

# Avian Ecology of the Mono Basin



**June 27–29, 2025 • David Wimpfheimer**

\$315 per person / \$300 for Mono Lake Committee members  
enrollment limited to 12 participants

The Mono Basin is one of the most diverse terrestrial ecosystems on the continent. This field seminar will be an overview of the varied habitats that are found here, from Mono Lake to young volcanic domes, to glacial canyons and subalpine meadows at tree line.

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. Not far from wonderful tufa towers we may encounter hundreds of phalaropes. A simple, but important food chain ties them to the trillions of brine shrimp in the lake. The tufa formations are just one geologic aspect of a wondrous basin that includes both the continent's oldest lake and its youngest mountain range.

We will enjoy the rich diversity of mammals, butterflies, wildflowers, trees, and other plants as we explore the Mono Basin, and a major focus of this seminar will be the identification and ecology of birds that breed here. In sagebrush meadows, 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. These are breeding sites for many birds, including Green-tailed Towhee, Sage Thrasher and Townsend's Solitaire; a major focus will be Mono Lake and other wetlands.

David Wimpfheimer has been educating people and interpreting birds and the natural history of California for over 30 years. His connection with and love for Mono Lake started with educational work for the Mono Lake Committee 1983 and continued as he rode in eleven Mono Lake Bike-A-

Thons. He has worked with groups such as the Smithsonian Institution, Point Reyes Field institute, Oceanic Society, Wild Wings, and Road Scholar. His seasoned focus and knowledge will make for an enjoyable and educational outing!

## **ITINERARY**

**Friday, June 27 at 2:00pm:** Meet in front of the Mono Lake Committee in Lee Vining. After introductions we will visit Lee Vining Canyon, a dramatic glacial carved expanse and other sites to explore the mixed forest ecosystem. Woodpeckers, swallows, and a variety of flycatchers are just some of the birds we'll discover in this zone. The diversity of conifers is quite rich here and a variety of shrubs and wildflowers will be our focus as well. We will end our afternoon field session by dinnertime. After dinner join David back at the Mono Lake Committee for a presentation on the habitats, wildlife, and birds of the Mono Basin.

**Saturday, June 28 at 7:00am:** Meet at the Mono Lake Committee in Lee Vining to carpool to South Tufa. From South Tufa we will make our way east to Navy Beach by 7:30am to join a Mono Lake Committee canoe tour for an hour on the water. Please bring plenty of drinking water and snacks. We will be back to shore by 9:15am. After canoeing the group will explore several habitats south of the lake. Sometimes overlooked, Panum Crater is a jewel in the basin. A short, but steep, sandy hike takes us to the top of this pumice and obsidian plug which is an excellent vantage point to discuss the amazing geological diversity of the basin. Mono Mills is an area rich in human history as well as a diverse mixture of sagebrush, bitterbrush, Jeffrey and pinyon pines. The nearby burn area here is a noteworthy study in ecological succession. Pinyon Jay and Red Crossbill are among the unique birds sometimes seen in this region. In the afternoon we may travel upstream along Rush Creek, stopping to look for birds and other wildlife and to discuss the ecological changes brought about by complete dewatering in the 1940s and the subsequent rewatering in the 1980s. We will end the day at approximately 4:00pm.

**Sunday, June 29 at 8:30am:** We will meet at the Mono Lake Committee and then caravan to different sites in the northern side of the Mono Basin. County Park, a rich riparian area along Mono Lake's shore, will be our first stop. Avocets and phalaropes are some of the birds that often feed along the shore here. DeChambeau Ranch is another unique spot, special both for its human and natural history. We will then begin a transect in elevation that will take us next to Lundy Canyon. The groves of aspen, pine, and fir here attract a variety of cavity nesting birds. The variety of chipmunks in these different habitats is also noteworthy. In the afternoon we will drive up to the subalpine habitat near Virginia Lakes. Wildflowers such as Elephant Heads or Corn Lilies can be especially dramatic here and we may find the elusive Gray-crowned Rosy Finch feeding on the edges of snowbanks. Each location displays a distinct variety of nesting birds, other wildlife and plant life. We will end the day at approximately 3:30 pm.

## **ACTIVITY LEVEL: DIFFICULT**

This seminar's activity level: *difficult*. We will be walking up to three miles a day at a leisurely pace, some of which will be over uneven terrain, off trail, and will include stepping up and over obstacles. This type of walking requires good balance, some agility, and stamina. Be prepared for short, steep sections of trail. We will be standing for several hours at a time while out in the field; some of that time may be in the sun without much shade. Participants must be able to sit down and get up out of a canoe.

## WEATHER & ALTITUDE

Temperatures in summer will be hot during the day and drop to chilly at night, with possible windy conditions and afternoon thunderstorms. Average temperatures in July in Lee Vining are 77°F (max) and 48°F (min).

This seminar will take place at elevations ranging from about 6,000 to 10,000 feet above sea level. It is a good idea to acclimate at the elevation of Lee Vining for at least 24 hours prior to the start of the seminar. Those with a history of heart, ear, or respiratory problems should consult their doctors before attending. Anyone restricted to lower elevations should not enroll. \*Note: If you have residual respiratory effects from having Covid-19, activities at altitude may be particularly difficult for you.

Remember to bring (and drink!) lots of water because your body loses more water at the higher altitudes of the Mono Basin. Begin drinking extra water as you drive to higher elevation in order to prevent dehydration and headaches. Also, the sun is intense at high elevations, capable of burning even on cool and cloudy days, so be sure to protect yourself thoroughly using sunscreen, sunglasses, and hat.

## TO BRING

- binoculars
- spotting scope
- notebook and pen/pencil
- field guide(s)
- appropriate field clothing: sturdy walking shoes, sun hat, sunglasses, warm layers, raingear, trekking poles (optional for Panum Crater)
- day pack including sunscreen, insect repellent, etc.
- packed lunch for each day, plenty of snacks
- plenty of drinking water

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Blackwell, Laird R. *Wildflowers of the Eastern Sierra & Adjoining Mojave Desert & Great Basin*. Lone Pine Publishing, 2002.
- Evens, Jules. *California Birdlife*. UC Press, Berkeley, 2005.
- Laws, John Muir. *The Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada*. Heyday Books, Berkeley, 2007.
- National Geographic Society. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Fifth Edition, 2006.
- Storer, Tracy, Robert Usinger, and David Lukas. *Sierra Nevada Natural History*. UC Press, Berkeley, 2004.
- Whitney, Stephen. *A Sierra Club Naturalist's Guide to the Sierra Nevada*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1979.



## Mono Lake Committee Field Seminars

P.O. Box 29 • Lee Vining, CA 93541 • (760) 647-6595 • [monolake.org/seminars](http://monolake.org/seminars)