

MONO LAKE

N E W S L E T T E R

Summer 2026



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This issue of the *Mono Lake Newsletter* feels to me like the whole Mono Lake story distilled into one publication.

It's a familiar story to anyone who knows Mono Lake. It starts with the lake ecosystem in peril, as the impacts to its health are accumulating after many decades of being kept too low (see page 3). The reason? The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power's ongoing diversions (page 4).

Next comes the regulatory agency with the power to require that more water reaches Mono Lake—the State Water Board—which is finally moving to reconsider the rules that govern DWP's water exports (page 5). The Board has a suite of hydrological and climate models to help inform how much water Mono Lake needs, all of which show positive signs for the lake's recovery if water diversions are paused (page 7).

The chapter about Los Angeles' increasing water resilience is both impressive and essential to the story—the city's water supplies are plentiful and advancing quickly to capture, store, and recycle more water than ever (page 11).

Some of the best parts of the story are the people who speak up for Mono Lake, time and again. People who wrote letters and made comments at the State Water Board meeting this spring (page 6). People like Marc Del Piero, who achieved the first real protection for the lake 32 years ago and continues to speak with the wisdom of long experience (page 8). People like Marina Castellino, who has built a program that amplifies the voices of young people working to protect the world's saline lakes (page 22).

As always, the story has a dash of hope. Look for it here and there—on the cover, in a headline, infused into our persistence for Mono Lake.

And if this issue of the *Newsletter* is like the Mono Lake story in miniature, that's good news. Because we already know what happens in this story—we save Mono Lake. Let's do it.

—Elin Ljung, Communications Coordinator



A hike to the Dana Plateau offers views of Mono Lake and Lee Vining Creek.

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.



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Continuing DWP diversions threaten Mono Lake's biodiversity

by Bartshé Miller

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) has diverted water from the Mono Basin for 85 years, and the impacts to the lake's ecological health are accumulating.

Diversions from Mono Lake's tributary streams have dramatically reduced the lake's elevation and volume, increased salinity, and created conditions that are disrupting ecosystem function and the food that supports nesting and migratory birds. In particular, these conditions are reducing the survival of California Gull chicks.

If this sounds like a repeat of a story from the early days of the effort to save Mono Lake, it is. But with the passage of time it has become worse, as the number of nesting gulls at Mono Lake has plummeted by two-thirds, and the productivity of the lake's ecological engine—phytoplankton and brine shrimp—is showing signs of stress and systemic dysfunction.

Declining numbers of gulls

Mono Lake's most iconic nesting bird species, the California Gull, is suffering an alarming decline. In 2024, California Gulls endured a near-complete nest failure at Mono Lake: Only an estimated 324 chicks fledged from an estimated 11,000 nests. According to Ryan Burnett, the lead California Gull researcher from Point Blue Conservation Science, "This total chick production is by far the lowest we have ever documented at Mono Lake." Fortunately, in 2025, the gulls avoided a similar catastrophe with an estimated 5,494 chicks fledging from 10,565 nests. While last year's rebound was a relief for the survival of gulls, it is well below the long-term average for reproductive success at the lake and it is part of a long-term, downward trend.

The number of nests counted in 2025 was the second lowest in the 43-year history of the study, and according



RUSS TAYLOR

The California Gull has nested at Mono Lake for millenia.

to Point Blue, "The 2025 breeding population represented a 67% reduction from the largest breeding population we have documented during our study of 32,488 nests in 1992." Gulls have suffered a range of impacts due to a low lake level, including coyote predation, swings in brine shrimp emergence and availability, and invasive weeds encroaching on their nesting habitat. The sum of these impacts can be traced to a legacy of continuing DWP diversions (see Summer 2025 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). Diversions have kept Mono Lake too low for too long, and the steep decline in the gulls' population indicates that neither Mono Lake nor its biodiversity are protected.

Chronically low lake level causes stratification and ecosystem stress

The physics and chemistry of an artificially low Mono Lake work against the timing and abundance of brine shrimp emergence, a critical source of food for nesting gulls as well as many other birds. The current low lake level and corresponding high salinity make the lake vulnerable to stratification after big precipitation and runoff years.

The lake's ecosystem responds positively to the water column mixing, or "turning over," each year, cycling nutrients upward from the bottom of the lake. However, when the lake is artificially low during a high runoff year, the big pulse of incoming freshwater mixes partially with the lake surface, but not with the deeper, more saline water below. The larger volume of less dense, less saline water caps the lake surface and impedes the lake's cycle of mixing. Nutrients get trapped in the deepest parts of the lake, initiating a cascade of detrimental ecosystem changes the following spring. Fewer nutrients in the water column limit phytoplankton growth, which limits brine shrimp abundance and changes hatch

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BARTSHE MILLER

Monitoring by researchers has detected a significant drop in the California Gull population at Mono Lake during the last four decades.

and growth timing. This, in turn, reduces the abundance and changes the timing of food for birds. According to the 2024 Mono Lake Limnological Monitoring Annual Report, “Six episodes of persistent stratification (meromixis) have occurred since 1982.” The report also says, “The recurring multi-year episodes of meromixis have introduced large variations in mixing and nutrient supply which complicate analysis of the effects of changing salinity associated with lake level management.” In other words, lake stratification is a disruptive, repetitive event—now unfortunately common—due to low lake volumes caused by nearly a century of DWP’s water diversions.

New signs of instability

What are the long-term impacts of repeated stratification events or persistently high salinities? While there are no simple answers, troubling signs of ecosystem disequilibrium are emerging. These include persistent and mysterious episodes of atypical algal abundance throughout the water column and a decline in brine shrimp size and egg productivity. According to the 2024 report, “...the long-term trend of decreasing female [brine shrimp] length and fecundity continues,” and, “The annual production of over-winter [eggs] was the lowest observed since calculations began in 1983.” More focused study might help to precisely unravel the complexities of these disturbing trends, but the trends have all occurred within the context of a lake that remains nine feet below what is required with no sustained progress toward higher elevations and reduced salinities.

There is a solution

How do you remedy the ecosystem stress at Mono Lake? Raise the lake to the mandated 6,392-foot level. Pausing diversions will increase the lake level and total lake volume, better protect nesting California Gulls, reduce salinity, improve ecosystem productivity, and make the lake resistant to multi-year stratifications that limit nutrient mixing.

An update to the diversion criteria to achieve a healthy, protected lake is long overdue. The current diversion criteria, now 32 years old, that allow DWP to divert water away from the lake, are not only failing to achieve a higher lake level, but are causing harm to the lake’s ecological health by blocking the most rapid path toward recovery. ❖



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOAQUIN BALDWIN

DWP’s diversions have created conditions in Mono Lake that are disrupting brine shrimp timing and abundance.

DWP continues diverting through spring

During a typical spring in the Mono Basin, the export of water to Los Angeles stops on March 31, the end of the runoff year, and water destined for Mono Lake is allowed to flow down the streams to the lake during the rest of the spring, summer, and early fall until DWP begins diverting again in October.

This spring, however, for the second year in a row, DWP never stopped exporting, departing from longstanding practice.

As this issue of the *Mono Lake Newsletter* goes to press, DWP is diverting water away from Mono Lake at a rate of 60 cubic feet per second and has already taken 4,500 acre-feet of water bound for Mono Lake during a season when that water is critically important for both the streams and the lake.

When visitors arrive at Mono Lake this year, it will be lower than if normal practice had been followed. Less water for Mono Lake also translates into lower amounts of water nourishing the Rush Creek corridor on the way to the lake, more dust-emitting shoreline left high and dry, and a quicker lake drop toward exposing the landbridge that endangers

California Gull nesting areas (see page 12). Given that DWP’s diversions have kept Mono Lake too low for too long, it’s adding an avoidable insult to injury this year to prevent the lake from rising as much as possible this summer. While the export is technically allowed, the resulting impacts underscore the need for the California State Water Resources Control Board to change the rules that govern water diversions.

DWP’s continuing spring diversions are especially egregious this year because they have caused downstream problems at Crowley Lake Reservoir, which (with the exception of 2024) was the fullest it had been in 56 years in early April—even impacting recreation access. The water is not critical to Los Angeles this summer either, as confirmed by DWP officials stating at an April 14 Board of Water & Power Commissioners meeting, “We have no concerns about water supply for this upcoming year.”

In sharp contrast, concerns about Mono Lake’s water supply are very real, and have been for the 85 years that DWP has been taking water from the Mono Basin.

Coming soon: A hearing on water diversions

Hydrology and climate models, low lake level get attention of State Water Board

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

In March the California State Water Resources Control Board focused on Mono Lake’s low level in a five-hour discussion at their regular meeting in Sacramento. The much-needed attention to the lake’s plight is due to the Board’s requirement for Mono Lake restoration being unfulfilled: The lake is nine feet below the Board’s required level and a decade overdue in achieving the mandated 6,392-foot surface elevation.

Despite the lake’s ailing situation, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) continues to maximize water diversions—every year.

For lake advocates it was an exciting day. After detailed discussion and extensive public comment supporting lake restoration, the meeting ended with all Board members agreeing that a formal, decision-making hearing about DWP water diversions is necessary, this year.

New analysis from UCLA

To analyze the low lake situation, the Board commissioned a new Mono Lake study and hydrology model from the UCLA Center for Climate Science (see page 7). The agenda item featured a briefing on the findings by project leaders Dr. Alex Hall and Dr. Benjamin Bass, who presented their work downscaling climate models to inform a Mono Basin hydrology model that projects future lake level response to water diversions.

