

Stepping Up for Birds

by Michael J. Parr

I've often heard people say that when habitat is destroyed, birds will just "move elsewhere." But where is elsewhere exactly? In reality, suitable "elsewhere" habitat is either already occupied by other birds of the same species — or it isn't actually suitable in the first place. Shorebirds can't live in forests. Warblers don't exist on mudflats. Imagine if this was about your home. "They'll just move somewhere else." You live where you live because you like it. Or maybe because it's where you need to live. It suits you. That's true for birds, too. Home is where the habitat is.

ABC recently joined a lawsuit that aims to compel the State of Utah to stop water diversions from the Great Salt Lake, which is currently on track to dry up within just a few years unless something changes. Of all the places I can think of that fit the concept of "there's no 'elsewhere' habitat," the Great Salt Lake is perhaps the best example.

If you have not visited yet, I strongly recommend it, and especially during fall migration. The number of migratory birds that use the lake is staggering.

One late-summer day 10 years ago, as I drove across the causeway to Antelope Island just after arriving in Salt Lake City, a large flock of shorebirds passed across the road in front of me. I'm used to seeing large flocks of Dunlin and Western Sandpipers, and I was fully expecting this group to be one of those two species. But then, I put my binoculars on them and realized that they were all Red-necked Phalaropes. By far the most I had ever seen in one place. It didn't take me long to figure out that the lake was full of thousands of these phalaropes.



— and Habitat



It was obvious, too, that a hatching of brine flies was underway. The flies were so abundant along the lakeshore that they almost seemed to move like a liquid as we walked among them — being pushed away from our shoes in waves. These flies are extremely nutritious for birds, and it is amazing to see hundreds of Franklin's Gulls feeding almost like baleen whales — by opening their bills and running along the shoreline scooping up dozens of the harmless flies in each gulp.

ABC is quite reluctant to engage in legal action. In fact, one of ABC's operating principles states that "ABC strives to be respectful and thoughtful with everyone, including with opponents, listening to all sides of an issue and considering the views of others even when they are in opposition to ABC's own." But we also don't back down from tough fights, and once in a while, this leads us into court. The Great Salt Lake is such a case. There really isn't an "elsewhere" for the 10 million phalaropes, Eared Grebes, American White Pelicans, Marbled Godwits, American Avocets, Franklin's Gulls, and other species that depend on the lake for their very survival.

All across ABC's programs, our team works day in and day out to ensure that birds can continue to use the habitat they depend on. Most of this work involves us purchasing habitat for protected areas — in Latin America for example; working with landowners, partner organizations, and agencies to ensure that land is better managed for birds across the United States; and once in a while stepping up and addressing habitat conservation through the courts. Whatever the need that birds have, ABC is there — and will continue to be with your support.

Thank you for all your help. It's the difference between habitat providing a real home for birds and birds being forced to an "elsewhere" that really doesn't exist.

Michael J. Parr, President
American Bird Conservancy



LEFT: Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes as far as the eye can see on the Great Salt Lake. TOP: Franklin's Gull feeding on brine flies. Photos by Mia McPherson, onthewingphotography.com.

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ON the WIRE



Why We Sued to Protect the Great Salt Lake (Hint: It's Vital for Birds)

In September, ABC joined a lawsuit with Earthjustice, Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment, Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, and Utah Rivers Council that seeks more water for the Great Salt Lake. The environmental groups are asking the court to direct Utah's leaders to implement meaningful solutions that will provide enough water to the lake for the people and wildlife that depend on it. (See ABC President Michael J. Parr's essay on the suit on the previous pages.)

The lake is among the most important shorebird and waterfowl sites in North America, annually providing food and habitat for more than 10 million migratory birds. Here are facts about the 300-plus bird species that rely on the lake and its biodiverse surroundings:

- The lake hosts the world's largest concentration of Wilson's Phalaropes, representing over a third of the world population.
- It is home to as many as 5 million Eared Grebes, at times 50 to 90

percent of the North American population.

- It hosts as many as 20 percent of the continent's population of Snowy Plovers.
- It is the only staging area in the U.S. interior for Marbled Godwits.
- It's one of the most important breeding grounds for American White Pelicans and American Avocets.
- And it's one of the most significant wintering sites for Bald Eagles.

When the surface of the lake is below 4,198 feet in elevation, many of its islands become connected to the mainland, allowing predators and other species to reach the islands and disturb nesting sites for birds, resulting in significant bird mortality. (In November 2022, the lake hit a record low of 4,188 feet, and in September of this year, it stood at 4,192 feet despite a record-breaking snow year.)

Already, the decline in water levels has affected American White Pelicans. Close to 20,000 pelicans

once nested at Gunnison Island in the lake, but with predators increasingly gaining access via a land bridge, only half have been stopping at the lake in recent years.

Likewise, the disappearance of Farmington Bay in the lake's southeastern corner has led to a decline in the American Avocet population at the lake, which, at its peak, had been as high as 250,000 individuals. The numbers of many duck species that nest or migrate at the lake — including the Redhead and Common Goldeneye — have also fallen as their food sources have died off. Further, the disappearance of Bear River Bay has harmed pelicans, avocets, American Wigeons, and Northern Pintails.

"We can't afford to have this significant body of water turn into dust," said Parr. "Water management decisions need to prioritize both water quantity and water quality while balancing the needs of birds, people, and local economies."

Phalaropes on the Great Salt Lake. Photo by Mia McPherson, onthewingphotography.com

