

MONO LAKE

N E W S L E T T E R

Summer 2024



If you visit Mono Lake this summer I know you'll be captivated by its beauty—a huge blue lake in the desert, with tufa towers like castles along the shore and tall snowcapped mountains rising to the west. If you picked up this issue of the *Mono Lake Newsletter* I bet it's because of the beautiful image on the cover.

Let Mono Lake's beauty draw you in. And then stay for the stories hidden beneath the surface.

We have illustrated one story that's hidden literally 79 feet underground—DWP's failing rotovalve that further hinders Rush Creek's long-overdue restoration (page 8). Hidden beneath the surface of Mono Lake are millions of alkali flies in various stages of life—the newest chapter of research about them begins this summer to help illuminate their mysteries (page 10).

Beneath the surface of that flock of birds on the cover—Wilson's Phalaropes—are several stories of resilience, from the beleaguered saline lakes they depend on, to each individual bird's remarkable migration. In a new effort to protect phalaropes and their habitats, advocates have asked for Endangered Species Act listing (page 7).

Hidden in a nondescript tract home near Rush Creek is a 30-year thriving education program, originally started through water conservation legislation and carrying on through the fourth generation of the founding Gutierrez family. During those three decades, more than 8,000 students have visited the Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center, where Mono Lake has become part of their stories (page 11).

Some stories have been deliberately overlooked for too long. The process to designate Tribal Beneficial Uses for Mono Lake and its tributary streams is an important step in recognizing the story of the Mono Lake Kutzadika'a Tribe. Their stewardship of this place stretches farther back in time than any other human story and continues today (page 5).

When you visit Mono Lake, come for the beauty. Seek out the stories by taking a guided tour or stopping into our bookstore (pages 16–17). And you'll become part of Mono Lake's story too.

—Elin Ljung, Communications Coordinator



COVER PHOTO BY ANDREW YOUSSEF

PHOTO COURTESY OF JACQUIN BALDWIN

A rare sight—the Aurora Borealis over Mono Lake, caused by a powerful solar storm in May.

Mono Lake Committee Mission

The Mono Lake Committee is a non-profit citizens' group dedicated to protecting and restoring the Mono Basin ecosystem, educating the public about Mono Lake and the impacts on the environment of excessive water use, and promoting cooperative solutions that protect Mono Lake and meet real water needs without transferring environmental problems to other areas.



Mono Lake Office

Information Center & Bookstore

Highway 395 at Third Street
Post Office Box 29
Lee Vining, California 93541
(760) 647-6595

info@monolake.org • monolake.org

Los Angeles Office

1718 Wellesley Avenue
Los Angeles, California 90025-3634

Staff

Executive Director Geoffrey McQuilkin
Operations & Philanthropy Dir. Anna Christensen
Eastern Sierra Policy Director Bartshé Miller
Communications Director Arya Degenhardt
Education Director Ryan Garrett
Hydrology Modeling & Membership Specialist
..... Maureen McGlinchy
Restoration Field Technician Robbie Di Paolo
Communications Coordinator Elin Ljung
Digital Engagement Coord Andrew Youssef
Membership Coordinator Leslie Redman
Info Center & Bookstore Manager Lily Pastel
Outdoor Educ Ctr Mgr Santiago M. Escruceria
Eastern Sierra Policy Coord Teri Tracy
Lead Naturalist Guide Nora Livingston
Information & Restoration Specialist Greg Reis
LA Education Coordinator Herley Jim Bowling
Sacramento Policy Associate Betsy Reifsnider
Facilities Superintendent Alyx Miller
Project Specialists Mara Krista Plato, Katie Smith
Info Center & Bookstore Assistants
..... Dana Diaz, Karis Sabraw
Canoe Tour Supervisor Gary Nelson
Canoe Coordinator Juniper Bishop
Birding Intern Sophie Coyne
Alkali Fly Research Technician Liz Holte
Field Monitoring & Reporting Intern Via Ruiz
Mono Lake Interns
..... BreeLynn Butler, Chris Hamilton,
..... Diego Murguia, Alden Seiberling

Board of Directors

Sally Gaines, Mammoth Lakes, Chair
Tom Soto, Santa Monica, Secretary
David Kanner, Redwood City, Treasurer
Martha Davis, Nicasio
Vireo Gaines, Bishop
Gina Radieva, Sacramento
Sherryl Taylor, Mammoth Lakes
Doug Virtue, San Pedro
Kristine Zeigler, Paso Robles

Directors Emeriti

Helen Green • Ed Grosswiler • Richard Lehman
Brent Coeur-Barron, Corporate Counsel

Founded by David Gaines in 1978

The Mono Lake Committee is a 501(c)(3)
non-profit organization, also known as the
Mono Lake Foundation. Tax ID: 77-0051124

MONO LAKE
NEW SLETTER

Summer 2024
Volume XLVI, Number 1

The *Mono Lake Newsletter* is a publication of the
Mono Lake Committee. ISSN #0275-6633.
Copyright © 2024 Mono Lake Committee.

Will LA take more Mono Lake water?

Mono Lake Committee and diverse LA coalition call on Mayor Bass to not increase water exports this year

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

Last year was notably wet, raising Mono Lake five feet—and creating a conundrum. Under rules written three decades ago, the lake's rise over the 6,380-foot elevation threshold means that on April 1, 2024, the maximum limit on water diversions from Mono Lake increased nearly fourfold. Yet decades of evidence show that increasing water diversions will erode the wet year gains, stopping the lake from reaching the mandated healthy 6,392-foot elevation.

This flaw in the water diversion rules, now obvious after 30 years of implementation, has real-world results: Mono Lake is a decade late and eight feet short of achieving the healthy lake requirement. The California State Water Resources Control Board plans to examine this problem in a future hearing. But with that critical action many months away—and still unscheduled—the question for 2024 is: Will the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) choose to maintain the same export level as recent years—and help achieve required lake recovery? Or will DWP choose to quadruple its water diversions—and push Mono Lake's level downward?

The Mono Lake Committee and Mono Lake friends are urging DWP and Los Angeles to keep diversion levels

"We respectfully request that this year, your administration choose to not increase water diversions from Mono Lake."

unchanged. As this issue of the *Mono Lake Newsletter* goes to press there is no decision out of Los Angeles yet.

Calling on the Mayor for action

Thirty years ago, the State Water Board limited DWP's decades of excessive water diversions in order to halt Mono Lake's destruction and protect the ecosystem, millions of migratory and nesting birds, clean air, and the ecological heritage of future generations. The decision was a momentous validation of the

work of Mono Lake supporters to protect the lake. It was also momentous because Los Angeles leaders joined the Committee and many others to endorse the ruling and commit to restoring health to Mono Lake, its tributary streams, and its internationally significant ecological, cultural, scenic, wildlife, and recreation resources.

Knowing the recent lake rise would technically permit increased water diversion, the Committee has been highlighting the negative lake impacts of such an action—and the positives of standing by the commitment Los Angeles made to Mono Lake in 1994.

A gathering of Mono Lake friends in March, hosted in

Continued on page 24



MAUREN MCQUILKIN

DWP has the chance to help preserve Mono Lake's recent incredible five-foot rise by not increasing stream diversions.

30th anniversary of the water rights decision to protect Mono Lake

by Elin Ljung

Throughout the year the Mono Lake Committee is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the decision that established the mandate to protect Mono Lake at the 6,392 foot elevation level—the Public Trust lake level. Decision 1631 was issued by the California State Water Resources Control Board 1994 and is the cornerstone of Mono Lake’s protection.

When the State Water Board voted unanimously to approve D1631, the crowd in the Sacramento hearing room stood in a genuine and enthusiastic ovation, a rarity for state agency decisions. Board member Marc del Piero pronounced: “Today we saved Mono Lake.”

D1631 placed limitations on the excessive water diversions that the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) had been taking for more than 50 years. Without those limits, Mono Lake would have continued its precipitous decline, its salinity would have risen beyond the tolerance of the brine shrimp and alkali flies at the core of the ecosystem, and its vital role in the lives of millions of nesting and migratory birds would have ended.

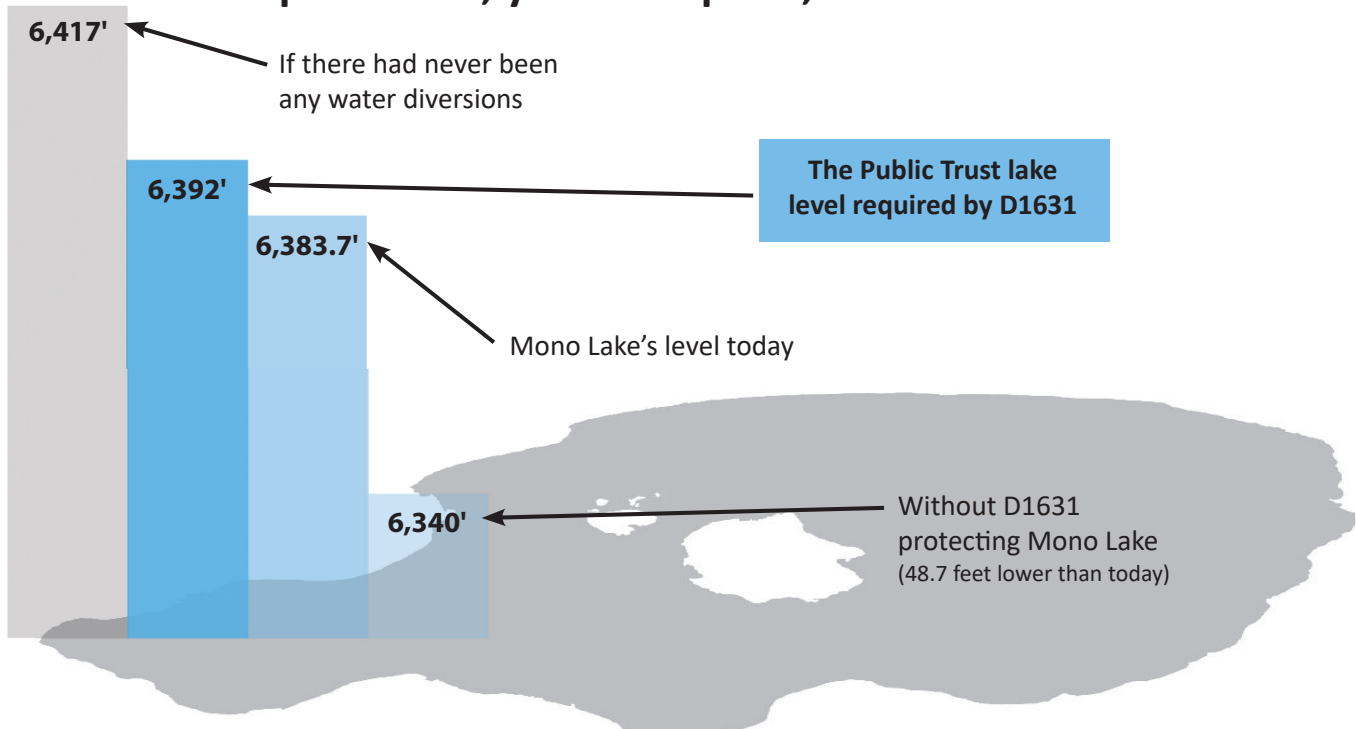
Not one of the 16 parties that participated in the State Water

Board’s hearing that led to D1631 appealed the decision—most notably, not even DWP. This was due to an agreement to implement major local water supply programs with millions of dollars in state and federal funding that the Committee had helped to secure. A decades-long water battle had ended with all parties agreeing to stop fighting and move forward to implement the solution.