The briefing provided the Board with three key insights.

1) The study found that while climate change is a factor, **ongoing DWP water diversions are the main cause** of the present-day low lake level.

2) The study also found that **current diversion levels “are**

unlikely to reliably restore and sustain” the lake.

3) And crucially, the study also found that **Mono Lake recovery is achievable if water diversions are reduced**—a clear opportunity for meaningful action by the Board.

A week later, in an article titled “L.A.’s drain on Mono Lake” the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the meeting and summed up the situation: “The researchers concluded that halting L.A.’s water exports would roughly double the likelihood of the lake reaching its target level within the next 20 years.”

All models concur

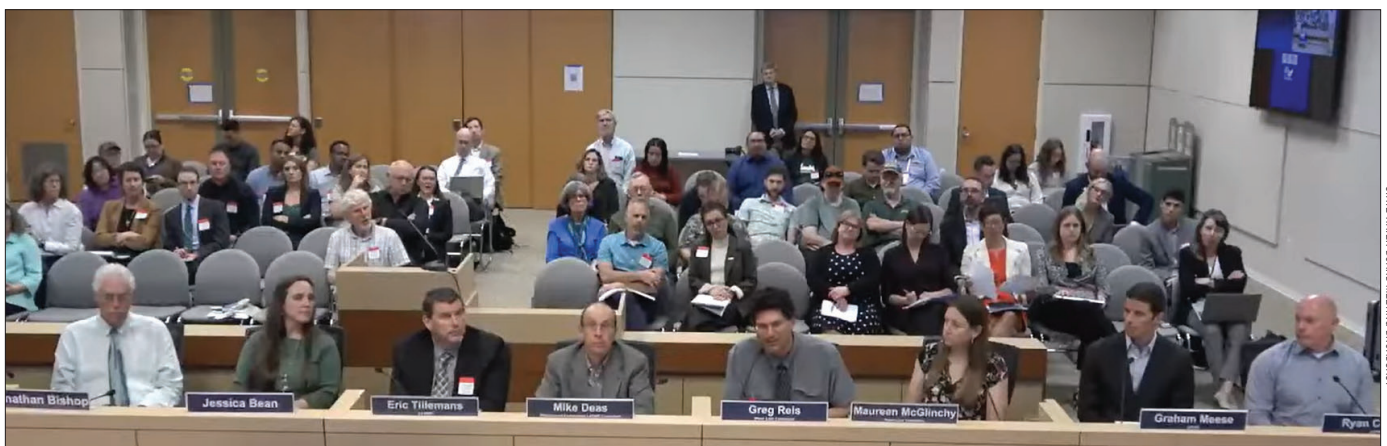
In the second part of the State Water Board meeting, Mono Lake Committee hydrology model experts Maureen McGlinchy and Greg Reis presented the Committee’s Vorster hydrologic model, which projects future lake level. The presentation was part of a panel discussion that also included DWP and California Department of Fish & Wildlife (DFW) technical experts, who explained their existing modeling tools. The takeaway: Future projections using the Vorster model, DWP’s model, and DFW’s model are consistent with the results UCLA reported.

Mono Lake restoration can be accomplished in the era of climate change if diversions are reduced. With multiple models—each using different methodologies—forming an ensemble analysis pointing in the same direction, the State Water Board has a solid foundation for action.

Tribe’s concerns heard

The Mono Lake Kootzaduka’a Tribe made a presentation describing the importance of Mono Lake as the cultural and spiritual center of the Tribe’s heritage. “We originate

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The State Water Board focused on Mono Lake during their regular meeting in March, receiving presentations about hydrology and climate models and hearing from dozens of commenters who urged them to take action so that Mono Lake can rise to its Public Trust lake level.

here,” shared a Tribal elder, explaining that the Tribe has been together with Mono Lake since time immemorial. The presentation highlighted concern about low lake levels and the resulting loss of abundance of alkali flies and pupae (a central traditional food resource) and toxic dust storms that harm the health of Tribal members who are at the lake.

Public call for action

The Board heard many calls for action to implement the existing, mandated plan and raise Mono Lake to restore its health. Six hundred letters called on them to take action in advance of the meeting. Forty-two people spoke at the meeting from a wide range of interested parties who, with the exception of four hired DWP consultants, unanimously called for urgent action from the Board. The diverse group included scientific experts, past State Water Board leaders, LA community members and DWP ratepayers, an LA business organization, agencies such as California State Parks and the California Air Resources Board, Tribal members, water policy experts, advocacy organizations, state legislators, local students, and saline lake experts calling in from as far as Argentina. The shared message: urgent, solution-oriented action from the Board is needed.

“We should have a hearing”

It was a moving series of presentations and comments, and Board members responded.

“I think we should be clear about it. I think we should have a hearing,” said Board member Sean Maguire. “We need a plan for moving forward and working with interested parties and the Tribe,” commented Board member Nichole Morgan. “I think we are long overdue,” said Board member Laurel Firestone.

All five Board members agreed. They directed staff to gather



All Board members confirmed that a Mono Lake hearing should happen this year.

necessary information and develop a hearing plan, with the goal of initiating the decision-making hearing before the end of the year. A formal hearing is the forum at which the Board can take action to reduce DWP diversion levels in order to ensure Mono Lake rises to the Board’s mandated healthy level.

“It is important that we keep making progress ... and prepare ourselves for a hearing that is efficient,” said Board Chair Joaquin Esquivel. “Mono Lake has a long history of hope,” said Vice Chair Dorene D’Adamo. “This is an opportunity for us to exercise leadership.” ❖

Video of the entire State Water Board meeting, including the eloquent and compelling comments, is available at monolake.org/march17swb, which provides a time-stamped guide to each speaker and presentation and links to the full UCLA report as well.

Workshops launched to evaluate lake condition

The State Water Board has announced a series of workshops, starting in June, to “collect information on the condition of Mono Basin’s public trust resources and evaluate potential management options.”

The first topics are lake limnology and ecosystem health, including salinity trends, problems with lake stratification, the status of brine shrimp and alkali flies, and the condition of the millions of migratory and nesting birds that rely on Mono Lake. Scientists who study these topics will make presentations and take questions. Additional workshops at the end of summer will cover topics including air quality, LA water resources, and diversion reduction options. The Board will hear input from the Mono Lake Kootzaduka’a Tribe

through a direct consultation process.

The workshops will be a status check on the Public Trust resources that have been damaged and impaired by 85 years of DWP water diversions. The information gathered will inform preparations for the State Water Board hearing on diversions.

Extensive scientific study supported the Board’s 1994 mandate for the lake to be managed at the 6,392-foot surface elevation, and the Committee expects the workshops will inform the Board of the situation we see daily: At present low lake levels chronic impacts continue, impairing ecosystem health, causing toxic dust storms, reducing food availability for nesting and migratory birds, threatening nesting grounds, and causing significant Tribal concerns.

Climate report offers hope for Mono Lake

A pause in diversions is the best route to the Public Trust lake level

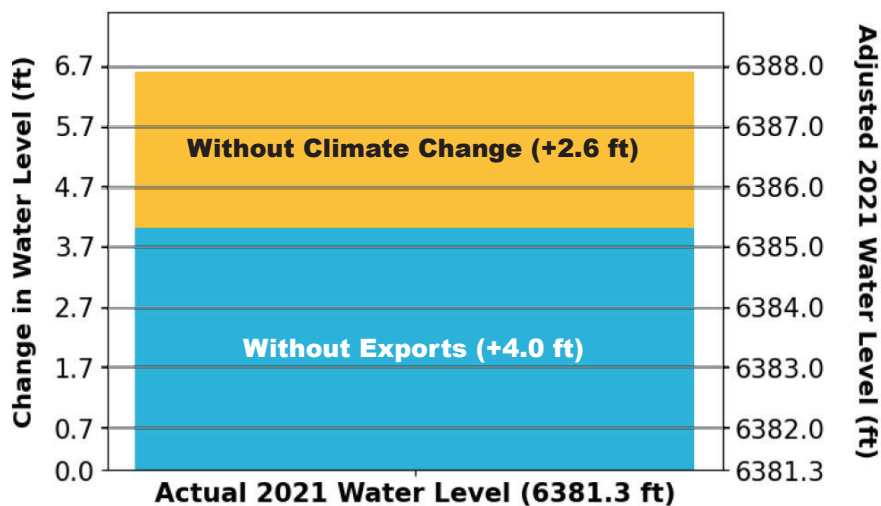
by Maureen McGlinchy

A report from UCLA released this spring, commissioned by the California State Water Resources Control Board, states that water diversions by the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) are the primary reason that Mono Lake is not at a higher elevation today. The report advises that reducing these diversions will give Mono Lake the best chance to rise to the mandated Public Trust lake level, even in the era of climate change.

Concern over Mono Lake's slow recovery led to the report. In February 2023, the State Water Board held a workshop to consider the problem of Mono Lake's chronically low level. In response to this discussion, Board staff contracted the UCLA Center for Climate Science to develop a hydrological model for the Mono Basin that incorporates current understanding of climate change in California. The scientists who developed the report are leaders in global and California climate modeling.

