

The Salton Sea Persists: *A Photography Destination*



In the beginning, a giant sea shimmered in the harsh desert sunlight...

Eons ago, with the help of the formidable San Andreas Fault and other Southern California fractures, a geologic “trough” sank 227 feet below sea level and the Salton Sink was born. Its topography supported a giant body of water fed with salt water from the Gulf of California, fresh water from the mighty Colorado River and cradled by desert mountain ranges in their infancy. It reached inland one hundred miles, northwest to the area we know today as Palm Springs, covering most of Imperial County, encroaching on Riverside County.

Ancient Lake Cahuilla [kuh-wee-uh], as the sea is called, acquired its name from North American inhabitants who thrived on native fish thousands of years ago. They lived along the fluctuating shoreline where marshy wetlands hosted an abundance of wildlife. But nothing stays the same. Gradual, repeated flooding by the Colorado River deposited sediments along the lake’s southern border leaving a land barrier, isolating the giant sea. Now, a terminal, inland lake, Ancient Lake Cahuilla was at the mercy of the fickle Colorado.

Once again, the river changed course away from the lake, and without fresh water to sustain historic levels, evaporation took its toll leaving behind a waterless basin. The last of four natural recorded dry spells were from 1540 to 1905.

By the late 1800’s, settlers moving west discovered the fertile soils of the Salton Sink and ambitious men built irrigation canals stretching from the Colorado River to fields and farms where water was needed for freshly planted crops. Soon again, silt from the muddy Colorado blocked the laborious channels and in 1905 a manageable “cut” in the bank was deemed necessary to release the flow of water again. The “cut” propagated on its own power a mile wide, and Colorado River water rushed into the Salton Sink for nearly two years, flooding homes, businesses, and dreams in its path.

Today we call this “accidental lake” the Salton Sea. In the 1960’s it became a playground mecca attracting Hollywood personalities, fervent fishermen, recreation seekers and real estate developers. Twelve marinas were in operation and



By Sandy Zelasko

Photos © Sandy Zelasko



Greater Yellowlegs



Burrowing Owl

buyers committed to contracts for property along its shoreline.

Located on the Pacific Flyway, birders and photographers called it a birding hot spot for its nearly 400 species. Now, as the compromised sea continues to evaporate and as salinity rises, we are fighting to save this neglected jewel for a myriad of reasons.

A visit to the Salton Sea today is much different than ten or even twenty years ago as some readers can attest. The best time of year to visit is still January when migration is in full swing, and you will still find the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge (established in 1930) acting as a steward for its designated 37,660 acres. Most of it is under water at the southern end of the Sea. The rest is divided into Unit 1 (3,835 acres) and Unit 2 (1,415 acres) at the terminus of the contaminated New River and the compromised Alamo River respectively. Both units are still the top two places at the Sea to photograph migrating Sandhill cranes and snow geese who feed in the approximate 2,000 acres of cultivated croplands.

These units are managed first and foremost for the birds, second for waterfowl hunters. (Note: 2019/2020 season dates ran from mid-October through January with an extended youth and junior season. Check California hunting regulations for exact dates before you go.) Waterfowl populations are stable and species such as Northern pintail, Northern shoveler, American wigeon, and Green-winged teal can be found in flooded ponds throughout the refuge system.

Approximately 800+ acres are managed wetlands harboring migratory and resident shore



Wilson Snipe

and wading birds including the endangered Yuma Clapper Rail, of which 40% of the entire US populations lives at the Salton Sea. Least bittern, White-faced Ibis, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Sora, Long-billed Dowitcher, Marbled Godwit, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's snipe and many more can be found with a keen eye and binoculars, and photographed with a long lens.

Travel slowly along the tree rows of Mexican Palo Verde, catclaw acacia, desert ironwood, honey and screwbean mesquite in the refuge. They supply habitat for the Crissal Thrasher, a State Species of Special Concern, or more common species such as the Northern Mockingbird, Inca Dove, Northern Flicker, Black Phoebe, Song Sparrow, tiny desert Verdin and more.