Reflecting on D1631 today, its importance is clear, but it is also clear that its promise remains unfulfilled. Mono Lake is eight feet shy of the Public Trust lake level—30 years of observation confirm that the lake is stuck at this low level because of the volume of ongoing stream diversions. Thus, it’s appropriate that in this anniversary year the Committee has asked DWP to not increase stream diversions—to make good on its role in D1631’s goal of Mono Lake rising to the Public Trust lake level (see page 3).

We celebrate this historic decision by reaffirming our commitment to implementing the protections D1631 promised. True success for Mono Lake comes when the Decision’s expectations become landscape realities, with a thriving ecosystem, safe bird habitat, clean air, and secure future. ❖

The protective, yet incomplete, effect of Decision 1631



The vision laid out in State Water Board Decision 1631 of Mono Lake up at the healthy, mandated level of 6,392 feet in elevation is possible to reach with adjustments to DWP’s stream diversions. As a start, this year the Mono Lake Committee has asked DWP to not increase diversions.

Historic designation of Tribal Beneficial Uses for Mono Lake in sight

by Bartshé Miller

In April, an historic designation of Tribal Beneficial Uses for Mono Lake and its tributary streams moved forward. In a hearing to receive comments on the draft Mono Basin Tribal Beneficial Uses Basin Plan Amendment and environmental documentation, the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board engaged in government-to-government conversation with the Mono Lake Kutzadika'a Tribe and other Eastern Sierra Tribes and took comments from other members of the public.

Kutzadika'a Tribe Chairwoman Charlotte Lange offered opening remarks at the hearing: "We've never been at the table to have conversations regarding Mono Lake or any of our traditional lands. This is a big day for us in Indian Country... Consider all you're going to hear today. Think Indian for a day, and get our thoughts and our feelings in your heart so you can protect Mono Lake and our traditional lands."

What are Tribal Beneficial Uses?

Under the Clean Water Act, rivers and lakes throughout the state have designated uses and water quality objectives that are established by regulators like Lahontan. In recent years California Tribes have advocated for an additional category of beneficial uses to recognize traditional cultural and Tribal subsistence uses. In 2017, the State Water Board recognized that need and defined types of Tribal Beneficial Uses (TBU) that could be applied to all inland surface waters, enclosed bays, and estuaries. The nine regional water boards are tasked with implementing TBU within their individual water quality control plans. Mono Lake and its tributary streams are the first designations to be proposed for specific water bodies, and because of this (and because it's Mono Lake), the State Water Board has been watching this process closely.

TBU designation would recognize the traditional uses of Mono Lake, wetlands, springs, tributary streams, and high-country lakes, protecting those uses through specific water quality objectives. The uses recognized include many wide-ranging cultural and subsistence practices. The traditional harvesting of *kootzabe* (alkali fly pupae) from the water and shoreline of Mono Lake is a well-known practice that has nourished Indigenous peoples throughout the region for many thousands of years. Hunting, gathering food plants, and ceremonial practices are also recognized uses. Along freshwater tributary streams and high country lakes, uses include water for drinking and washing, fishing, willow-gathering for basket weaving, trade-route travel, hunting, and swimming.

Joining other beneficial uses

There are other existing categories of beneficial uses of water in California, protected under the Clean Water Act. In the Mono Basin, these categories include agricultural supply, cold freshwater habitat, commercial and sport fishing, municipal and domestic supply, navigation, inland saline water habitat, wildlife habitat, and water recreation. Multiple designations frequently coexist at Mono Lake and other water bodies that have specific, recognized uses and water quality objectives; they are part of a larger State policy of water quality control which "is directed toward achieving the highest water quality consistent with maximum benefit to people of the state."

Beneficial uses were an important consideration in the State Water Board's decision to raise Mono Lake to its Public Trust lake level of 6,392 feet above sea level, "to maximize the reasonable and beneficial use of California's limited water resources." However, the

Continued on page 6



A chorus of voices spoke in favor of designating Tribal Beneficial Uses for Mono Basin waters at a Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board hearing in April.

Kutzadika'a Tribe was not formally engaged as a Tribe in the State Water Board proceedings in the early 1990s.

A formal request from the Tribe

In 2021 the Mono Lake Kutzadika'a Tribe reached out to Lahontan and requested TBU designations for Mono Lake and its tributary streams. The Tribe's request initiated a multi-year process that involved research, public scoping, outreach, and formal consultation with the Tribe and other Tribes in the region. The Mono Lake Committee has supported the Tribe's request throughout. In March, Lahontan staff released a draft proposal designating TBU for Mono Lake and its tributary streams.

Hearing before the Lahontan Board

Lahontan is the regional water board that covers the largest area of California, stretching from the Oregon border to the Mojave Desert southeast of the Sierra. Its jurisdiction includes Lake Tahoe, Mono Lake, the Owens Valley, Death Valley, and points south. Board meetings occur throughout Lahontan's region, and at the April 18 meeting in Barstow, TBU for Mono Lake were on the agenda.

The hearing was well-attended—one of the largest Lahontan has held. Members of the Kutzadika'a Tribe as well as representatives from the Bridgeport Indian Colony, Bishop Paiute Tribe, Big Pine Paiute Tribe, and Reno Sparks Indian Colony all offered moving testimony in support of TBU.

Dean Tonenna, Kutzadika'a elder, made a presentation describing the Tribe's use of Mono Lake and its tributary streams, sharing that "this water body is so central to our lives and heritage that

we must do all that we can to ensure our lake has the utmost protections so that our lake and the ecosystem it supports are healthy and strong... it's important to remember that we're not thinking of ourselves, we're thinking of also all the species that are there at Mono Lake." Tonenna went on to highlight some of the present-day Tribal uses of Mono Lake, its tributary streams, and high-elevation lakes, illustrating the continuum of traditional use that occurs: "This is happening now. This isn't just, you know, something we once did. This is something that we continue to do."

Unanimous support

Mono Lake Committee staff traveled to Barstow to offer testimony and to support the Kutzadika'a Tribe's request to adopt TBU. Executive Director Geoff McQuilkin remarked, "What we just heard makes it clear that protecting Mono Lake and its tributary streams must involve the Kutzadika'a and Indigenous peoples... Today is about expanding what California recognizes to be the purposes of protecting clean water in the first place."

Interested parties and individuals from up and down the Eastern Sierra commented as well. The Inyo National Forest, California State Parks, Mono County Supervisor Bob Gardner, Friends of the Inyo, the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club, and Lee Vining residents all offered supporting comments.



PHOTO FROM LAHONTAN BOARD MEETING LIVE STREAM

Ninety-one-year-old Kutzadika'a Tribe elder Ruth Austin recounts her life in the Mono Basin at the Lahontan hearing.

Interested parties from Los Angeles also provided testimony supporting the Tribe and TBU designation. Communities for a Better Environment, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, the Sierra Club's Water Committee and Social and Environmental Justice Committee, and the Southern California Watershed Alliance were among those recognizing the Tribe's heritage and supporting Lahontan's consideration of TBU.

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) was present at the hearing, and a representative made brief comments thanking all those who spoke, stating that DWP would be submitting its comments in writing. DWP commented previously during the scoping phase of the project in 2023, and asked that Lahontan "identify and evaluate any potential impacts that may occur to LADWP's critical water supply and hydropower infrastructure and operations as a result of the Proposed [TBU]."

Next steps

The Lahontan board accepted written comments through April 2024, which will be considered as the board provides direction to staff completing the final proposed decision document. Once the document is released, there will be another opportunity for the Tribes and the public to provide comments. The next Lahontan Board meeting is in Lee Vining in August, when an action to designate TBU in the Mono Basin is tentatively scheduled.

Other regional boards in California are also considering TBU designations, but Mono Lake is the first. The Public Trust was first implemented in California at Mono Lake, positively shaping the trajectory of water law and use in California. Now, as Tribal Beneficial Uses are considered, Mono Lake and the Kutzadika'a Tribe can bend that trajectory further to include Indigenous people and traditional cultural practices in the effort to balance beneficial uses, water quality, and Public Trust values. ❖

Endangered species protections sought for Wilson's Phalaropes

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHERIDAN SANBORN

In March the Center for Biological Diversity led a coalition of scientists and conservation groups, including the Mono Lake Committee, in filing a legal petition with the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) seeking protections for the Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*) under the Endangered Species Act.

Wilson's Phalaropes are ever-popular visitors to Mono Lake—swooping in synchronized formations among Mono Lake's tufa towers and feasting on the lake's flies and shrimp in preparation for hemispheric migrations. Phalaropes inspire the Committee's work to restore Mono Lake to health and renew our commitment to ensuring that the decade-overdue management lake level of 6,392 feet is achieved.

Wilson's Phalarope numbers in North America have fallen by 70% since the 1980s. At Mono Lake, the highest published estimate of Wilson's Phalarope numbers is 93,000 from a single survey in 1977. The average annual peak count in the 1990s was 22,566.

The future of the species at Mono Lake is interwoven with Great Salt Lake in Utah and Lake Abert in Oregon. Forty to sixty percent of the world population of Wilson's Phalaropes—and up to 90% of the adults in the world—typically stage for fall migration simultaneously at these three lakes each year.

Mono Lake enjoys a measure of established, though as yet unfulfilled, protection. But its sister salt lakes—and thus Wilson's Phalaropes—are in a more dire situation. Great Salt Lake fell to its lowest level in recorded history in 2022, with salinities pushing high enough to threaten ecosystem collapse. Lake Abert functionally dried up at the same time.

The petition provided a 100-page review of the existing science on Wilson's Phalaropes and their status, making a compelling case for action, and asked the USFWS to protect them as “Threatened” under the Endangered Species Act. A response and subsequent USFWS analysis are likely to take years. Thus, initiating the process is important, and

consideration for listing will expand scientific resources and add to the urgency of protecting saline lakes.