Model development and reporting spanned three years, and the UCLA scientists consulted experts at the Mono Lake Committee and DWP throughout the development process. In March 2026, the State Water Board released the UCLA Mono Lake Model final report. Two hundred pages of technical description can be boiled down to these takeaways:

1. Ongoing DWP water diversions are the major cause of the present-day low lake level. Why has Mono Lake been slow to recover since the 1994 decision to protect it? The UCLA model analysis contrasted the impact of the last 30 years of climate change with the nearly 400,000 acre-feet of streamwater diversions exported from the Mono Basin during this period. Results indicate that since 1994 diversions have had a 50% greater



This figure from the UCLA model report illustrates the impact of climate change (in yellow) and exports (in blue) on Mono Lake water levels between 1994 and 2021 by showing how much 2021 water levels would have changed in their absence.

impact on the state of the lake than changes in climate (see figure above). This finding disputes DWP's assertion that exports have a negligible impact on Mono Lake.

2. Current diversion criteria are unlikely to allow the lake to rise to the 6,392-foot Public Trust lake level. The UCLA model utilized 33 future climate projections to model Mono Lake rise over the coming decades. Under the current diversion rules, less than 40% of model runs reach 6,392 feet within 40 years. This result tracks with the observed lake level fluctuations over the past 30 years; lake level rise has stalled below 6,385 feet under the current diversion rules, with no net rise since 1999.

3. Mono Lake recovery is still achievable, even with climate change, if diversions are reduced. The percentage of successful model runs doubles when diversions are paused. Under every climate projection, the effect of diversions is evident, with increasing impacts over time. While pausing diversions is the most effective way to raise the lake, the UCLA model

report also outlines alternative diversion criteria that raise the lake while allowing some water export to LA, especially during critically dry years when LA's water supply is limited.

The UCLA model adds knowledge to the current ensemble of models used to evaluate Mono Lake's elevation. Importantly, the new model's results align with the conclusions of the existing models. Hydrology or climate models cannot predict future Mono Lake levels; however, when there is agreement between independently developed models, the conclusions are strengthened. In particular, the current Mono Lake models—and recent experience—agree that DWP diversions limit Mono Lake's rise and must be adjusted to protect Public Trust values. The UCLA model is the first Mono Lake model to incorporate future climate change and the report gives us confidence that saving Mono Lake remains in reach.

The full report, along with a user-friendly summary of key findings, are available at monolake.org/uclareport. ❖

Time to get tough and finish the Right Thing

by Marc Del Piero

Now is the time that all residents of California and the friends of Mono Lake need to rise up to convince the members of the State Water Resources Control Board to finish the anticipated restoration of Mono Lake and its tributary ecosystems by completing the contingent provisions and restoration requirements from Decision 1631. When the decision was handed down it was characterized as “doing the right thing.” Direct and unwavering supervision by the State Water Board itself is the only way to finish those requirements of that herculean water rights decision from the 1990s.

Twenty-two years ago, in 2004, Geoff McQuilkin, the Executive Director of the Mono Lake Committee, called and asked me to write the essay for that year’s Mono Lake Calendar. Although a decade had passed, the memories of the process that led to the Mono Lake Decision (D1631) were still fresh in the collective minds of those of us who had toiled throughout the 46 days and nights of evidentiary hearings in 1993–94. In my capacity as the Vice-Chair and Water Rights Hearing Officer of the State Water Resources Control Board, I had read every report and more than 1,000 evidentiary exhibits produced by every interested party, annotated the entire

Environmental Impact Report, and conducted the hearings from start to finish.

Now, as I write this prologue to the 2026 Calendar, I am once again filled with proud memories, thoughts, and emotions about a moment in time in California when things went remarkably “right.” I remember the expressed joy of Executive Director Martha Davis and Mono County Supervisor Andrea Lawrence on the day of the final Board hearing. But, I am also left wondering why, after more than three decades since D1631’s unanimous adoption by the Board, the current Board has not yet compelled the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) to increase the stream releases and decrease diversion flows so as to complete the restoration of the lake level to the surface elevation of 6,392 feet, which is called for in D1631. Of the multitude of parties to the D1631 hearings, not one “stakeholder/litigant” objected or filed appeals of the Board’s final decision (not even the senior management of DWP, which had spent tens of millions of taxpayers’ dollars on every conceivable study and report to try to oppose the reduction of its entitlements). Now, it is clearly time for the current State Water Board to finish doing the Right Thing.

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Blunt talk on the job of the State Water Board

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

Marc Del Piero was a notable commenter at the State Water Board’s March meeting (see page 6). Del Piero was a State Water Board member at the time of the 1994 Mono Lake decision and served as the hearing officer for the 46 days of testimony and examination that informed the decision, making him the Board member most deeply immersed in the Mono Lake issue.

Standing before the board this March, Del Piero spoke clearly and compellingly, laying out the job of the Board then, and now.

Protection of the Public Trust at Mono Lake is the law of the land, Del Piero pointed out. That’s what the 1994 decision is designed to accomplish.

Los Angeles’ water rights “are compromised if they don’t protect the Public Trust resources in the Mono Basin,” Del Piero stated. “It is [DWP’s] responsibility singularly,” he highlighted, citing multiple court decisions on the matter, concluding, “the responsibility is on the holder of the water rights to protect the Public Trust resources of this state.”

Yet DWP is not moderating its water diversions—in fact, the agency even broke a promise made by the mayor of Los Angeles rather than reduce water exports.

What happens if DWP doesn’t meet its responsibility? Del Piero put it starkly to the State Water Board members: “Frankly, it makes you guys the policemen.”

And what is the remedy? “You don’t cure the problems that exist within the Mono Basin with paper. The fact of the matter is you fix it with water. You add water to the lake—it’s that simple.”

Del Piero concluded by underscoring the deal that was struck in 1994: LA would get some water, and Mono Lake would be restored to the 6,392-foot Public Trust level as a public resource. “Today you have an unequal equation. [DWP] got the water it was promised. The citizens of the state of California didn’t get what they were promised. It is ultimately your responsibility to try and address that,” he told the Board. Indeed, it is.

Policy notes

by Geoffrey McQuilkin & Bartshé Miller

State Reserve boardwalk on replacement path

Summer visitors will have to wait a little longer before they can walk down to the lake from Mono Lake County Park after last year's Inn Fire destroyed the State Reserve boardwalk (see Fall 2025 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). The good news is that California State Park staff have identified funding for the new boardwalk materials, and purchasing plans are underway. The Mono Lake Committee is providing additional funding for two sections of the new boardwalk, including the observation deck near the lake. That funding comes from an earlier state grant that was extended to cover new boardwalk materials. Donations collected during the July 2025 boardwalk removal will also fund a portion of the boardwalk. While construction is still expected to begin after summer 2026, the date has not yet been scheduled.



Replacement of the State Reserve boardwalk at Mono Lake County Park will not happen until after summer this year.

a more formal overview of the current proposed project.

DWP also indicated that the aging rotovalve was evaluated by engineers and can now be used to provide a wider range of operational outlet flows before its eventual replacement, reversing a previous limitation imposed in 2024 and 2025.

Meanwhile, after 13 years, the clock is still ticking on the delayed restoration of Rush Creek as the much-needed improvements to Grant Lake Reservoir Dam are preventing the simple and reliable delivery of downstream flows to the recovering stream.

Grant Dam Project awaits regulatory input

This spring the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) submitted the Grant Lake Reservoir Dam Project work plan for approval by the California Division of Safety of Dams (DSOD). The plan involves a phased approach for the Siphons Outlet Project, which is needed to reliably deliver Stream Ecosystem Flows below the dam (see Winter & Spring 2026 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). Once approved, DWP has indicated it will engage the stream restoration parties (California Department of Fish & Wildlife, California Trout, and Mono Lake Committee) to share project details, answer questions, and provide



DWP submitted the Grant Lake Reservoir Dam Project work plan to state regulators this spring. Most of the project is necessary to repair aging infrastructure.

Major reorganization for USFS, uncertain impacts for the Mono Basin

The Trump Administration ordered a major restructuring of the US Forest Service this spring that involves closing every regional office in the country and replacing them with 15 state offices. Additionally, the plan will shutter 57 of the agency's 77 research stations, and move the national headquarters from Washington, DC to Salt Lake City, Utah. While there is a lot of news and speculation regarding the de-emphasis of science in managing the landscape for ecosystem health and wildfire, as well as the agency's capacity to carry out its mission, there's not yet enough information to understand how the reorganization will affect the Inyo National Forest and the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area.

The Inyo is already broadly understaffed due to workforce and budget reductions implemented in early 2025. However, Mono Lake District Ranger Stephanie Heller reported in April that the Inyo was moving forward with hiring five seasonal staff for the Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center as well as a wilderness ranger for the

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SANTIAGO M. ESCRUCERIA

A better future beyond imported water

One of the themes for the 2026 Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center (OEC) season is “building a sustainable California water future beyond imported water.” Not only is imported water environmentally destructive, but it is less reliable than local water, and increasingly unaffordable. Especially for students visiting from Los Angeles, there is a high level of interest in the environmental injustices in the Mono Lake story.

In 2019 the City of Los Angeles set a goal of sourcing 70% of its water locally by 2035, and progress has been made through investments in recycled water, stormwater capture, lawn removal, and home water efficiency programs.

This local water goal is deeply personal for our students—they want to be part of communities that protect ecosystems, and they want to be part of the changes and solutions that heal damage, not create more.

One of the ways we show OEC groups how much water Mono Lake needs to get to the healthy mandated lake level of 6,392 feet above sea level is by bringing a measuring stick down to the shoreline to see how much the lake needs to rise (see photo above). It really brings home the need for action—both in terms of water conservation and being vocal about supporting local water initiatives.

