

PREDATORS

Waiting for Water

The drought plaguing California's Mono Lake has created a more immediate threat to its bird colonies: coyotes.

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

IN LATE SEPTEMBER GEOFF McQuilkin knelt on the gray alkali crust on the shore of Mono Lake, scowling at an image of a coyote caught by a camera trap. The stealthy predator was dangerously close to the lake's volcanic isles, which host one of the largest California Gull rookeries in the world.

Most years the mile-wide moat between the shoreline and the atolls is enough to keep the birds safe. Yet five consecutive drought years and an arid El Niño have left this ancient sea on the eastern edge of Yosemite National Park at its lowest level in two decades. If the water drops another foot (a likely outcome over the next season) it threatens to expose multiple landbridges, putting the eggs and chicks of roughly 45,000 nesting California Gulls within scarring range of coyotes.

It's a tricky situation, acknowledges McQuilkin, executive director of the Mono Lake Committee—a nonprofit formed to protect the region's unique ecosystem. "Coyotes are not the enemy," he says, "but no one wants to see the gull colonies decimated." Kristie Nelson, who studies the species for the wildlife-research group Point Blue Conservation Science, notes that a single coyote could wipe out hundreds or thousands of nests packed onto each yacht-sized islet. That's what happened in 1979, when an invasion caused entire gull colonies to abandon ship, limiting breeding counts for at least three seasons.

To keep the carnivores at bay, McQuilkin and state officials who manage the land are designing a fence that would emit a low-voltage jolt. The four-foot-high, mile-wide barrier will be longer,

more strategic, and more shocking than previous ones, which were either erected after the coyotes already caught wind of the birds or couldn't weather the salty environment. The new installation is set for early 2017, before gulls begin nesting.

Even if the plan works, the basic predicament at Mono Lake isn't predators eating prey: It's the loss of water. And while a fence can't fix the drought itself, it's one way something can be done, says McQuilkin. After decades of grass-roots action to save the lake, with its eerie tufa towers and haunting vistas, he's planning for the worst, hoping for the best. **A**

WATCHDOGS

A camera trap recorded coyotes prowling near the Mono Lake landbridge.

COURTESY OF MONO LAKE COMMITTEE