“This petition on behalf of the Wilson's Phalarope is an act of love,” said author and co-petitioner Terry Tempest Williams, observing that saline lake protection “can no longer be seen as a local issue or a state issue but a global one—with the phalarope's epic migration from Argentina to Utah and back again signaling (as the brine shrimp and brine flies do) the interdependence of all life.”

Mono Lake, as the petition noted, is critical habitat and yet “is too small to sustain the entire population of Wilson's Phalaropes using saline lakes, should Great Salt Lake and

Continued on page 25

Phalarope phacts

Unlike all other shorebirds, Wilson's Phalaropes spend most of their time swimming, rather than walking on the shore. While swimming, they often spin in circles to create a vortex to draw prey to the surface.

Phalaropes' southward migration is a “molt migration”—they travel to specific areas where they undergo a complete replacement of body feathers before continuing the rest of their journey.

During the molt migration, Wilson's Phalaropes depend on hypersaline lake habitats, where they more than double their body weight by eating alkali flies and brine shrimp and engage in one of the fastest documented complete feather molts lasting just a few weeks.

After stopping to molt, Wilson's Phalaropes embark on a non-stop migration of approximately 3,500 miles to South America.

Another delay for Rush Creek restoration

by Arya Degenhardt

Aging Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) infrastructure is further delaying the construction of the long-awaited modification to Grant Lake Reservoir necessary to reliably deliver the high flows needed to restore Rush Creek.

Moving water around Grant Dam into Rush Creek has long involved an engineered work-around with limited ability to mimic natural runoff in wetter-than-average years (see page 9).

Now, in addition to that unresolved situation, a rotovalve that controls water flow into the aqueduct intake tunnel has partially failed, and the California Department of Water Resources Division of Safety of Dams has told DWP that the rotovalve must be replaced before the long-planned outlet construction can begin.

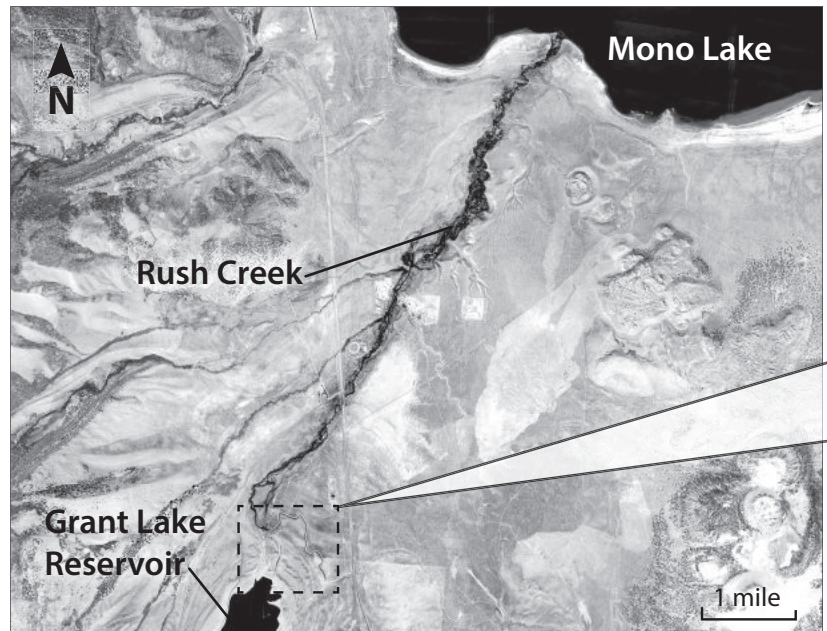
The 88-year-old rotovalve suffered cavitation damage—pitting the metal components inside the valve. Running the system at lower capacity is the only way to prevent complete failure.

The rotovalve's operation is currently limited to 175 cubic feet per second (cfs), significantly less than the 380 cfs it could originally carry. This limitation means that DWP cannot meet the required 2024 spring runoff streamflows.

In 2021, after years of seeing the severe limitations of the Grant Reservoir system, the State Water Board amended DWP's water licenses, ordering DWP to construct an outlet that reliably delivers seasonally larger and more natural Stream Ecosystem Flows to Rush Creek to achieve stream restoration goals.

To be able to deliver the required flows, DWP has planned to widen and deepen the existing spillway and install two 14-foot-tall Langemann gates that will allow for controlled releases of the required amounts from the reservoir. DWP completed environmental review in 2020, and construction was planned to begin in 2024 and finish in 2025.

The Mono Lake Committee, California Department of Fish & Wildlife, and California Trout are very concerned about this latest development. Although the failing rotovalve in its current state does not limit the total quantity of water delivered to Mono Lake or Los Angeles, it imposes even more severe limits on DWP's ability to deliver the long-overdue mandated streamflows needed to restore Rush Creek. ❖

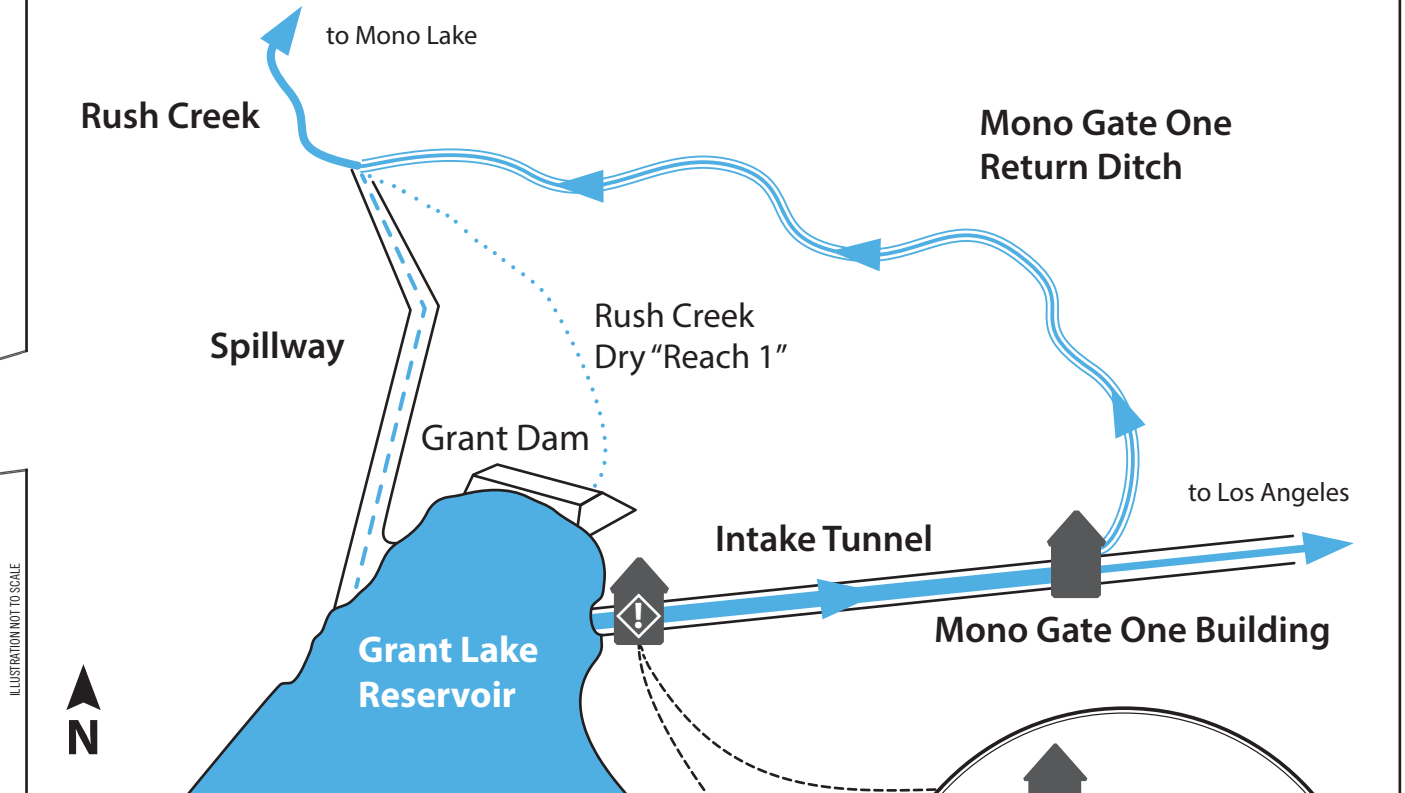


A damaged rotovalve in DWP's aqueduct infrastructure is further limiting desperately needed, long overdue, mandated streamflows in Rush Creek.

Rush Creek milestones & setbacks

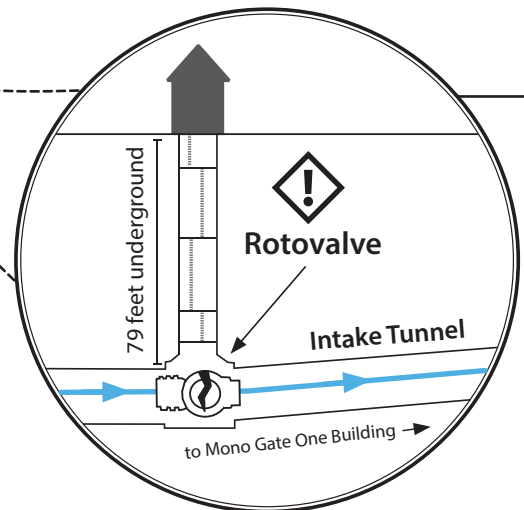
- 1984 Court orders continuous flow for Rush Creek.
- 1994 State Water Board (SWB) orders the restoration of Mono Lake, tributary streams, and wetlands.
- 1998 SWB issues stream restoration orders requiring DWP to implement a restoration plan and a ten-year study of the streams by independent Stream Scientists for future restoration recommendations.
- 2010 Stream Scientists' study recommends changes to the way DWP delivers water to the streams. DWP objects to the recommendations. SWB directs parties to work together to resolve the issues.
- 2013 Stream Restoration Agreement is signed. Includes DWP agreement to modify the Grant spillway for full restoration flow delivery to Rush Creek.
- 2018 DWP purchases replacement rotovalve to install after the spillway modification is complete.
- 2021 SWB issues Order 2021-86 amending DWP's water rights with Stream Restoration Agreement requirements for Rush restoration, flows, and facilities modification.
- 2023 Rotovalve begins to fail; Rush flows limited.
- 2024 DWP submits plans for fixing the rotovalve to the Division of Safety of Dams, proposing a timeline of up to ten years. The Division of Safety of Dams rejects the plan.