From April through November we will be seeing, learning, and discussing this theme as part of the watershed education programs with groups from Homeboy Industries, California State University–Northridge, Port of Los Angeles High School, Camp Cricket, Communities for a Better Environment, Southern California Crossroads, Torres East Los Angeles Performing Arts Magnet, Pacoima Beautiful, Kid City Hope Place, East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, One Generation, Dorsey High School, and more.

Thank you San Fernando Valley Audubon

Thanks to a grant from San Fernando Valley Audubon, we can sponsor ten groups with extra funds for food and transportation to help more students participate in the OEC program this year.

California Audubon is celebrating its 30-year anniversary, and Mono Lake is part of its legacy. In 1983, National Audubon, together with the Mono Lake Committee, sued the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP), arguing that the government has an obligation to protect Mono Lake under the Public Trust doctrine. This landmark case is a cornerstone of Mono Lake’s protection today.

We are grateful for the ongoing partnership with San Fernando Valley Audubon, and their support for the Outdoor Education Center so that more students have access to Mono Lake and the unique watershed education programs we offer.



SANTIAGO M. ESCRUCERIA



The mission of the Mono Lake Committee’s Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center 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.

monolake.org/oec facebook.com/mono.oec

SoCal water notes

by Arya Degenhardt, Elin Ljung, & Teri Tracy

Coalition pushes for a stronger LA water plan

A broad coalition of 20 organizations joined the Mono Lake Committee in a letter urging the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) to strengthen its draft 2025 Urban Water Management Plan (UWMP) to secure a more climate-resilient water future. The UWMP is legally required to be updated every five years and serves as the master plan for securing and managing DWP's water supply over the next 25 years.

The joint letter recognizes LA's substantial progress toward the goal of sourcing 70% of water locally by 2035 while pointing out that the draft UWMP overestimates how much water the city will need. Decades of declining water use, changing landscaping, conservation programs, rising water rates, and behavioral shifts mean demand will continue to fall over the next 25 years. DWP's water demand projection should be in the range of 380,000 acre-feet per year, not 476,000.

A notably wide range of groups supported the letter's recommendations, which include: removing the 2035 cap on water conservation savings programs, increasing water conservation incentive programs that support low-income customers, better alignment with the City's biodiversity goals, prioritizing nature-based climate solutions, providing metrics on stormwater capture, and planning for a future in which DWP reduces imported water supplies, including those from the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

The final 2025 UWMP is scheduled for completion and release in the next several months. See the letter at monolake.org/2025uwmp.

Abundant stormwater capture in LA

By mid-April, DWP had captured nearly 100,000 acre-feet of stormwater since October of last year, which



A rendering of LA's Tillman Water Reclamation Plant, which will supply the city with enough water to completely replace Mono Basin exports once its renovation is completed.

represents 20% of the city's annual need. Ten years ago, this would not have been possible. Stormwater capture capacity hovered around 60,000 acre-feet annually when DWP created its Stormwater Capture Master Plan in 2015. Capacity has been increasing since, with a target of 150,000 acre-feet by 2035.

In its draft 2025 UWMP, DWP stated, "Maximizing stormwater capture for groundwater recharge is a fundamental goal of the City's watershed management efforts." DWP has been improving centralized capture projects and further developing distributed capture projects such as parks and open spaces. Still, some water leaders in LA have cited concerns about capture improvements moving too slowly.

Even with this increased capacity, the majority of local LA stormwater runs off impervious surfaces such as concrete before flowing into the ocean, and often contributing to flooding. Interestingly, during wet years, DWP uses water from the Los Angeles Aqueduct to apply to spreading grounds in the San Fernando Valley.

Tillman water is key to LA's new climate plan

Construction continues at the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant in Van Nuys, where a new water recycling project will eventually yield 40,000 acre-feet of water annually (see Fall 2025 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). When the plant's expansion was approved in October 2025 by the Los Angeles Board of Water & Power Commissioners, then-President Richard Katz said the project will enable DWP to stop taking water from the Mono Basin. Katz later sent this recommendation to the California State Water Resources Control Board: Use DWP's new local water supply to meet the needs of Los Angeles and pause DWP's Mono Basin water diversions to meet the needs of Mono Lake (see Winter & Spring 2026 *Mono Lake Newsletter*).

The Tillman Plant was the site where, this spring, Mayor Bass announced a new plan for addressing climate change in Los Angeles. Many of the goals in the Climate Action Plan are energy-focused, such as increasing renewable

Continued on page 25

Streamwatch

Earliest runoff fills reservoirs, Dry-Normal I year forecasted

by Greg Reis

The unprecedented March heat wave resulted in an early start to snowmelt runoff and generated March streamflows that were the highest on record. On March 26, there was an early Rush Creek peak flow upstream of Grant Lake Reservoir of 172 cubic feet per second (cfs). Gem Lake Reservoir storage was the highest for April 1 since 2012, and releases contributed to the highest Rush Creek inflow to Grant on record for April. Grant spilled on April 6, the earliest date since 2011. The early melt of what was a normal snowpack offers a preview of

changed runoff timing in a warmer future under extreme climate change.

The April 1 snowpack measurements in the Rush Creek drainage were similar to last year. The runoff forecast for the Mono Basin is 73% of average, similar to last year's 69%, resulting in a Dry-Normal I year-type. Dry-Normal I does not have a minimum snowmelt peak flow requirement for Rush Creek; nonetheless, a peak flow produced from Grant spilling should be similar to or higher than last year's peak flow. Lee Vining Creek snowpack was much

lower, with the Saddlebag Lake snow survey measuring the fourth-lowest snowpack on record.

The Los Angeles Department of Water & Power's (DWP) exports are reducing the spill to Rush Creek. This year and last are the first times that DWP has reduced the spill during the peak snowmelt season—a major shift from the longstanding policy of maximizing Rush Creek peak flows. This reduction of beneficial high flows, even in drier years when they aren't required, further delays the ecological recovery of Rush Creek. ❖

Lakewatch

DWP accelerates Mono Lake's fall toward the California Gull danger zone

by Greg Reis

DWP plans to export 16,000 acre-feet of stream diversions from the Mono Basin during the 2026 runoff year and is already exporting at a rate unprecedented in over a decade: 4,500 acre-feet was exported as of press time. While this is permitted under its water rights licenses, the Committee has recommended that DWP should voluntarily invest this year's Mono Basin runoff in a higher Mono Lake level instead of exporting it to Los Angeles. Crowley Lake Reservoir storage was the highest it had been on April 1 in 56 years, with the exception of 2024.

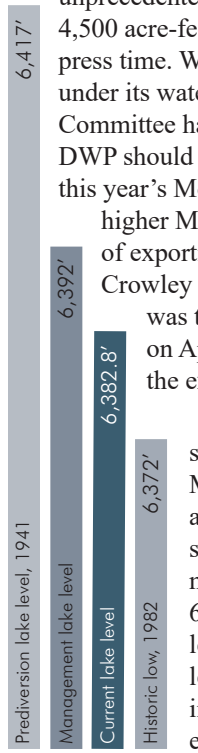
While LA's water supplies are secure, Mono Lake is too low and dropping when it should be rising to its management level of 6,392 feet above sea level. At the current level, high salinity impairs the lake's ecosystem and violates

the water quality standard that protects aquatic productivity. Additionally, the Mono Basin suffers from dust storms that violate air quality health standards.

Preserving lake level is critical this year, as Mono Lake—at 6,382.8 feet above sea level—remains well below the 6,392-foot management level that also provides drought protection. With continued exports and an ever-possible dry winter, Mono Lake could drop below 6,380 feet within two years. This critical threshold marks increased risk

of predator access to California Gull nesting islets. A two-year decline greater than 2.8 feet has happened three times in the last 14 years. Pausing just surface water export—with no reduction in the export of groundwater tapped by the Mono Craters Tunnel—would prevent that outcome. ❖

Greg Reis is the Committee's Information & Restoration Specialist. His family recently adopted a kitten.



DWP exporting water from Grant Lake Reservoir while it spills reduces the beneficial flows in Rush Creek and robs Mono Lake of that water's immediate benefit.

Mono Basin Journal

A roundup of quiet happenings at Mono Lake

by Geoffrey McQuilkin



GEORGE MCQUILKIN

The vast blue expanse of Mono Lake sprawls unexpectedly across tens of thousands of acres of volcanic sands and sagebrush terrain, creating an awe-inspiring view. The great size of the lake unavoidably captures one's attention; so too does the simple surprise of an inland sea nestled in a dry landscape.

Drivers on Highway 395 see the lake easily from the viewpoint just south of Conway Summit—water accentuated by a backdrop of dark green Jeffrey Pine forest and glowing peaks of the White Mountains. In town you can see the shimmering lake stretching to the eastern horizon, fed by Lee Vining Creek and its ribbon of recovering cottonwood and willow riparian habitat.

The view from the east, looking across the bright exposed lakebed to the deep blue salty lake, the black and white

islands, and the towering snowy peaks of the Sierra above, captivates and illuminates the question of the day: Why allow water diversions that force the lake to be so perilously low?

In March it was this view—projected onto ceiling-high screens—that hung over the members of the State Water Board as they contemplated this very question. After a full afternoon of technical and public evidence they called for a hearing that could well pause water diversions and put the lake back on the rise to health—an action that, if we can achieve it, will change the landscape for the better, from every point of view. ❖

Geoff McQuilkin is the Committee's Executive Director. He recently spent time sharing the Mono Lake story with leaders in Utah seeking to halt Great Salt Lake's decline and return Mono's sister lake to health.

