AN OVERVIEW OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITATS AT THE SALTON SEA

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Regardless of its history, there is no denying the sea's ecological importance today. Birdlife is rich at the Salton Sea, perhaps as rich as it is anywhere. The region has hosted just over 400 species of birds, more than have been recorded in many U.S. states. A quarter of the species breed locally, many of them waterbird species that do not breed elsewhere in the interior of western North America. Yet however impressive the species count is, it is the sheer abundance of birds in the region that makes one take pause. From the Everglades of Florida to the Mai Po marshes of Hong Kong to the Pantanal of Brazil, there are few places on the globe that support as many birds as does the Salton Sea. Whether millions of Eared Grebes staging during migration, hundreds of thousands of gulls wintering, or ten of thousands of egrets, herons, and cormorants breeding, the spectacle of birds dotting the water and sky can be breathtaking. Besides providing a haven for waterbirds in an intensely arid region, the sea also provides a modicum of relief, toward a balancing of the ledger, for the loss of wetlands in California, which is estimated at over 90% since Europeans settled.

The tepid water is hypersaline, being several times saltier than the ocean, though it is less salty at the mouths of the rivers and major drains, leading to greater bird diversity in those areas.

Populations of shrimp, regularly stocked through the 1940s, probably persist, providing food for numerous waterbirds. The sea is also home to the Acorn Barnacle, a particularly visible and abundant aquatic invertebrate. Despite being first recorded at the sea in 1944, its shells now form a substantial amount of shoreline habitat, including beaches, spits, and islets that provide nest, roost, and forage sites for shorebirds, gulls, terns, and skimmers. Lastly, a species of pile worm first noted at the sea in the 1960s has increased sharply, enough to become the principal food for the millions of Eared Grebes passing through each year.

Vegetation in the Salton Sink can be divided into eight principal formations or types, five of them native. Such divisions are artificial, as vegetation communities grade into one another; nonetheless, naming them provides convenient shorthand for discussing avian habitats. Habitats modified or created by humans constitute the last three "vegetation formations"; although such formations are artificial, each provides habitat for numerous species, as does the open water of the Salton Sea.

1. Aquatic vegetation. Truly aquatic plants are poorly represented in the Salton Sink, duckweed being the only prevalent representative. This formation occurs sparingly on fresh-water marshes, and in some ditches with sufficiently clear water, but provides important habitat for foraging dabbling ducks.