarter unit course entitled *Natural History of the Mono Basin* is being offered by University of California at Davis Extension. Participants will spend five days ranging from the shores of Mono Lake to the headwaters of its snow-fed tributaries high above timberline. Dates: August 26 - 30. Instructor: David Gaines. Fee: \$50.00. For further information, write to: Dottie Gates, University Extension, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

WE WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS OUR APPRECIATION to California Syllabus (low-cost, short run-book manufacturers, 1499 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland, CA 94602) for valuable assistance in producing our literature, to Sharon and Steve Johnson for the cartography in this newsletter and in our position paper, and to Keith Axelson for designing our Eared Grebe masthead. What more fitting symbol than this diminutive diving bird which gathers by the hundreds upon hundreds of thousands on Mono's waters each year.



*WE NEED YOUR HELP.* If you have not done so already, please join us. Tell your friends and elected representatives about Mono's plight. Visit the lake and learn first-hand how water diversions are affecting this awesomely beautiful region. If you can help in other ways, please let us know.

*WE NEED YOUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT AS WELL.* We receive no funds from the Audubon Society. All our time is volunteered. Your tax-deductable contributions will help pay our phone bills, travel expenses, and publishing and mailing costs.

In return for your contribution, we will keep you informed of the latest developments affecting Mono's future. You will receive our position paper, *MONO LAKE: ITS UNCERTAIN FUTURE*, a thoroughly researched account of the lake's natural and human history. And you will receive the summer, fall, and winter issues of this newsletter.

If you can't afford a contribution, but are interested in Mono Lake's future, please let us hear from you anyway.

By the way, *BUMPER STICKERS*, emblazoned with the words *LONG LIVE MONO LAKE* in attractive blue letters, are now available. We ask a minimum donation of one dollar.

Please fill out this coupon and send to:

**Mono Lake Committee**  
**P. O. Box 2764**  
**Oakland, CA 94602**

Make checks payable to:  
 Santa Monica Bay Audubon Society.

I want to help Mono Lake live on.  
 Here is my contribution for:

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- \$100  I'm interested in promoting local publicity
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