Benchmarks



BARTSHE MILLER

On April 1, 2025, Committee staff read the lake level gauge, which showed Mono Lake was 6383.3 feet above sea level.



ANDREW VOUSSEF

In April 2026, after DWP maximized its diversions over the past year, Mono Lake stands half a foot lower at 6382.8 feet.

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-two years after the State Water Board’s historic decision, the lake is still nine feet short of the healthy management level because of DWP’s ongoing water diversions.



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 decreased water use 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 27, 2026 through September 7, 2026
- 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



GABRIELLE RENTERIA

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 at 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 while also advocating for better rules that will allow the lake to rise. 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



@monolake.org



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 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 and your voice will help convince decision makers to make sure lake restoration is accomplished.

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. ❖



EMILY LUND

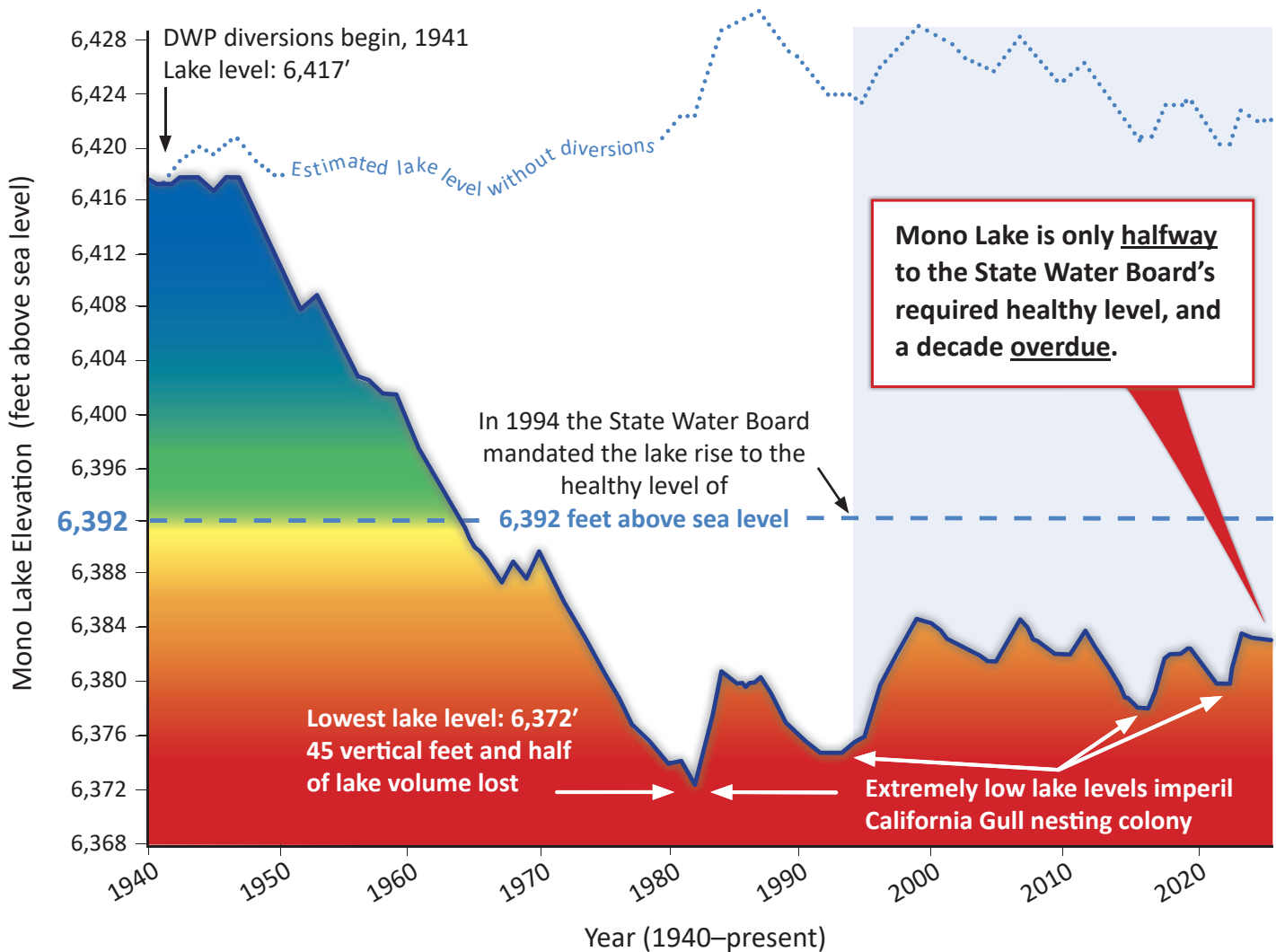
Free birding tours

- 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 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).

Mono Lake is in trouble

Mono Lake Surface Elevation



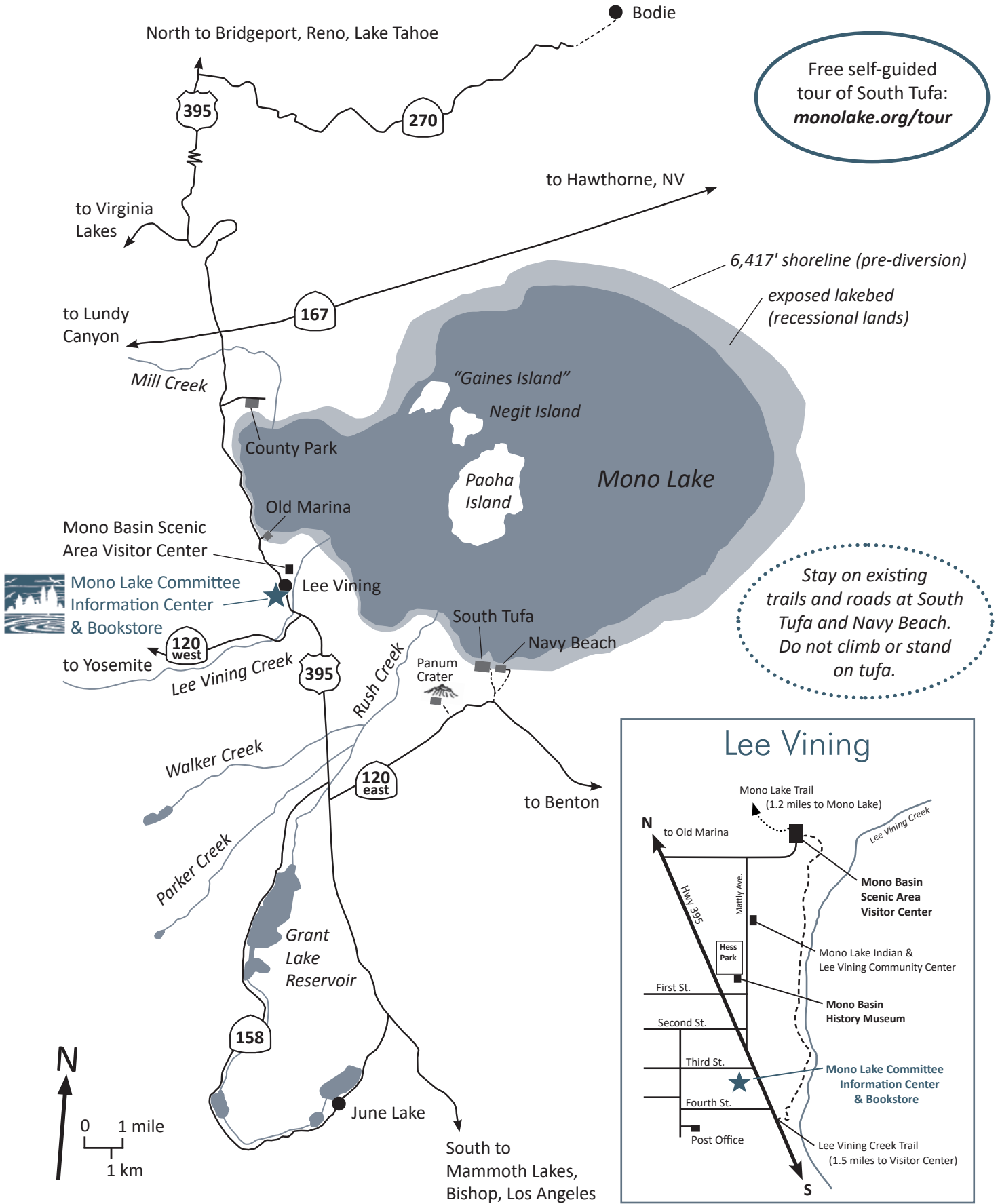
When the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power began excessive diversions from Mono Lake's tributary streams in 1941, the level of Mono Lake plummeted—falling 45 vertical feet, doubling in salinity, and pushing the unique ecosystem to the edge of collapse. Thirty-two years ago the Mono Lake Committee won major lake protections with the State Water Board, but today the lake is only halfway to the healthy level. The Committee is preparing for a hearing to modify stream diversions until the lake rises (see page 5).

DWP's water diversions threaten all aspects of Mono Lake's health. The solution is to let Mono Lake rise to the level mandated by the State Water Board. Visit monolake.org/rising to take action for Mono Lake.

SAVE MONO LAKE

Mono Lake Committee • Lee Vining, California • monolake.org

Mono Lake map



2026 Field Seminars



Avian Ecology of the Mono Basin

June 26–28 • David Wimpfheimer
\$345 per person / \$330 for members
enrollment limited to 12 participants

The Mono Basin is one of the most diverse ecosystems on the continent; this seminar will provide an overview of the varied habitats found here. We will first explore Mono Lake's shores and then proceed to higher elevation habitats. The major focus will be the identification and ecology of birds that breed here, and we will also enjoy a rich diversity of mammals, butterflies, wildflowers, and trees. In sagebrush meadows and riparian and conifer forests, the seminar 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.

