West Coast Marshes Are Drowning, But There’s Still Time to Save Their Birds

In the next 100 years, sea level rise will overtake Pacific coast marshes. Here’s how conservationists plan to keep endangered marsh birds afloat.

By Hannah Waters audubon.org
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Karen Thorne has grown used to expressions of stunned shock whenever she gives a talk. It simply comes with the territory, the U.S. Geological Survey ecologist says, of informing hundreds of coastal wildlife managers that, in 100 years time, the places they care for will be underwater.

In her new study, the most detailed sea level rise projections yet for Pacific coast marshes, that apprehension melts away. Published last week in Science Advances, the new work examines how rising waters will alter the ecology at 14 marshes, from Seattle in the north to Tijuana in the south, at 10-year intervals throughout the next century. Like other reports on sea level rise, it predicts dire results by 2110, as rising waters inundate all coastal marshes in California and Oregon, and most of those in Washington. However, there’s a silver lining: It also finds that sea level rise will progress slowly until 2050. That gives today’s managers enough time to prepare marshes, and their birds, for the changes to come.

“It’s breaking down this monster problem into something that’s manageable,” she says. “You actually have 40 to 50 years to see what we can do. It gives people hope and motivates them to figure this out.”

At Seal Beach National Wildlife Refuge near Los Angeles, managers have come up with an interesting solution to the problem. Like around San Francisco Bay, the land surrounding the refuge is urban and developed; not only does this prevent the marshes from moving inland as sea levels rise, but any rails that flee the floodwaters end up in the city, where they’re readily caught by house cats and other predators. So, around 10 years ago, managers there built floating platforms and, during high tides, rails jump up onto them to stay dry. “It’s a short term-strategy, but it’s a great strategy,” Thorne says, and one that could be easily replicated elsewhere.

These changes should help rail populations now, and over the next couple of decades. But additional restoration and management will be needed after that. “That’s the reason we’ve taken so much time and money and partnered with Audubon to enhance this particular marsh,” Marriott says. “We will have helped keep these guys alive in the initial stages of climate change and sea level rise.” In a few decades, she’ll pass off this work to the next cohort of refuge managers, who will use improved climate models to get the birds over the next hump of adaptation.

This sort of work will be necessary to maintain marshes up and down California’s coast, according to the new study. Even assuming that sea level rise is moderate (around three feet), by 2110 most California marshes will have no dry areas, or will convert entirely to mudflats. Under high sea level rise (nearly four feet), all California marshes and some in southern Oregon will become open water permanently, with no tidal activity to speak of. Land managers now have a framework with which to work on mitigating future flooding.

KIDS SPACE

Our annual fundraiser is coming up, the Conservation Award and Dinner. Proceeds fund our general meeting speaker program and placement of Audubon Adventures into classrooms and afterschool STEM programs. This past year, we funded placing a set of binoculars into one of these programs, and they have been a great hit with the kids. Would you like to sponsor AA in a classroom for $40 or binoculars for $100? We are looking for community partners to spread conservation education to our youth. We welcome your participation.

Audubon

We are a chapter of National Audubon
Mailing address:
Whittier Area Audubon
PO Box 548
Whittier, CA 90608-0548

Field Trip Schedule:
Every second Saturday of the month
(except July and August,

March 10, 2018 8:00am Sycamore
Canyon Beginning Bird Walks
Meet at the Sycamore Canyon
Trailhead. The trail is located adjacent
to Rose Hills Cemetery gate 17. DO
NOT BE LATE. The gate opens and
locks punctually. Expect to park on the
street. Please check our website for
updates.

Rain or recent rain cancels the Canyon
walk, but we will choose another
location) Leader TBD.

Overnight trip to Taft
Saturday March 17 to Sunday
Mar 18. Carrizo Plain
Leader Jay Oberholtzer
The Carrizo Plain is about 100 air
miles north of Los Angeles near the
communities of Taft and Maricopa.
The area is officially known as the
Carrizo Plain National Monument. It
is home to Pronghorn Antelope, Tule
Elk and, of great interest to us, many
species of birds. Past trips have
found Sandhill Cranes, Golden
Eagles, Prairie Falcons, Long-billed
Curlew, Mountain Bluebirds,
Loggerhead Shrikes and many
others. The Carrizo Plain is also the
best area in the State to view the
effects of the San Andreas Fault.
This trip is very dependent upon the
amount of rainfall that occurs. The
past years of drought followed by
last year’s deluge offer a mixed bag
of possibilities

I will make a scouting run the
weekend before to see the condition
of the Plain. Depending on that
result, we may re-direct our plans.
Watch the website. Be sure to let
me know that you are coming,
preferably by email. That way I can
be sure of letting you know of any
changes.

We will be going up on Friday night
(March 18) and spending Friday and
Saturday nights in Taft. Saturday will
be spent on the Plain. There will be
a wine and cheese party Saturday
night. We will check out Sunday
morning and depart eastward to
either the Tule Elk Reserve State
Park or the Buena Vista Aquatic
Recreation Area and head home on
Interstate 5. Of course, you are free
to depart whenever you need to. Be
sure to bring your lunches for
Saturday and Sunday and lots of
water, a hat and sunscreen. Please
arrange to car pool. The fewer cars
the better while birding on the Plain.
I have made arrangements to stay at
the Holland Inn and Suites, 531
Warren Street, Taft.
661.763.5211. They probably will
not have room for all of us, so you
may have to stay at one of the other
motels in town. We will meet at the
parking lot of Holland Inn and Suites
on Saturday morning, March 19,
2016 and leave at 7:00 a.m. If you
are joining us, please let me know.
Jay Oberholtzer 562-945-2838
(offi ce) or email at
tvulture@earthlink.net.

FIELD TRIP REPORT
February’s field trip found our
intrepid group boarding the Eagle
Barge on Silverwood Lake. The
weather was crisp and clear and
perfect for birding. The barge tour
allowed us to spot various groups of
waterfowl, but no eagles. We did
spot an Osprey towards the end of
the water portion of the day.

Once back on land, we followed the
shore around to the Inlet/Outtake
towers (depends on if you’re a lake
person, or a water supplier). The

bird of the day was Lewis’
Woodpecker. They were everywhere
in the picnic areas and
campgrounds. We also saw many
Phainopepla, Scrub Jays, Red-
breasted and –naped Sapsuckers,
Oak Titmouse, Bewick’s Wren,
Wrentit, California Thrasher, White-
crowned and Golden-crowned
Sparrows, Fox Sparrow, a Great
Blue Heron rookery with 8 herons.
After a lunch break, we crossed
back over 138 and birded the group
campgrounds along the creek.
There we lucked into a feeding flock
that included Lawrence’s Goldfinch
and Western Bluebirds.