Still one of the most popular species easily photographed is the Burrowing Owl. More than 70% of California's Burrowing Owl population can be found within the Salton Sea Ecosystem (SSE). Currently they are federally listed as a Species of Management Concern and are a Species of Special Concern in California. A rigorous reintroduction program and careful monitoring have allowed the population to stabilize and grow. When you visit, look for them along irrigation ditches in and around farmlands. These are resident owls so they regularly breed in the area. Babies are born as early as May but don't emerge from their burrows until late May or early June. Burrowing Owls are diurnal, meaning they are active day and night. Using your vehicle as a blind is the best way to approach one. As with a lot of species, sitting quietly and allowing an animal to feel secure in your presence will allow you the opportunity for interesting behavioral images.

The once common fish-eating birds such as cormorants, herons, pelicans and osprey are harder to find these days. Salinity in the lake has reached 61 parts per thousand nearing double the salinity of earth's oceans. Most fish cannot reproduce at those levels, hence, with the disappearance of fish, we are losing piscivorous populations.

Don't overlook the four-legged friends of the Salton Sea. There are 41 species of mammals such as the raccoon, Desert cottontail, ringtail, skunk and badger found on the refuge. Footprints crossing muddy roads are often all you will see of these night stalkers.

A number of reptiles, amphibians and fish make the refuge their home. The US Fish and Wildlife Service listed the desert pupfish as endangered in 1986. Three natural populations exist in Imperial and Riverside Counties. Pupfish can be found in the shallow water of desert springs, small streams and marshes.

When planning your visit to the refuge, use the following link for additional information such as Visitor Center hours, etc. https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Sonny_Bono_Salton_Sea/visit/plan_your_visit.html. Be prepared for gravel roads posted 25



East Jesus Art



Rock Wren



Whitefaced Ibis

mph. Please be respectful of refuge rules such as staying out of closed areas and be careful not to disturb wildlife in their environment. Keep all dogs on leash and refrain from collecting any material in the refuge. This document, <https://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Bird%20list.final.pdf>, is an excellent source to help identify and familiarize yourself with the wildlife found in the SSE.

But what if you are not a birder or wildlife photographer?

The lively geothermal activity surrounding the Salton Sea could be an interesting addition to your trip. There are a few locations where you can observe dynamic mudpots and spewing mud volcanos. The Davis-Schrimpf Seep Field is very characteristic of this active geothermal phenomenon. Located on the southeastern side of the Salton Sea and accessible by dirt road, this specific mud volcano location is on private property but can easily be seen and photographed from the road (or with landowner permission). Please check road conditions in wet weather as 4WD is recommended but not always sufficient. Roadways can take days to dry out. A passenger car can make the trip during dry weather.

Also at the southeastern side of the Sea, art of all kind is sure to be found in the colorful, eclectic communities beyond Salvation Mountain. An easy drive east on Main Street in Niland will steer you in the direction of the “experimental, habitable, extensible artwork in progress.” Leave your preconceived notions behind and experience East Jesus, a 501(c)3 charity, filled with recycled ideas by artists worldwide.

You will need more than a day to experience the SSE. Affordable, clean lodging, fuel and dining can be found in Westmorland at the south end of the Sea, only minutes from the refuge. Although birdlife at the Sea is changing, it still exists. Federal and state funding is fueling a movement to recondition areas surrounding the Sea and locals are advocating for neighborhood improvements. Expanding your trip east into Imperial Valley’s extensive farmland, you’ll find even more opportunities. Photograph birds of prey on their quest for a meal, migrant workers harvesting “winter salad” crops, and enjoy a delicious date shake from one of the many date farms in the area.

Start planning now and don’t neglect a visit during winter months to witness migrating and resident bird species, experience the artfully minded, and explore the geologic history of unique Southern California. ■

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Salvation Mountain



Red-tailed Farmland

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Long-billed Dowitcher