Miwok-Paiute Basketry

July 10–12 • Lucy Parker, Dr. Julia Parker, & Ursula Jones
\$630 per person / \$605 for members
enrollment limited to 12 participants

During this seminar, participants will prepare materials and create a small Miwok-Paiute basket using a twining method.

Basket weaving requires time and desire, plus patience, especially with yourself, as you practice a new skill. Your instructors are excellent guides, and we encourage you come to this workshop open to learning about weaving and native cultures. Participants are encouraged (but not required) to camp with the group at a peaceful private group campsite near Lundy Canyon.

Botanizing the Basin: Exploring Mono Lake's Diverse Flora

July 17–19 • Steve Root
\$310 per person / \$295 for members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

The Mono Basin supports an exceptional diversity of plant communities shaped by extreme soils, strong elevation gradients, and a dynamic history of fire, volcanism, and hydrologic change. We will focus on learning to read the landscape through its plants by practicing plant identification using observable traits, simple keys, and pattern recognition. This seminar will emphasize understanding why plants grow where they do, building confidence with field identification, and developing practical skills that participants can apply beyond the Mono Basin.

Field Seminar registration opens in February each year, and many seminars fill quickly. Register or join a waitlist at monolake.org/seminars.

Mono Basin Landscape & Dark Sky Night Photography

July 17–19 • Jeff Sullivan & Lori Hibbett
\$410 per person / \$390 for members
enrollment limited to 10 participants

Summer is a special time in the Mono Basin with Sierra Nevada peaks catching morning alpenglow and afternoon cloud formations lighting up at sunset, often yielding to clear skies for Milky Way photography. This seminar will cover best practices for composing and capturing stunning landscape and night sky photographs. We'll also spend time learning how to anticipate and plan for great sunrise and sunset shots and how to use composition and light for greater impact in every photograph. When we're not out photographing in the field, we will have discussions and demonstrations on post-processing indoors to refine our skills.

Butterflies & Moths of the Eastern Sierra

July 24–26 • Paul Johnson
\$310 per person / \$295 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



HANNAH ASHBY

Learn about the fascinating natural history of the Mono Basin on a Field Seminar.

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 as they go about their lives in the darkness.

High Country Marvels: Wildlife with an Altitude

July 31–August 2 • Beth Pratt
\$310 per person / \$295 for members
enrollment limited to 10 participants

During hikes to elevations of up to 11,000 feet, we will learn about (and hopefully meet!) resilient creatures such as pikas, Yosemite toads, alpine butterflies, fairy shrimp, yellow-bellied marmots, Clark's nutcrackers, and more. In this survey of alpine life, we'll discuss the unique geologic and climatic influences that define the distinctive types of plants and animals that live in the Sierra high country and how climate change is impacting life at high altitudes.

Geology of the Mono Basin: Land of Fire & Ice

August 7–9 • Greg Stock
\$310 per person / \$295 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.

Traveling through Geologic Time in the Mono Basin

August 14–16 • Guleed Ali
\$310 per person / \$295 for members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

The Mono Basin is among the most dynamic geologic settings in North America, lying within an actively rifting basin where multiple processes converge. Lake waters reach extreme salinity and alkalinity with unusual rare-earth element chemistry. In this seminar, we'll discover how a once high-elevation plateau was dismantled and reshaped into a topographic sink, and then partially filled with sediment, pierced by magma from below, covered with glaciers above, and cut through or swept clean by streams and the lake at its center, Mono Lake.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHANIE HERRERA

Discover Mono Lake's aquatic habitats during Avian Ecology of the Mono Basin, which includes a guided canoe tour of the south shore.

Communing with Lands and Waters

August 21–23 • Bree Salazar
\$40–80 per person, sliding scale
enrollment limited

This seminar will visit the varying ecosystems of Kootzagwae (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).

Falling for the Migration: Bridgeport, Crowley, Mono

August 21–23 • Dave Shuford
\$310 per person / \$295 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 bird

life 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.

Lee Vining Creek Crawl

August 28–30 • Hannah Ashby
\$250 per person / \$235 for members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

In this field seminar, we will follow Lee Vining Creek, one of Mono Lake's tributary streams, to learn about the ecosystems surrounding the water as it drops 3,600 feet from its headwaters to Mono Lake, and the human interventions that have changed its course. As we meander our way to Mono Lake, we will discuss various perspectives through which moving water has been managed, appreciated, and utilized, while also learning about the flora and fauna that call the creek home.

Cuentos y Cantos al Desierto

September 4–6 • Blanca 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, animals, 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.

Natural History at the Edge of the Sierra

September 18–20 • Nora Livingston
\$310 per person / \$295 for members
enrollment limited to 14 participants

Natural history pays attention to all aspects of nature and widens our view whether 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 seminar in the field with a naturalist, where we will ponder the grandeur and the minutiae that envelop us in this amazing place.

Geology of the Mono Basin: Land of Fire & Ice

September 25–27 • Greg Stock
\$310 per person / \$295 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.

Fall Colors of the Mono Basin

October 10 • Hannah Ashby
\$185 per person / \$170 for members
enrollment limited to 15 participants

Fall in the Mono Basin brings a spectacular but fleeting display of color, making the “hunt” for fall colors an exciting one. In this one-day field seminar, we will learn about the science behind these brilliant displays and venture to local hotspots that give us the most dramatic shows of color with opportunities for birding, botanizing, art, and photography along the way.



Each fall, changing aspens light up the Mono Basin in brilliant hues.

ANDREW VOUSSEF

Field Seminar Information

Please visit monolake.org/seminars to register for a Field Seminar, join a waitlist, find complete itineraries, and see cancellation and refund policies. You can also join the Field Seminar email list for registration reminders.

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.

2026 Andrea Lawrence Award honors Marina Castellino

Experience Ambientalia youth leadership program connects Mono Lake, Laguna Mar Chiquita

by Elin Ljung

On a spring evening in early May, Eastern Sierra friends, community members, high school teachers, and local students gathered at Mammoth Mountain’s Parallax Restaurant to celebrate passionate engagement in community and the land, and this year’s Andrea Lawrence Award recipient, Marina Castellino.

Marina was chosen for the award for creating Experiencia Ambientalia, an international education program she founded at her home lake of Laguna Mar Chiquita in Argentina, that helps students learn about their local saline lakes, practice environmental stewardship, and connect with other saline lake communities across the Western Hemisphere.

Marina drew inspiration from her sister, a biologist who works with Wilson’s Phalaropes, small shorebirds that rely on several saline lakes through their incredible migration along the Pacific Flyway, including Laguna Mar Chiquita and Mono Lake.

In 2021, in response to declining habitat and increasing threats to Wilson’s Phalaropes, Marina, in partnership with Manomet and Fundación Líderes de Ansenanza, created the Experiencia Ambientalia program to promote conservation and sustainable development at Laguna Mar Chiquita by addressing the main threats facing the ecosystem through innovative, long-term solutions. Experiencia Ambientalia empowers young leaders of the region by providing training, stewardship opportunities, and the tools to design and implement projects with real impact on both the community and the ecosystem.

While the program was an immediate success in Argentina, Marina recognized that protecting the Wilson’s Phalarope meant protecting all the lakes along its migratory path. Her vision from the beginning was to have an Ambientalia chapter



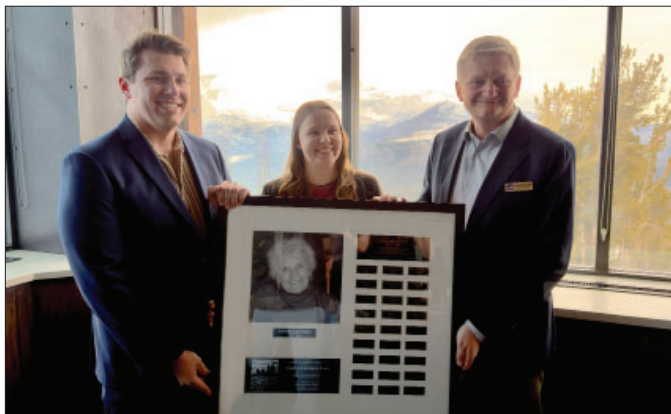
Experience Ambientalia students, teachers, and families at the dinner.

at every saline lake in the Western Hemisphere.

The Mono Lake Committee was the perfect fit for the program’s first expansion—when Marina brought her vision to Mono Lake she “set up a very shy little table at Chautauqua” and her program instantly resonated with our dreams of connecting with communities at Laguna Mar Chiquita. Together, and with support from local high school teacher Sarah Taylor, students, families, and community support, in 2023 the Committee launched Experience Ambientalia in the Eastern Sierra.

Marina’s acceptance speech was poignant: “This place holds a rare combination of passion, dedication, commitment, and love. You inspire me. You give me strength. From the beautiful family who made me one of their own, to the Mono Lake Committee staff, to the Rotary community, to generous supporters—this is an extraordinary community and I feel incredibly lucky to be part of it.”

“Mono Lake and Mar Chiquita now sit side by side in my heart. And while what I can offer may seem small, it comes with unwavering commitment: to care for both places, and to inspire future generations to love them as deeply as I do.” ❖



Award recipient Marina Castellino (center).