How water flows to Rush Creek from Grant Lake



Delivering water to Rush Creek below Grant Lake Reservoir is not a straightforward operation. Grant Lake Dam was built in the 1930s with the singular purpose of holding water for delivery into the LA Aqueduct, thus, there is no direct outlet to Rush Creek. As stream restoration requirements were imposed, DWP developed the work-around system illustrated above. Without the construction of an outlet that can adequately deliver and control flows, DWP cannot meet the requirements in its license to restore Rush Creek.

1. Water flows from **Grant Lake Reservoir** into the Intake Tunnel below the surface of Grant Lake.
2. The rotovalve controls the amount of water flowing into the **Intake Tunnel**. The original capacity of the rotovalve was 380 cubic feet per second (cfs). The failing rotovalve limits the amount of water that can be safely moved to the Intake Tunnel to 175 cfs.
3. At the **Mono Gate One Building**, water is directed either to the Mono Gate One Return Ditch which flows to Rush Creek, or onward into the Los Angeles Aqueduct.
4. The 1.5-mile-long **Mono Gate One Return Ditch** is the only reliable way to release water from Grant Lake Reservoir to Rush Creek and Mono Lake. The Mono Gate One Return Ditch has a functional flow restriction of 380 cfs—just half of the 750 cfs needed to meet DWP's flow requirements for Rush Creek.
5. The only other way water can be released from Grant Lake Reservoir into Rush Creek is when the reservoir is full and water flows down the **Spillway**. However, DWP can't control flow in the spillway and thus is planning a spillway retrofit project that would allow for control of the timing and magnitude of flows in the spillway to meet the flow requirements for Rush Creek.



Alkali fly research resumes at Mono Lake

by Robbie Di Paolo

Alkali fly (*Ephydra hians*) productivity at Mono Lake is a valuable indicator for understanding Mono Lake's ecosystem health. With a life cycle that occurs almost entirely within Mono Lake's saline waters and a diet of lake algae, alkali flies and their productivity are directly linked to the environmental conditions of Mono Lake. Additionally, the alkali fly serves as the primary food source for hundreds of thousands of migratory and breeding shorebirds and waterfowl at Mono Lake.

For these reasons, the Mono Lake Committee has advocated for and facilitated alkali fly research at Mono Lake over the years. Most recently, the Committee secured grant funding through the California Department of Fish & Wildlife from the drought response provisions of Senate Bill 129 to fund alkali fly research at Mono Lake in 2024 and 2025.

Assessing Mono Lake ecosystem health

Research on the flies was part of the original ecological study of Mono Lake in 1976 when experiments were done to determine the effects of increasing salinity on the physiology of the flies. This and subsequent research identified an empirical relationship between lake salinity and alkali fly productivity, which was subsequently used by the California State Water Resources Control Board in part to determine the ecologically healthy 6,392-foot elevation.

With the lake eight vertical feet short of the Public Trust lake level 30 years after it was mandated, there is an

unfortunate opportunity to better understand how elevated salinity is impairing the alkali fly population over time.

Unique research

The renewed research will be directed by one of the original alkali fly researchers from the 1976 study, Dr. David Herbst, and conducted by Committee research technician Liz Holte using lab space at the Sierra Nevada Aquatic Research Laboratory.

Holte is responsible for sampling fly larvae and pupae on the lakebed, real tufa, and artificial concrete tufa. Specimens will then be measured and categorized into one of three difficult-to-distinguish instars, or stages of development. In aggregate, this data will paint a picture of the current conditions for the flies in Mono Lake and expand the picture of alkali fly health relative to different lake levels over time.

Harvesting of *kootzabe* (alkali fly pupae) from the water and shoreline of Mono Lake is a traditional Mono Lake Kutzadika'a practice (see page 5) and the Tribe has invaluable traditional ecological and historical knowledge of the alkali flies. The Committee is coordinating opportunities for Dr. Herbst to report to and receive feedback from the Tribe about this research. ❖

Robbie Di Paolo is the Committee's Restoration Field Technician. Even though he had wished for another 200% snowpack winter for Mono Lake, he admittedly enjoyed a less-intense winter and is looking forward to a summer with good high country access.



Alkali fly research samples are collected from underwater. Dr. David Herbst and Liz Holte set up stations where fly larvae and pupae are collected from different submerged surfaces.

Understanding our impact

Celebrating three decades of unique watershed education in the Mono Basin

by Ryan Garrett

Thirty years ago Madres del Este de Los Angeles Santa Isabel (MELASI), an environmental and social justice group participating in a city-sponsored ultra-low-flush toilet distribution program, made the 350-mile journey north to join the Mono Lake Committee in seeing the benefit of their water conservation work and learn more about the source of their water at Mono Lake.

Now in its thirtieth year, the Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center (OEC) program will host more than 25 community and school groups this summer. Participants primarily from Los Angeles will visit Mono Lake to connect with the source of their water through multi-day trips full of watershed education through hands-on learning and stewardship activities.

True to its roots

In 1994, money from Assembly Bill 444 was being used to implement a voluntary water conservation program in Los Angeles to benefit the ecosystem of Mono Lake.

As part of the AB 444 implementation, community groups, in cooperation with the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP), installed residential water conservation equipment, primarily low-flush toilets, within the DWP service area. Community group members were trained in the water conservation equipment installation and given free toilets to distribute in their neighborhoods.

Part of a greater effort to show that the people of LA could easily conserve more water than was needed to save Mono Lake, the toilet retrofit program was both popular and successful. Together with MELASI, the Mono Lake Committee envisioned an idea to bridge the gap between Los Angeles youth and the origins of their water.

Together with Juana & Ricardo Gutierrez, co-founders of MELASI, a group of MELASI families traveled from LA for four days of camping and immersive watershed education at Mono Lake. Reflecting on the impact that this trip had on her group, Juana said in 1994, “In time these young people will become involved in the struggle to keep these places alive.”

Continuing the legacy

One of those young people was her grandson mark! Lopez, who has since become an activist and community leader with



The Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center has connected community and school groups, primarily from Los Angeles, with the source of their water for 30 years.

East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice. A staunch Mono Lake advocate, mark! continues to bring groups to Mono Lake each year, including his children, the fourth generation of the Gutierrez family to participate in OEC programs.

mark! writes, “The Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center has grown since the 90s. After enjoying the program as a youth participant for most of my life, I have transitioned to supporting organizing youth groups for over a decade. For us, unlike with other urban-to-outdoor type programs, visiting with Mono Lake isn’t about disconnecting from our communities. It is about understanding our own impact on Mono Lake, examining our responsibilities to Mono Lake and committing to fight for our communities, which includes fighting for Mono Lake. It is about a type of connecting and reconnecting that regenerates the type of community building our elders have taught us.”

The mission of the OEC program is to build understanding and appreciation for the Mono Basin-Los Angeles watershed through education programs and muscle-powered recreational activity; to demonstrate that balanced solutions are possible for meeting the water needs of people and the environment; and to kindle stewardship through service projects that restore and improve the quality of the Mono Basin watershed.

OEC staff tailor every trip to meet the students’ needs. By visiting Mono Lake, learning the history of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and discussing the importance of equity and community around water, the participants can start to see Mono Lake as part of their home watershed.

Ron Ozuna, science teacher with LA Unified School

Continued on page 25

Aging infrastructure limits Rush Creek flows ... again

by Greg Reis

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) forecast for the Mono Basin 2024 runoff year (April 1, 2024–March 31, 2025) is 103% of average, putting this year into a “Normal” year-type. The required Normal year peak flow on Rush Creek is 380 cubic feet per second (cfs) for three days; however, the failing rotovalve at Grant Lake Reservoir (see page 8) limits controlled releases to Rush Creek to only 175 cfs—less than half of the required flow.

Luckily, this year the reservoir is full and already spilling, making flows

higher than 175 cfs possible if upstream Southern California Edison (SCE) dam releases, combined with uncontrolled snowmelt runoff, exceed 175 cfs. Unfortunately, DWP has not committed to coordinating with SCE to maximize the spill flows to Rush Creek.

The failing valve will take at least two years to fix, meaning this will be a problem through next year and likely longer. Reducing DWP’s surface water exports would mitigate the problem by keeping Grant Lake Reservoir full and allowing the opportunity for spills to achieve flows higher than 175 cfs, as

well as raising Mono Lake faster. DWP has not committed to that either but for the first time in history is considering a voluntary export reduction in response to the Mono Lake Committee’s request (see page 3).

Peak flow requirements are as much as 750 cfs in wetter years, a level even a fully functioning rotovalve cannot deliver. This will be remedied by DWP with a long-promised spillway modification; unfortunately, that project is now on hold until after the failing valve is replaced, delaying required Rush Creek flows even longer. ❖

Lakewatch

Mono Lake benefits from full aqueduct and conservation in LA

by Greg Reis

The 2023 runoff year was the third-wettest year on record, with more snowmelt runoff than any year except 1983 and 2017. 189% of average runoff flowed down the four tributaries controlled by DWP, and almost all of that water made it past the Los Angeles Aqueduct to Mono Lake. Mono Lake rose 3.7 feet since April 2023, the biggest rise since 1983, and a total of 5.3 feet since the December 2022 low point, but it still remains about 8 feet below the required management level of 6,392 feet above sea level.

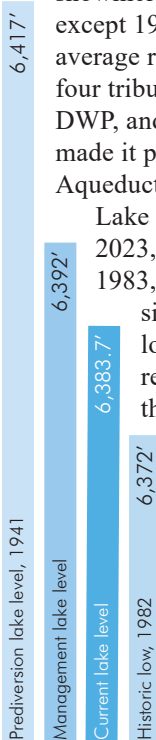
Because Mono Lake started the 2023 runoff year below 6,380 feet, DWP was permitted to export up to 4,500 acre-feet of streamflow. However, DWP was only able to

export 1,510 acre-feet of Mono Basin streamflow in addition to its continuous groundwater export of about 5,000 acre-feet per year. This decrease was due to the wet conditions that filled the LA Aqueduct system and thanks to the water conserving habits of Los Angeles residents, who simply did not need the water. The 2,990 acre-foot involuntary reduction in streamflow export was left in Grant Lake Reservoir, which allowed the reservoir to spill sooner this spring, benefiting Rush Creek and likely causing Mono Lake to rise an additional tenth of a foot this year.

On April 1, 2024, Mono Lake was at 6,383.7 feet above sea level—above the 6,380-foot threshold that allows DWP to export up to 16,000 acre-feet of streamflow. Over the past 30 years, the Mono Lake Committee has seen that this level of streamflow diversion is too high and the 6,380-foot lake level threshold is too low. The high streamflow export rate drags down Mono Lake’s level, causing it to stabilize near its current

level, unable to rise to the mandated healthy management level of 6,392 feet. The Committee is asking DWP to only export 4,500 acre-feet of surface water this year and voluntarily leave 11,500 acre-feet in the Mono Basin (see page 3). This would be enough to raise Mono Lake a quarter-foot. While this may not seem like much, if a quarter-foot had accumulated each year since the State Water Board Decision 30 years ago, today Mono Lake would be near 6,387 feet, significantly closer to the management level and less saline with higher aquatic productivity, better air quality, and more protection for the California Gull colony. ❖

Greg Reis is the Committee’s Information & Restoration Specialist. He thinks it is really cool that due to the full aqueduct system, every drop of water conserved in LA this year caused an equal reduction in Mono Basin surface exports (up to 2,990 acre-feet), making a direct difference for Mono Lake.



Mono Basin Journal

A roundup of quiet happenings at Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



GEORGE MCQUILKIN

Cool spring snowmelt is once again slipping out of Grant Lake Reservoir, flowing over riprap, pushing across the concrete spillway crest, and sloshing down the 1,500-foot-long spillway channel. The water, which is in motion due to a full reservoir and a capacity cutback on a failing aqueduct rotovalve, then accelerates down a steep slope. With whitewater and splashes that leap out to the delight of my daughter as we watch from the channel's edge, the water then transitions into a cobble channel that leads onward into the natural channel of Rush Creek.

The spillway water mingles with incoming water separately released by 1930s infrastructure from the

reservoir, the increased flow adding energy to the creek, activating dynamic processes that rebuild the complex stream channel structure and restore miles of streamside forests. Year after year the restoration rebuilds the health of the creek, fish, and forests.

Patience is required as these natural processes do their work on time scales of their own choosing. Yet the passage of time matters as recovery from the excess diversions of the past slowly advances. A simple rule is to not cause delay. Whether it is outdated diversion rules or failing aqueduct infrastructure, fast action is needed to stop impeding the rise of the lake and restoration of the creeks. ❖

Benchmarks



ELIN LUONG

April 3, 2021: These tufa formations on Mono Lake's south shore were almost completely on dry land after a series of dry years. Mono Lake's level was 6,381.3 feet above sea level.



ANDREW VOISSEF

April 29, 2024: After last year's record snowpack and runoff, water now surrounds the tufa, providing protection for the Osprey nest in the center. Lake level: 6,383.7 feet.



MONO LAKE COMMITTEE

INFORMATION CENTER & BOOKSTORE



VINTAGE MONO LAKE LONG-SLEEVE SHIRT

Enjoy this classic *Mono Lake Committee exclusive* design, now in a lightweight, long-sleeve cut, modeled by Nora and Lily. This soft blue 100% cotton shirt will keep you cool and covered during sunny outdoor activities. Featuring a scene of Mono Lake and the phrase "Mono Lake, it's worth saving," this design has been a top seller since the very beginning.

Vintage Mono Lake long-sleeve shirt, soft blue, 100% cotton, unisex sizes S-XXL: \$30.00

NEW!



LOGO TRUCKER CAP

Get ready for hot and sunny days with these breathable trucker caps, modeled by Anna and Geoff. The bill blocks the sun while the breezy mesh back allows for cooling when you work up a sweat. Featuring the

Mono Lake Committee logo embroidered onto an adjustable organic cotton and recycled polyester cap, this is a sustainable style ready to hit the trail this summer. Available in two colors: surf (natural white and navy blue) and earth (charcoal grey and brown).

Logo trucker cap, one size fits most, please specify surf or earth: \$25.00



MONO LAKE NALGENE BOTTLE

Stay hydrated during summer adventures with this durable and lightweight Nalgene bottle. This 32-ounce wide-mouth bottle is made in the USA and features a Mono Lake design of tufa towers and a flock of birds. It has a leak-proof lid, is BPA/BPS free and dishwasher safe, and is available in two colors: clear with teal lid or aubergine with magenta lid.

Mono Lake Committee exclusive.

Mono Lake Nalgene bottle, 32 ounces, please specify clear or aubergine: \$17.00

LAWS FIELD GUIDE TO THE SIERRA NEVADA

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

JOHN MUIR LAWS

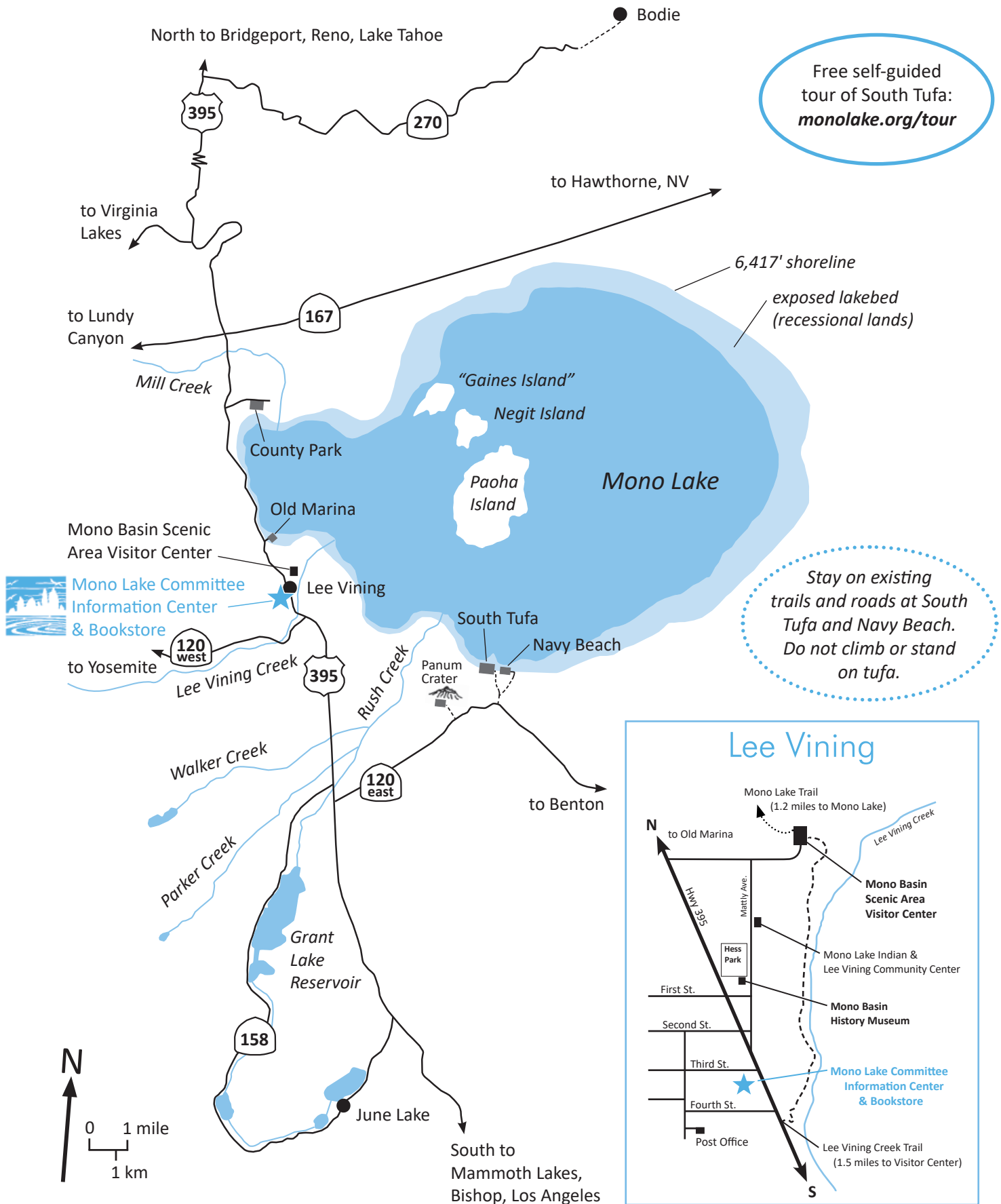
A trip to the Sierra Nevada isn't complete without this field guide. Covering a vast array of Sierra life forms from lichen to mammals, this is our go-to guide for identifying local species on the go.

With a packable size and lovely illustrations, this guide will be your best hiking buddy. *Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada, paperback, 366 pages, Heyday, 4½" x 8¾": \$26.00*



order at monolake.org/shop or (760) 647-6595

Mono Lake map



Visiting Mono Lake

Nestled at the edge of the arid Great Basin and the snowy Sierra Nevada, Mono Lake is an ancient saline lake that covers over 70 square miles and supports a unique and highly productive ecosystem. Along the lakeshore, scenic limestone formations—tufa towers—rise from the water’s surface. The lake has no fish; instead it is home to trillions of brine shrimp and alkali flies. Freshwater streams feed Mono Lake, supporting miles of lush riparian forests of cottonwood and willow. Millions of migratory and nesting birds visit the lake each year.

The Mono Lake story

In 1941, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) began excessive water diversions from Mono Basin streams. Mono Lake dropped 45 vertical feet, lost half its volume, and doubled in salinity.

The Mono Lake Committee was founded in 1978 in response to the threat of ecological collapse of Mono Lake. The Committee set up headquarters in the old aqueduct workers’ dance hall in Lee Vining and went to work spreading the word about Mono Lake. The Committee took the City of Los Angeles to court, arguing that DWP had violated the public trust doctrine, which the Supreme Court of California described in 1983 as “the duty of the state to protect the people’s common heritage of streams, lakes, marshlands and tidelands...”

In 1994, after more than a decade of litigation, the California State Water Resources Control Board ordered DWP to reduce diversions and raise Mono Lake to a healthy level of 6,392 feet above sea level—twenty feet above its historical low. This was truly an environmental victory. Now, thirty years after the State Water Board’s historic decision, the lake is still eight feet short of the healthy management level. There is more work to be done.



Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore

- Open daily 9:00AM–7:00PM during the summer
- monolake.org/shop and (760) 647-6595

See detailed displays about Mono Lake’s political history and the current work of the Mono Lake Committee, “The Mono Lake Story” film, an art gallery, a comprehensive selection of books on natural and local history, T-shirts, maps, and locally made artisan gifts. This is also the Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce.

Mono Lake’s recovery depends on water solutions in Los Angeles, and the Committee has created solutions to the demand for water by implementing conservation and recycling programs in LA that have saved more than enough water to share with Mono Lake. Today LA is one of the most water-conscious cities in the United States, and the Committee works statewide to promote wise water use.



Canoe on Mono Lake

- Saturdays and Sundays at 8:00, 9:30, and 11:00AM
- June 29, 2024 through September 1, 2024
- Tours last one hour
- \$35 per person; \$20 for children ages 4–12
- Sorry, no children under the age of 4 and no pets
- Reservations required: monolake.org/canoe or (760) 647-6595

Guided canoe tours provide a unique look at the ecology and geology of Mono Lake. Discover bubbling springs, alkali flies, brine shrimp, underwater tufa towers, and migrating birds from the vantage point of a canoe. No canoe experience is necessary and all equipment is provided.