Andrea Lawrence was an environmental leader, an Olympic double gold medalist, and a mother of five, who tirelessly pursued a principled vision of how ecological integrity, economy, and community can thrive in a way that preserves the vitality of each and enhances the whole. Thank you to the Lawrence family and Mammoth Mountain Ski Area for making the Andrea Lawrence Award Dinner possible.

Mono Lake has always been an anthology of personal stories, “Old West” tales, human frailties, nefarious intrigue, and big personalities. It is a geologic history. It is a story of marginalized Native Americans (the Kootzaduka’a Tribe), anonymous explorers, and gold and silver miners (mostly failed and penniless) looking for one last strike. It is about legendary, greed-driven Southern California “city fathers,” land developers, and their avaricious engineers promoting urban growth and their own careers with water, taken without discussion, from other counties and landowners. It is about dried stream beds, dead birds, dead fish, and ignoring 19th century statutory protections for the once-abundant fisheries in the streams that Los Angeles dammed. It is a history of intellectual brilliance and shallow-minded egos, “old boy” backslapping and political backstabbing, mythic audacity, and persistent vigilance.

It is this political intrigue that continues to compel the attention of all Californians. And it is this history that has allowed past members of the State Water Board to demonstrate the political backbone and bravery that is necessary to definitively right past environmental mistakes that were spawned by that intrigue.

In the case of the State Water Board water rights hearings, that process began in the late 1970s with the establishment of the Mono Lake Committee by the prophetic David and Sally Gaines. Then, the lake level was dropping like a stone, the tributary streams were dry, PM-10 air pollution in the basin was among the worst in the entire country, the lake’s environmental habitats and migratory bird populations had been virtually wiped out by DWP’s engineering decisions, and the original fisheries (as definitively documented by state fisheries biologist Elden Vestal) had been sacrificed on DWP’s altar of urban sprawl. The litigation filed by the Mono Lake Committee and others forced open the doors of the previously closed state water rights review process.

The National Audubon Decision by the California Supreme Court in 1983 began to change the environmental devastation that had resulted from the decades of failed leadership and disingenuous stewardship by DWP over the Mono Basin’s environmental resources. DWP’s then-management had acted like a slumlord over the Public Trust resources, the fisheries, the air quality, and stream habitats in the Mono Basin. The stranglehold that previously had been exercised by the non-elected engineers of DWP was further weakened by the CalTrout I and II decisions (1989) from the California Court of Appeals. Those decisions identified and mandated the criteria and process for ecosystems, water rights, and Public Trust hearings and restorations in the Mono Basin.

And finally, the cascade of bipartisan efforts to restore the Mono Basin and its Public Trust resources reached a new summit with the adoption of the State Water Board’s D1631 decision. CAL-EPA Secretary Jim Strock was massively supportive of our efforts. 125 sworn witnesses presented testimony, and 17 attorneys conducted weeks of direct and cross examinations in the Bonderson Building Hearing Room.

Importantly, D1631 was the work of a crew of our most dedicated State Water Board staff. Led by the late and brilliant Jim Canaday, a Senior Environmental Scientist, the team was composed of Steve Herrera, Rich Satkowski, Hugh Smith, and attorney Dan Frink, and they became like family.

Throughout the hearings that I conducted, those staff members were both selfless and dedicated to the revealing of the facts and evidentiary truths about the conditions within the Mono Basin, and what was needed to restore the Public Trust resources after 50 years of governmental neglect. They were always there. They pored over brilliant academic studies and legal briefs by Bruce Dodge, Patrick Flynn, Virginia Cahill, Scott Stine, Mary Scoonover, Richard Roos-Collins, and Peter Vorster for nearly a year. They sacrificed weekends and holidays with their families over the ensuing seven months after the hearings to complete a task that many in the “water industry” of California believed would never happen. Decision 1631 was and is their product. It is their gift to the citizens of California, their “affirmation of the duty of the state to protect the people’s common heritage in our streams, lakes, and tidelands.” Their efforts are legendary. They were and are my heroes.

Still, the completed and sustainable restoration of the Public Trust resources of the Mono Basin as conceptualized by the unanimous decision of the State Water Board in D1631 has not yet been realized. In spite of the regenerated riparian habitats on Rush and Lee Vining creeks, and the sustainable brown trout fisheries that have now grown in the streambeds that DWP had de-watered, and the somewhat reduced PM-10 air pollution, Mono Lake has not yet been allowed to reach the targeted 6,392-foot level. In spite of over three decades, and hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of snowmelt, and in spite of the sincere promises of Los Angeles Mayors and City Councilpersons and members of the DWP governing board, the non-elected staff of the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power has not complied with the restoration of the lake level that was established and accepted unanimously by EVERY interested litigant that appeared before the State Water Board between 1992 and 1994. So, now is the time for the current Board members to finish doing the Right Thing. Now is the time for them to demand “Why has it not been done?” NOW, RIGHT NOW, is the time for a new generation of heroes to Save Mono Lake. ❖

Born and raised in Monterey County and the fourth-generation son of a California farming family, Marc Del Piero served as the Attorney Member of the California State Water Resources Control Board from 1992 to 1999. He also served in the California Army National Guard and on the Monterey County Board of Supervisors and was an Adjunct Professor of Water Law at Santa Clara University School of Law. Marc is married to Tina Tomlinson Del Piero, and has two sons, Paul and John. Editor’s note: Each year we ask a writer to contribute to the Mono Lake Calendar—this essay appears in the 2026 calendar.

Hoover Wilderness, positions that have long been deprioritized and unfilled. The Committee and other partners have helped staff the Scenic Area Visitor Center to keep the doors open with past seasonal hire limitations.

Gold mining activity increases on the Mono Basin's horizon

Several exploratory gold mining projects are moving forward in the Bodie Hills northeast of Mono Lake. If the exploratory projects are successful in finding sufficient gold deposits, the exploratory mines could expand into larger operations and be highly visible from the Mono Basin. Future exploratory drilling and mining could create significant impacts in the Bodie Hills in the vicinity of East Brawley Peak, Mt. Hicks, and along the California-Nevada border around the historic ghost town of Aurora. Within these mining project areas there are potential impacts to Bi-state Sage Grouse, mule deer, pinyon woodlands, water resources, and scenic viewsheds. One of the projects, the Polaris Exploration Project, was approved by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and involves up to 250 proposed drill sites over ten years. Seven

proposed drill sites are on top of East Brawley Peak. New changes to the federal NEPA regulations have reduced the opportunities for the public to comment, and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest made a “finding of no significant impact” on the Polaris Project, which means it is proceeding.

Farewell Kathy Bancroft

Kathy Jefferson Bancroft passed away on January 25, 2026. A member of the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Tribe, and for many years the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Kathy envisioned a protected Patsiata (Owens Lake), inspired generations of water leaders, and held the line on DWP's misuse and export of water from Payahuunadü. Tributes to Kathy's impact came from far and wide; one wrote: “Kathy carries Paiute memory like water—moving through dry channels, naming old shorelines, insisting that the lake is never empty, only unheard.” She was quick with a smile, laughter, and a story revealing her long knowledge of the pain and promise of caring deeply for a region so severely damaged by water extraction. She will be missed. ❖

Counting California's biodiverse habitats: Does Mono Lake qualify?

In 2023, California initiated a bold conservation program to protect 30% of the state's lands and coastal waters by 2030. Known as “30x30,” the state's goal is for the areas on the list to be sustainably managed to protect California's biodiversity. Those protections must be legally enforceable, ecologically functional, and resilient over time.

Mono Lake was an early entry on the 30x30 list of lands and waters essential to saving our state's biodiversity. Critical to millions of migratory and nesting birds including phalaropes, grebes, and gulls, Mono Lake is a link in bird migration chains from the Arctic tundra to Laguna Mar Chiquita, Argentina, and from the Pacific Coast to Great Salt Lake, Utah. Mono Lake's designation as a site of international significance in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network showcases its irreplaceable biodiversity value.

But what about Mono Lake's protection status? The State Water Board's 1994 ruling that DWP must raise the lake to an elevation of 6,392 feet above sea level to maintain a healthy ecosystem was recognized as one of California's first “nature-based” water policy decisions. The State Water Board identified an array of critical Public Trust and biodiversity resources to be protected by 2014 at the 6,392-foot lake level, including core lake ecological productivity, the California Gull nesting colony, wetland habitats, and dust storm

elimination consistent with Clean Air Act requirements. The Board recognized the exceptional ecological importance of Mono Lake by designating it an Outstanding National Resource Water, the highest level of protection possible under the Clean Water Act. The designation prohibits degradation of water quality, such as salinity increases resulting from water diversions.

More than thirty years later, Mono Lake is nine feet below the State Water Board's mandated level and the ecosystem is showing signs of severe strain—with declining lake productivity, alarmingly low California Gull reproduction, and dust storms violating PM-10 air quality standards for decades. Can Mono Lake be considered durably protected and count toward the State's 30x30 goals if the lake is not rising to the healthy mandated level?

The State Water Board is reviewing Mono Lake's poor condition and there will soon be a critical opportunity when it initiates a formal decision-making hearing to consider reducing DWP water diversions (see page 5). It's time to ensure Mono Lake is durably protected as intended by the State Water Board in 1994 and envisioned by the State's 30x30 commitment to preserve California's biodiversity for the future.

energy, converting transportation infrastructure to electric and sustainable fuel, and decreasing oil and gas extraction and use.