You are part of the Mono Lake story



Free naturalist tours at South Tufa

- Daily at 10:00AM and 6:00PM*
- *Reservations recommended: monolake.org/freetour or (760) 647-6595
- Tours are free, but there is a \$3 per person entrance fee to the South Tufa area
- Meet at the kiosk at the South Tufa parking lot

Find out why Mono Lake is salty, make tufa, taste alkali fly pupae, and see migratory and nesting birds on this fascinating hour-long tour. (If you can't make a scheduled tour, you can take a self-guided tour on monolake.org/tour.)

The Mono Lake story is not over

The Committee works in the areas of public policy, ecological protection and restoration, education, and scientific research. We continue to strive for solutions that balance the water needs of people and the environment.

Protection. The Committee defends existing Mono Lake protections to ensure that established rules, orders, agreements, and victories remain active and strong. We make sure that DWP complies with existing rules and agreements, acting as a watchdog when necessary. In addition to demands for water, challenges facing Mono Lake also include poorly-planned development, increasing recreation pressures, underfunded management agencies, and climate change.

Restoration. The Committee works to restore the ecological functions of Mono Lake, its tributary streams and waterfowl habitat, and the watershed as a whole. Our restoration programs work to heal the damage caused by 50 years of DWP's past excessive water diversions. As a result of historic litigation, DWP is required to fulfill its restoration obligations in the Mono Basin as ordered by the State Water Board. The Committee plays a critical role as a monitor to transform the restoration requirements into measurable restoration progress.



monolake.org



@monolakeca



@Mono_Lake



Mono Lake Committee

Education. The Committee offers hands-on programs to share the sense of wonder that Mono Lake evokes. South Tufa tours, activities for school groups, Field Seminars (see page 18), custom guided trips, and the annual Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua all provide ways to learn more about Mono Lake. The Committee's Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center brings students from Los Angeles to learn about the source of their water, educating the next generation of California policymakers.

Science. Scientific research is the basis of our policy work, a guide for restoration, and an inspiration for understanding Mono Lake. The Committee supports and works with researchers, hosts a comprehensive research library, and runs the Mono Basin Field Station to enhance the scientific knowledge of Mono Lake, its tributary streams, and the surrounding lands.

Get involved at Mono Lake

Mono Lake has a great success story, and you can be a part of it! Add your voice to the 16,000 members who are committed to the protection and restoration of Mono Lake. Your support as a Committee member will be put to work for Mono Lake.

Join us on a walking tour, Field Seminar, or custom guided trip. Check out Mono Lake online at monolake.org to stay connected to Mono Lake and help ensure its protection for generations to come. ❖



Free birding tours

- Fridays and Sundays at 8:00AM at Mono Lake County Park
- Saturdays at 8:00AM in Lundy Canyon
- Reservations recommended: monolake.org/birdtour or (760) 647-6595

Magic is literally flying and flitting through the air in the Mono Basin. Join a resident expert to see everything from shorebirds to songbirds on this free tour for birders of all levels. Bring binoculars and a bird book if you have them (not required).

2024 Field Seminars



Mono Basin Natural History: Aquatic & Terrestrial Habitats

July 5–7 • David Wimpfheimer
\$285 per person / \$270 for members
enrollment limited to 12 participants

The Mono Basin is one of the most diverse ecosystems on the continent; this seminar will be an overview of the varied habitats found here. One of the best ways to get an appreciation for Mono Lake's drama and productivity is to explore its shores and then proceed higher in elevation to other habitats. We will enjoy the rich diversity of mammals, butterflies, wildflowers, and trees, and a major focus will be the identification and ecology of birds that breed here. In sagebrush meadows and riparian and conifer forests, the class will explore a number of sites intensively, mixing short leisurely walks with periods of observation and natural history discussion. A guided canoe tour of Mono's south shore is included.

Capturing the Mono Basin in Pastel

July 12–14 • Ane Carla Rovetta
\$310 per person / \$295 for members
enrollment limited to 12 participants

The rich light and deep colors of the Mono Basin are a perfect subject for the brilliance of pastel chalks. During this seminar, we will work outside, on location, to make landscape studies in pastel. We will be challenged by wind, weather, and our copious gear, however, the exuberant brilliance of "plein air" paintings make them worth the effort. We will concentrate on vista paintings in the mornings, move indoors for midday lectures, and late afternoons will consist of painting a smaller scene in a sheltered place. Each participant will go home with at least one small finished painting and several sketches, color studies, and value experiments to fuel future artistic endeavors.

To sign up for a Mono Lake Committee Field Seminar
please visit monolake.org/seminars or call (760) 647-6595.

Los Angeles Aqueduct Tour

July 20 • Robbie Di Paolo & Maureen McGlinchy

\$145 per person / \$130 for members

enrollment limited to 15 participants

The Mono Basin extension of the Los Angeles Aqueduct began exporting water 350 miles south to the City of LA in 1941. Today, the aqueduct must balance competing needs for this water instead of exclusively serving one. During this seminar, we will visit all the major aqueduct facilities in the Mono Basin and learn about their modern relationship with Los Angeles, Mono Lake, and the lake's tributary streams. We will discuss past and present diversions, and see how 20th-century infrastructure is serving 21st-century water needs. This seminar will provide a great overview of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and a few of the historical, engineering, and ecological anecdotes that make up this fascinating water infrastructure.

Wildflower Wander

July 21 • Nora Livingston

\$140 per person / \$130 for members

enrollment limited to 8 participants

Working on your wildflower identification? July is the perfect month to practice as the flowers will be out in abundance taking advantage of plentiful sunlight and warm temperatures. We will scour meadows and canyons for the plethora of blooms that grace the trails, focusing on the identification and natural history of the flowers we see.



Field Seminars span a variety of interesting topics ranging from wildflowers and birds to painting and photography.



Field Seminars have a range of activity levels, from slow, leisurely walking to strenuous hiking. Learn more at monolake.org/seminars.

Mono Basin Ecology for Families

July 27 • Nora Livingston

\$10–40 per person, sliding scale

enrollment limited to 12 participants

This hands-on, immersive seminar for families is designed to foster an understanding and appreciation of the habitats in the Mono Basin. Open to families with kids ages 6 and up, there will be something for everyone no matter their age, including scavenger hunts, science experiments, nature art, and more. This seminar encourages bonding, environmental stewardship, and a deeper connection with nature. At least one adult per family is required to attend.

Butterflies & Moths of the Eastern Sierra

August 2–4 • Paul Johnson

\$250 per person / \$235 for members

enrollment limited to 10 participants

More than 100 species of butterflies and perhaps 20 times as many species of moths live in the Eastern Sierra. With this incredible diversity of species, there is always something new to be found by the careful observer. Most butterflies and moths have close relationships with the few plant species their caterpillars can eat, and various biological needs drive them to visit flowers, mud puddles, hilltops, and more. This seminar will explore these habitat preferences and then use this knowledge to guide our searches at various butterfly-rich locations. We will likely see some day-flying moths along the way and we'll also reconvene at night and use black lights to attract nocturnal moths that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Cuentos y Cantos al Desierto

August 9–11 • Stacey Villalobos
\$40–80 per person, sliding scale
enrollment limited

La tierra es testigo de nuestras ofrendas, ¿cómo podemos honrar nuestra relación con la naturaleza a través de nuestras voces? Over the course of this bilingual seminar, participants will be guided on a series of outings that will explore reciprocity as an offering through stories and song. Exchanges with plants, critters, and the elements will inform our relationship with the lands, people, and communities we call home. Activities may include hiking, birdwatching, botany, meditation, journaling, storytelling, singing, and embodied voice practices. This bilingual seminar is specifically designed to create a space for native and heritage Spanish-speaking participants and field instructors to connect with the Eastern Sierra.

Falling for the Migration: Bridgeport, Crowley, Mono

August 16–18 • Dave Shuford
\$250 per person / \$235 for members
enrollment limited to 14 participants

The east slope of the Sierra Nevada is a major migration route for birds traveling from northern nesting areas to warm southern habitats. As a result, August is the time of year to see late summer migrants and early arriving wintering birds in the Mono Basin, Bridgeport Valley, and Long Valley. Beginners as well as experts will enjoy this introduction to the area's birdlife found in a wide variety of habitats, from the shimmering shores of Mono Lake to lofty Sierra peaks.

We will identify about 100 species by plumage and calls and also discuss migration strategies, behavior, and ecology to complement our field observations.

Communing with(in) Nature

August 23–25 • Bree Salazar
\$40–80 per person, sliding scale
enrollment limited

This seminar will visit the varying ecosystems of Kootzagwae (the Mono Basin) and Payahuunadü (Owens Valley) to learn about local natural history, regional environmental/ Indigenous-led movements, and ways to feel more connected to and grounded on the land. Activities may include hiking, birding, nature journaling, forest bathing, meditation, and community building. Whether it's your first time or your hundredth in the area, by the end of this seminar we will feel more confident and empowered to step beyond just recreation and into responsibility, while honoring each other's identities. This seminar is specifically designed for participants who self-identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

Geology of the Mono Basin

September 6–8 • Greg Stock
\$250 per person / \$235 for members
enrollment limited to 14 participants

From volcanic craters to glacial moraines, earthquake faults to tufa towers, the Mono Basin displays some of the most unique, spectacular, and accessible geology anywhere in the world. This seminar, consisting of field visits to the premier sites, will present in understandable fashion the geologic stories of the Mono Basin.



The brilliant hues of golden aspen leaves in fall make the perfect backdrop for a Field Seminar.

monolake.org/seminars or (760) 647-6595 to register

Natural History at the Edge of the Sierra

September 14 • Nora Livingston
\$145 per person / \$130 for members
enrollment limited to 8 participants

Natural history pays attention to all aspects of nature and widens our view when out in the forest or high desert. In this seminar, we will make our way up the east slope from Mono Lake to Tioga Pass, stopping at several locations to observe all that we find, which may include wildly colorful butterflies like the lustrous copper, hidden Sierra rein orchids in pristine meadows, and plenty of birds, from warblers to rosy-finches. This is the quintessential day in the field with a naturalist, where we will ponder the grandeur and the minutiae that envelop us in this amazing place.



Discover many of the unique and fascinating geological features of the region on the Geology of the Mono Basin Field Seminar.

Foraging in the Eastern Sierra

September 20–22 • Mia Andler
\$270 per person / \$255 for members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

Learn about the edible and useful plants of the Eastern Sierra in an active, multisensory, and fun way. This seminar is a hands-on course in plant identification and their uses. We will search for plants, cook some of what we find, make plant-based products, get creative with field journaling, and get closer to plants by practicing nature awareness techniques. While the seminar will focus on foraging in the Eastern Sierra, much of the knowledge participants will learn will help them forage in other areas too.

Geology of the Mono Basin

October 4–6 • Greg Stock
\$250 per person / \$235 for members
enrollment limited to 14 participants

See September 6–8 seminar description on page 20.

Mono Basin Fall Photography

October 11–13 • Robb Hirsch
\$350 per person / \$330 for members
enrollment limited to 10 participants

In autumn spectacular foliage and skies combine with exceptional light, presenting ample subject matter to photograph. Seminar participants will learn how to refine their own vision and best interpret it through the camera. Explore shoreline locations at sunrise and sunset, fall color in nearby canyons, and grand overviews of the Mono Basin.

Field Seminar Information

Please visit monolake.org/seminars to register for a Field Seminar, and see complete itineraries and cancellation and refund policies.

No pets are allowed on any Field Seminars. Please consider this in advance and find boarding accommodations for your pets or leave them at home; do not leave pets in your car during seminars. Service animals assisting people with disabilities are allowed on seminars and must be leashed.

Field Seminars are open to all, but Mono Lake Committee members may register early and receive discounts. All instructors are experts who have received high ratings from past seminar participants. We emphasize a spirit of learning and camaraderie in this magnificent outdoor setting for a reasonable cost. Proceeds from Field Seminars benefit research and education in the Mono Basin.

All Field Seminars and custom trips operate under Inyo National Forest and California State Parks permits.

Questions? Email fieldseminars@monolake.org or call us at (760) 647-6595.

Policy notes

by Elin Ljung & Bartshé Miller

Horse activity continues around Mono Lake

Wild horses were active last winter around Mono Lake, although fewer horses were observed along the south shore than during winter 2023, when approximately 200 horses ranged towards Rush Creek along the south shore of the lake.

The Inyo National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management are proposing to gather excess wild horses outside of the Montgomery Pass Wild Horse Territory in the Eastern Sierra, primarily in Mono County. The public comment period on the proposed gather project closed in December 2023.

As many as 570 wild horses have been counted outside of the territory along the east shore of Mono Lake, where they have significantly impacted wetlands, springs, vegetation, and wildlife habitat since the initial bands of animals first appeared in 2015. Highway collisions on Highway 120 East and Highway 6 are on the rise, causing safety concerns for motorists and horses, and there is growing concern that the horses will reach Highway 395. A draft environmental assessment on the proposed gather will likely be released this summer.

Owens Lake is a lake again

The huge snowpack that helped Mono Lake rise nearly five feet last year also



PHOTO COURTESY OF LARRY FREILICH

Record 2023 runoff caused Owens Lake to increase to a remarkable 26,600 acres in size, up from its typical size of 6,000 acres, making canoeing on the lake possible.

flooded into and partially refilled Owens Lake, 130 miles south of the Mono Basin.

Owens Lake dried up a century ago when Los Angeles diverted the Owens River into the aqueduct. Once 64,000 acres in size, the typical remnant is a highly saline brine pool of approximately 6,000 acres. The record snowpack produced inflow that caused the remnant pool to grow to a remarkable 26,600 acres. This expansion pushed water up against the inner edge of the berms that delineate DWP's extensive dust control systems, threatening the infrastructure DWP manages.

The reemergence of Owens Lake has been welcomed by many in the Owens

Valley, but not DWP. Over the past 25 years DWP has been required to install dust control measures across the dry lakebed such as gravel cover, vegetation, and shallow water across extensive bermed areas. The lake's growth impacted dust mitigation projects and required emergency work to enhance berms and otherwise protect pumps, pipelines, roads, and other infrastructure, requiring what DWP estimates to be at least \$100 million in preventative protective measures.

Of course, the lake itself could be a dust suppression measure; in fact, covering dust-emitting dry lakebed with a rising lake is the mandated solution to Mono Lake's air quality problems. However, at Owens, DWP runs dust control operations to support ongoing water diversions and does not plan to keep water in the lake. A DWP spokesperson told the *Los Angeles Times* that most of the water in the brine pool will evaporate by late fall this year.

The view of Owens Lake with water in it has been stunningly beautiful, a glimpse back in time to before the lake was dried up in the 1920s. Thousands of migratory birds have shown up to feed on brine shrimp that hatched from



RYAN GARRETT

Wild horses were active last winter around Mono Lake, although there were fewer than during winter 2023, when approximately 200 horses ranged westward along the south shore of the lake.

Continued on page 23



Richard Katz, seventh from right, at a 1993 press conference where Mayor Richard Riordan pledged to use \$36 million in State funds for new LA water supplies to save Mono Lake.

long-dormant cysts in the rewatered mud. People have been able to paddle watercraft on the lake, possibly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. However, under DWP's management, the Owens Lake of today is ephemeral.

New DWP Commission President and General Manager

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) Board of Commissioners is now led by Richard Katz, who was confirmed to the Board by the Los Angeles City Council in late March and subsequently elected as President.

Katz has worked in the public service sector for more than four decades, serving as a legislator, a member of the California State Water Resources Control Board, and on transportation boards, where he advocated for innovative water policy solutions and developed reliable transit systems focused on improving air quality and creating zero-emission mobility options.

Katz's 16-year career in the California State Assembly began in 1980 and included co-sponsorship of a bill that provided \$36 million to Los Angeles to be used to replace DWP water exports from the Mono Basin. When DWP and the Mono Lake Committee announced

together at a 1993 press conference their joint application for those funds it was a pivotal moment in the fight to save Mono Lake. The Committee looks forward to working with Katz on a new generation

of Mono Lake protection solutions.

DWP also has a new General Manager, Janisse Quiñones, who was selected by Mayor Karen Bass, appointed by the DWP Board of Commissioners, and confirmed by the LA City Council. She replaces Martin Adams, who retired after four years in the position and 40 years with DWP; he is now serving on the National Infrastructure Advisory Council, the result of an appointment by President Joe Biden.

Quiñones brings to DWP more than 25 years of experience in the utility and engineering industries, most recently in leadership positions at Pacific Gas & Electric and at San Diego Gas & Electric before that. She also serves as a commander in the US Coast Guard Reserves. The Mayor's office emphasized that Quiñones's skills and experience will be key in advancing DWP's goal of achieving 100% clean energy by 2035. ❖



New fee at June Lake Beach

The June Lake Beach day-use area will have a fee this summer—beachgoers will be charged \$10 per vehicle, with a \$50 season pass available. People staying in the adjacent campground who walk to the beach will not be charged.

The parking lot opens at 8:00AM daily. The lot closing time will

vary during the summer and fall seasons; find exact times at bit.ly/junelakebeachinfo.

The fee and parking lot hours are intended to improve safety after many years of increased use that has led to illegal parking, overflowing dumpsters and toilets, and access problems for emergency vehicles.

Los Angeles by environmental leader Mary Nichols, launched an effort by a coalition of the Committee and Los Angeles leaders to ask Mayor Karen Bass to, simply put, do the right thing for Mono Lake. The shared commitment to lake protection quickly generated a letter from a 32-member coalition that we sent to the Mayor prior to the April 1 lake level reading that confirmed the increase of the diversion maximum. The group includes leaders like Mark Gold and Ed Begley, Jr., community groups like Communities for a Better Environment, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, and Pacoima Beautiful, alongside groups like the Sierra Club, Los Angeles Waterkeeper, and LA Audubon.

Collectively we wrote to Mayor Bass in the letter: “We respectfully request that this year, your administration choose to not increase water diversions from Mono Lake.”

“There is a choice to make,” the letter continued, “and leaving diversion levels unchanged will help preserve the lake rise progress made last year.”

The letter highlighted that, “Under your leadership, Mono Lake diversions have not changed. Why risk Mono Lake impacts at this crucial moment with an increase? Coming off the very wet 2023 winter, water supplies are ample. Stormwater capture has increased, and per capita water use is falling, reflecting the successful conservation efforts of Angelenos.”

DWP’s draft plan to increase diversions

Every year, DWP develops an Annual Operations Plan for the Mono Basin. The plan is a requirement of the State Water Board, includes consultation with the Mono Lake



Mono Lake supporters catch up on the state of the lake and the streams, plus the decision facing Los Angeles about whether or not to increase diversions this year.

Committee, California Trout, and California Department of Fish & Wildlife during development, and states DWP’s plans for the year to export water out of the Mono Basin to the city. What better place to record a commitment to leave diversion levels unchanged?

The first draft of the 2024 plan says that diversions will increase up to the maximum allowed. DWP has resolutely taken the maximum amount of water allowed from the Mono Basin for decades, so the unfortunate draft plan is unsurprising; to say differently requires direction from DWP and Los Angeles leadership.

As of press time the Committee is aware of discussions at the leadership level about fulfilling the request to leave diversion levels unchanged.

Plenty of communication from the Committee and allies

Continued on page 25

Technical effort to reveal new Mono Lake level insights

In spring 2023, Mono Lake Committee and DWP leaders met with Los Angeles Deputy Mayor for Energy & Sustainability Nancy Sutley to discuss Mono Lake and the need to better identify the paths forward that raise the lake to the Public Trust lake level required in the City’s water rights.

The result: a collaborative hydrology modeling effort that launched last fall and has invested hundreds of hours of collective time in discussion, modeling, and analysis. The group recently reported back on the results of ten different stream diversion scenarios.

The informational report compares the performance of scenarios that range from continuing the same problematic

stream diversions of the past 30 years to fully pausing stream diversions. Additional scenarios include more than diversion volume adjustments. Diversion levels that vary between wet and dry years are part of the study, and of particular interest are dynamic diversion rules that adjust as the lake rises to lock in gains and avoid damaging declines in lake level.

Staff from the Committee, DWP, and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife conducted the modeling work, with the larger technical discussion group including the Mono Lake Kutzadika’a Tribe, California Trout, and the State Water Board. The Fall 2024 *Mono Lake Newsletter* will report on the results in detail.

continues to underscore the importance of making the right choice. And significantly, a May letter from the Mono Lake Kutzadika'a Tribe reiterated the call to not increase diversions, highlighting the importance of the action to the protection of Tribal cultural heritage and the Tribe's future.

What will LA's final plan be?

A final Mono Basin operations plan is due from DWP to the State Water Board in mid-May. The Committee and network of Mono Lake friends are working hard to ensure a firm commitment within the plan to leaving diversion levels unchanged. As of press time, the final decision is an open question.