Progress on water is also included in the plan's objectives, notably sourcing 70% of LA's water locally and reducing average per-person water use by 25% by 2035. This is both wise planning, as local water sources are more sustainable and reliable than distant sources like water from the Eastern Sierra, and good news for Mono Lake, which will hopefully benefit from these goals. The Tillman Plant expansion can help make them happen.

DWP leadership change

DWP's CEO Janisse Quiñones left the job in late March, returning to her home of Puerto Rico to lead modernization of the island's electrical grid. Quiñones' two-year tenure at DWP was highlighted by the city's successful transition away from coal-powered electricity but shadowed by criticism about water distribution and pressure hindering firefighting efforts during the Palisades Fire in January 2025.

Notably for Mono Lake, Quiñones was the latest in a long line of DWP executives who failed to reduce water diversions from the Mono Basin, despite being directed to do so by Mayor Karen Bass in 2024.

Mayor Bass named David W. Hanson as Interim General Manager. Hanson has worked at DWP for more than 20 years in a variety of roles, primarily in power operations. He will now have a chance to "advance local water supply development," as Allan Marks, President of the Board of Water & Power Commissioners remarked upon Hanson's appointment. A search process for a permanent DWP leader has not yet been announced.

Los Angeles Environmental Justice Water Network Convening

In April, the Committee's Outdoor Education Center Manager Santiago Escruceria participated in the Environmental Justice Water Network Convening co-hosted by Better World Group and Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE). More than 30 organizations came together in Los Angeles to forge deeper connections and build power around water justice issues. Together, attendees identified and co-created advocacy opportunities to support climate-resilient water projects, like DWP's Pure Water LA, the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation & Parks' South LA Wetlands, and Accelerate Resilience LA's DepaveLA project. These projects will help shift Los Angeles' water to more local and sustainable sources, reducing the need for extractive, imported waters, like those from Mono Lake.

Santiago joined Ruth Andrade (SCOPE Water Academy Leader), Dayana Molina (Community Organizer), Angela Mooney D'Arcy (Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples Executive Director), and Pastor Eddie Anderson (Partnership for Growth LA Chief Executive Officer) to share water stories and highlight throughlines between interconnected water and environmental justice campaigns led and supported by local community, Tribal, and faith-based organizations. Santiago shared the Committee's 48-year history of grassroots, community-led advocacy to protect Mono Lake and the urgent need for Angeleno support for saving Mono Lake. ❖



PHOTO COURTESY OF BETTER WORLD GROUP

The Committee's Outdoor Education Center Manager Santiago Escruceria (far left) took part in the Environmental Justice Water Network Convening in LA, a forum for sharing stories and throughlines between interconnected water and environmental justice campaigns.

Staff migrations

by Teri Tracy

After a busy winter and spring preparing for State Water Board meetings, we welcome a cohort of seasonal staff at an exciting time for the Mono Lake Committee. After an initial, intensive training, this group has a robust schedule of canoe tours, South Tufa and bird tours, engaging with visitors at the Information Center & Bookstore, working on special projects, and supporting field seminars.

Thank you, Anna Christensen

From Executive Director Geoff McQuilkin: **Anna Christensen** has been a Mono Lake leader for eight years as the Committee's Philanthropy & Operations Director, strengthening the organization in countless ways and enabling us to confidently pursue our mission at a critical time. Anna has headed to new adventures in Southern California, where she will be leading a philanthropy team at Pomona College and returning to a familiar family spot.

I greatly value Anna's partnership and wisdom and the Committee's efforts for Mono Lake have benefited significantly from her leadership. Anna's dedication and skills have kept core operations running for the Committee, including her notable ability to anticipate and solve problems before they become, well, big problems. She has deepened meaningful connections with our dedicated longtime members and brought order to the Committee's essential housing and Mono Basin Field Station facilities. Anna identified strategic opportunities of all kinds, ranging from staff member growth to thriving hemispheric programs like the Experience Ambientalia youth leadership exchange with our sister lake in Argentina.

Recently we gathered at the shore of Mono Lake to celebrate Anna and share a toast: from hiring to training to direct mail to supervising to volunteer support, to international relations to insurance to donor stewardship to Field Station management to events—Anna did it all while helping each of us learn and grow in working to achieve the Committee's lofty goals. Thank you, Anna, for consistently supporting the whole team and the Mono Lake effort with generosity, heart, and humor.

A strong seasonal staff team

Judith Goddard returns to the Committee as a part-time Senior Information Center & Bookstore Assistant. Judith provides continuity and invaluable organizational support to enhance and improve member and visitor experience.

Monica Potter, Information Center & Bookstore Assistant, is a current University of Central Missouri student studying Wildlife and Natural Resources Conservation. She worked in Yosemite Valley last year, managing visitor

interactions with black bears. She loves the Eastern Sierra and teaching the public about conservation.

Victor Ulloa-Reyes, Information Center & Bookstore Assistant, is nearing completion of his master's degree in Chicana/o Studies at California State University, Northridge. His experience participating in the Mono Basin Outdoor Education Center program in 2022 inspired his graduate school journey and his return to the Mono Basin to work with the Committee.

Roni Schacker first came to the Mono Basin in 2025 for a college course through the University of California, Santa Cruz. After birding in the area and learning about the internship program, Roni returns as the Committee's Birding Intern with her Environmental Studies degree in hand.

This season's Alkali Fly Research Technician, **Jessilyn Lee**, came to the Mono Basin after graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a degree in Ecology and Evolution. She is gathering data on Mono Lake's alkali flies and contributing to a multi-decade dataset.

Holding a degree in Marine Biology, **Annakate Clemons** is an experienced kayaker, naturalist, and educator. We're fortunate she is spending this summer back at home in the Eastern Sierra as a Mono Lake Intern before beginning a master's program in Coastal Science and Policy at UC Santa Cruz.

A recent graduate of California State University, Stanislaus in Communication Studies, Mono Lake Intern **Stephanie DeCavit** is putting her degree into action leading interpretive programs and following her passion for protecting the natural environment. Her previous experience interning with Yosemite Rivers Alliance helped her hit the ground running at Mono Lake.

Having worked as a summer research fellow in the Mono

Continued on page 27



Arya, Andrew, Anna, and Geoff at the gathering to thank Anna and send her off in style.



From the mailbag

News from members and friends

by Leslie Redman

Wildflowers are blooming and migratory birds have returned to the sagebrush lowlands and the woods in the high country. After a mild winter and some much-needed spring storms, summer has returned to breathe life back into the Mono Basin. Thank you to all who have given a gift in memory or in honor of loved ones and friends. Your contributions help make our work to protect this special place possible.

In honor

Pam Griffey of Dixon gave a gift in honor of **Lily Mathieu**. **Christina Watson** of Los Alamitos donated in honor of **Dianna Reynolds**. **Bradlee Welton** of Richmond made a contribution in honor of **Richard Roos-Collins**.

In memory

Patricia Akins and **Irene & David Turner** of Rancho Palos Verdes, **Janice Davis** of Glen Ellen, and **Susan Nakatsukasa** of Gardena gave gifts in memory of **Gary Nofziger**. **Jane Askin** of Bishop donated in memory of **Bil Askin**. **Thomas Cerny** of Sunnyvale made a contribution in memory of **Judith Cerny**. **Kathleen & Jim Clarke** of San Francisco gave a gift in memory of **Janet “JB” Barth**.

Maria Couglin of Santa Clara donated in memory of **Ruth Shores**. **Roberta Harlan** of Bishop made a contribution in memory of **Shirley Campini**. **Peggy Lodes** of Hayward gave a gift in memory of **David Lodes**. **Karen Melarkey** of Reno, NV donated

in memory of **Bertha LeMond**. **Margaret Muench** of Santa Clara made a contribution in memory of **Ruth Norris**. **Ann Olmsted** of Palo Alto gave a gift in memory of **Franklin Olmsted**. **Anne Prescott** of Los Altos donated in memory of **Holly Warner**. **Sarah Rabkin** of Soquel made a contribution in memory of **Chuck Atkinson**.

Sondra Sharee & Bill Fitzgerald of Truckee and **Gretchen Whisenand** of Santa Rosa gave a gift in memory of **Dr. Harrison “Hap” Dunning**. **Arthur Sorrell** of Auburn donated in

memory of **Yukiko Sorrell**. **Elizabeth & John Swallow** made a contribution in memory of **Bill Dickey**. **John Turmes** of Lakewood gave a gift in memory of **Martha Meade**. **Sherrill Van Sickle** of Palmdale donated in memory of **Ann Van Sickle**. **Sandra Valdez** of Rio Vista made a contribution in memory of **Virginia & Elton MacDonald**. ❖

Leslie Redman is the Committee's Membership Coordinator. After four years with the Committee, she has begun birding in earnest. She figures it was bound to happen eventually.



Staff migrations from page 26

Basin in 2025, **Sophia Heffner** returns as a Mono Lake Intern. She graduated in May from Scripps College with a double major in Organizational Studies and Environmental Analysis and is particularly interested in environmental law and policy.

New college graduate **Iris Mahony-Moyer** brings both her

degree in Environmental Science and Management from Cal Poly Humboldt and her experience working for California State Parks to her Mono Lake Intern position this summer.

Diego Murguia is in his second year at UC Davis majoring in History and exploring a minor in Paleobiology and brings a wealth of experience to the

Committee and the Mono Basin with his third season as a Mono Lake Intern.

Jonah Rosen-Bloom arrives as a Mono Lake Intern with a degree in Geology from Whitman College and a keen interest in many facets of the Mono Basin's ecosystem and cultural and policy history. ❖



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