The Committee continues to prepare for the hearing that will establish new multi-year rules governing stream diversions. Although the hearing date remains unknown, the

State Water Board has prioritized Mono Lake in its 2024 workplan, and preparations have begun. Additionally the Committee is working on the issue of DWP's failing aqueduct infrastructure at Grant Lake Reservoir (see page 8) which, if not addressed with a fast, smart plan, will hold back Rush Creek restoration for years.

We are optimistic about Los Angeles acting to not increase diversions this year, consistent with the long-established agreement to implement the State Water Board decision. However, if DWP submits a final plan stating it will increase diversions, then our work will intensify in the months prior to DWP opening the valves and physically moving water out of the Mono Basin. All in all, a very busy summer season lies ahead, and the Committee will continue to advocate for the right outcome for Mono Lake. ❖

Phalaropes from page 7

Lake Abert disappear as habitat." In other words, should those lakes be lost, Mono Lake will lose the Wilson's Phalaropes.

This is not the first time the Mono Lake Committee has supported listing of an endangered species at Mono Lake. The Mono Lake brine shrimp (*Artemia monica*) is an endemic species found nowhere else on earth, and in 1989 the USFWS began consideration for listing the brine shrimp in response to the tremendous impacts of water diversions on Mono Lake. The State Water Board in 1994 promised habitat protection

for the species by establishing the management level of 6,392 feet above sea level for the lake's health, pausing further USFWS action.

Without people calling for action, Mono Lake would today be far too salty to support brine shrimp and phalaropes. Instead, as we work to ensure Mono Lake's recovery, the annual presence of phalaropes shows that implementing real water solutions can meaningfully change the future for people, phalaropes, and saline lakes everywhere. ❖

Mono Basin OEC from page 11

District's Theodore Roosevelt High School, and ten-time trip leader, wrote of the approach taken by Outdoor Education Center Manager Santiago Escruceria and the education staff:

"When you arrive at the OEC you have an introduction circle meeting on the living room floor. Santiago gives each student a fun nickname that he uses the entire trip and sets the tone for the next five days. From there, the activities start—a night hike, canoeing on Mono Lake, swimming, mountain climbing, eating together, and working on stewardship projects together. The whole time Santiago and his staff talk to the students, asking questions, making them think and come up with answers. They talk about school, the importance of education, nature, animals, plants, water, maps, volcanoes, and the planet. They listen to the students and make them feel important. Through these experiences, inevitably, the students begin to think about setting goals for school, education, and life."

Generations of water leaders

The OEC programs have grown along with the success and evolution of water conservation programs throughout Los Angeles. In 1995, DWP leased the Mono Lake Committee a

single-family home to use as the program's base camp. The OEC has hosted more than 8,000 students from dozens of schools, environmental and social justice organizations, and community groups, primarily from Los Angeles.

After 30 years of OEC trips, the relationships between the Committee, students, and community groups have grown stronger. OEC students and leaders are advocating for Mono Lake—talking to city leadership and showing them that taking action to protect Mono Lake is also protecting their communities in LA. Others have migrated back to Lee Vining to work for the Committee and invest their energy at the northern end of the aqueduct. Currently, Information Center & Bookstore Assistant Dana Diaz and I are both OEC alumni working at the Committee.

When MELASI first ventured out to the wilds of the Mono Basin, it would have been hard for any of them to imagine what the program would become. When reflecting on this milestone for the OEC, Santiago's theme for the students this year is simple: "Let's reach 6,392 and build a sustainable future together." ❖

Staff migrations

by Elin Ljung

Summer brings some very fun staff migrations to the Mono Lake Committee—a dozen seasonal staff join us, bringing their enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to the office. If you visit, you'll encounter them introducing visitors to the Mono Basin on tours at South Tufa, County Park, Lundy Canyon, and by canoe on Mono Lake (see pages 16–17) or helping folks at the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore.

This spring we welcomed **Teri Tracy** back from Fort Collins, CO as Eastern Sierra Policy Coordinator as she also finishes her master's degree in environmental law. Her studies dovetail particularly well with the campaign to raise Mono Lake (see page 3) and Tribal Beneficial Uses designation efforts (see page 5).

We bid farewell to Office Coordinator **Anna Kristina Moseidjord**, who helped keep the office and Mono Basin Field Station running through the winter, into this year's research season, and through a major sewer line repair. Anna Kristina's partner, Facilities Assistant **Freeman George**, departed with her—we are grateful for his help keeping Committee buildings and grounds safe through the winter.

Information Center & Bookstore Assistant **Dana Diaz** arrived at the Committee from East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, a partner group in the Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center. Dana studied human biology and society at UCLA while promoting public health education in Los Angeles.

Karis Sabraw, Information Center & Bookstore Assistant, grew up visiting the Eastern Sierra from home in Southern California and worked for two summers in busy Yosemite Valley. Karis brings extensive retail experience to the Committee and is glad to be back in the mountains.

Juniper Bishop followed the spring blooms from the Owens Valley to return for a second summer as Canoe Coordinator. Juni's canoeing skills, naturalist experience, and welcoming presence will ensure that each visitor who books a tour will have a safe and fantastic time on the water.

Sophie Coyne, a recent graduate of Mount Holyoke College, arrived in the Mono Basin for their very first time to start this summer's Birding Intern position. Trading the lush forests of western Massachusetts for the sagebrush sea, Sophie is excited to learn a whole new group of birds.

Alkali Fly Research Technician **Liz Holte** joined us thanks to funding from the California Department of Fish & Wildlife. Liz is collecting data on Mono Lake's alkali flies; she is based at the Sierra Nevada Aquatic Research Laboratory south of Mammoth Lakes.



Experience Ambientalia students who will be going to Argentina this summer, including Mono Lake Interns Alden, second from left, and Diego, third from right.

Via Ruiz, Field Monitoring & Reporting Intern, is a student at Grossmont College who recently visited Mono Lake as part of a college field course. Via's experience with GIS mapping ecological disturbances along the San Diego River will be put to good use in the Mono Basin this summer.

Mono Lake Intern **BreeLynn Butler** grew up visiting the Bridgeport area with her family and is thrilled to be here for a whole summer. BreeLynn is pursuing a degree in wildlife management, ecology, and conservation from Cal Poly Humboldt with a minor in fisheries biology.

Chris Hamilton, Mono Lake Intern, is a student at California State University Monterey Bay who has worked as a climbing steward in Yosemite and Joshua Tree National Parks, as well as in Lee Vining at the Scenic Area Visitor Center bookstore. Chris is majoring in global studies and minoring in journalism.

Mono Lake Intern **Diego Murguia** graduated from Lee Vining High School this spring and is familiar to many staff from his friendly customer service at several local businesses. Diego is participating in the Experience Ambientalia program (see Winter & Spring 2024 *Mono Lake Newsletter*) and will be traveling with the group to Argentina this summer.

Alden Seiberling, Mono Lake Intern, also grew up here, graduated from Lee Vining High School this spring, and will be traveling to Argentina with the Experience Ambientalia program. Alden's lifelong love for and knowledge of the Mono Basin will be assets at the Committee this summer. ❖

Elin Ljung is the Committee's Communications Coordinator. Twenty years ago her time as a Mono Lake Intern changed her life and she's excited for this year's seasonal staff to have a great summer.



From the mailbag

News from members and friends

by Leslie Redman

Birds are singing, local flora is blooming, and it feels like life has been breathed into the Mono Basin once again. Even after a mild winter and spring, summer always seems to give the Eastern Sierra a jolt of vitality, bringing rising temperatures and a constant buzz of energy from animals and visitors returning to the area.

We're feeling the electricity of summer at the Mono Lake Committee as well. Our seasonal staff has joined us in Lee Vining, permanent staff is excited for the programs and field work to be done in the next few months, and we're all looking forward to another busy summer of education and stewardship in the Mono Basin. Thank you to everyone who contributed in honor or in memory of friends and loved ones. Your gifts make our work possible from season to season.

In honor

Joseph Barsugli of Boulder, CO donated in honor of **Dr. Linda Mearns**. **Kristina Berg** of Denver, CO gave a gift in honor of **Barbara Moulton**. **Bart & Debby Jones** of Cornwall Bridge, CT contributed in honor of Mono Lake Committee Project Specialist **Mara Krista Plato**. **Ernest Roiz** of Laguna Hills donated in honor of **Theresa Roiz**. **John & Ruth Shores** of Santa Clara gave a gift in honor of former Mono Lake Committee Executive Director **Frances Spivy-Weber** on the occasion of her 80th birthday. **Richard Sproul** of Santa Monica contributed in honor of **Mark Agnello**.

In memory

Katherine Adams of Los Angeles donated in memory of **Dan Hastings**.

Bob Austin of Napa gave a gift in memory of **Frank Fowles**. **Kelly Endow** of Concord, **Aron Thomas** of San Francisco, and **Craig Wiblemo** of Fallbrook contributed in memory of **Floria Artola Whipple**. **Sidney Felsen** of Los Angeles donated in memory of **Jack Waltman**. The **Ishizuka Family** of Carmel gave a gift in memory of **Richard Bucich**. **Donald Johanneck** of San Jose contributed in memory of **Beth Johanneck**. **Bob Mandel** of Alameda donated in memory of **Bill & Tanya Mandel**. **Michelle Neimann** and **Brad Rassler & Jane Grossman** of Reno, NV gave gifts in memory of **Valerie Cohen**.

Jeanne Oakeshott of Swall Meadows donated in memory of **Elaine Strathman**. **Susan Poirer-Klein** of Oakland gave a

gift in memory of **Charles Klein**. **Arnold Rabin** of Captain Cook, HI contributed in memory of **Ali Shahroody**. **Richard Roos-Collins** of Berkeley donated in memory of **Dr. Robert Collins & Mrs. Elizabeth Collins**. **Phyllis Smoyer** of Hockessin, DE gave a gift in memory of **Michael Colpo**. **Patricia Stone** of Villa Park contributed in memory of **James Stone**. **Linda Tate** of Long Beach donated in memory of **Floyd Smith**. **George Yamaoka** of San Jose gave a gift in memory of **Richard Brown**. ❖

Leslie Redman is the Committee's Membership Coordinator. She's looking forward to coffee on cool mornings, paddleboarding on hot afternoons, and running as far as her feet will take her this summer.



Signs of a rising lake—marshy ground and brackish lagoons—surround Mono Lake this year.



MONO LAKE COMMITTEE

Highway 395 at Third Street
Post Office Box 29
Lee Vining, CA 93541

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ST. CLOUD, MN
PERMIT NO. 2650

CANOE MONO LAKE



Reserve your seat on a weekend canoe tour at monolake.org/canoe.

Free Bird Tours



Sign up for weekend tours at
monolake.org/birdtour.

Free Mono Lake South Tufa Tours



Sign up for daily tours at
monolake.org/freetour.