

Recently farmers in the Imperial Valley formed a partnership with the Audubon Society in California to help increase the amount food and habitat for the large number of birds that migrate through our valley every year.

Imperial Valley provides habitat for several dozen bird species, many of which are listed or are sensitive species and highly dependent on Imperial Valley farmland for their survival. While many farmers would like to conserve and enhance habitat on their land, and the Imperial Irrigation District is required to do so as part of its NCCP, most farmers lack the technical and financial ability to design and implement habitat conservation projects. Audubon's Landowner Stewardship Program in Imperial Valley will provide scientific, technical and financial assistance to protect and enhance habitat on Imperial Valley farmland and to increase wildlife-friendly farming methods. The program's specific objectives are to:

- Conduct research and develop a valley-wide assessment and recommendations for conservation of farmland habitat to help shape and implement IID's NCCP and to prioritize specific conservation and enhancement projects;
- Work with individual farmers, the Imperial Valley Farm Bureau, the Cooperative Extension Service, and Desert Research Center to design and implement specific habitat conservation and enhancement projects, including pilot and research projects with rigorous monitoring and adaptive management plans; and
- Provide the technical, project implementation, grant application and legal assistance to help interested farmers implement on-the-ground projects, apply for various funding programs and, if desired, secure long-term protection for their farmland through easements and other conservation tools.

Protecting working landscapes requires a long-term commitment and presence on the ground. Audubon has worked with Yolo and Solano County farmers and ranchers for more than six years, helping to restore and conserve thousands of acres of habitat. Drawing on that experience and partnering with the many interested stakeholders and experts in Imperial Valley, Audubon California expects to produce similar results in Imperial Valley over the next several years with funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the State Fish and Game's Wildlife Conservation Board.

The Salton Sea ecosystem, including the tributaries, agricultural lands in Imperial Valley and the 35-mile-long Sea itself provide habitat for more than two-thirds of all bird species in the continental United States and Canada, over 400 species in total. The southern end of the Salton Sea acts as an extension of the Gulf of California, and large numbers of pelicans and other fish-eating birds gather here by the thousands. Seabird nesting colonies on islands here include one of the few breeding populations of the rare Van Rossem race of the Gull-billed Tern, which forages in nearby farm fields of the Imperial Valley.

The wetlands at the Sea's southern end, including the "simulated wetlands" formed by flooded agricultural fields, provide bird habitat that has otherwise been lost in the Western U.S. These adjacent wetlands consistently support some of the largest

concentrations of waterbirds in the West, including Eared Grebes (up to 3 million birds – one of the largest concentrations in the world), Ross' Goose (2000+ each winter – top 5 wintering areas in the world), White-faced Ibis (30% of global population) and Long-billed Curlew (20% of global population).

Many of the grain crops in the valley have proven attractive to large numbers of declining grassland species that have suffered major losses statewide. The resident Burrowing Owl population is by far the largest concentration in California (up to 70% of the state population), and probably among the largest on earth. The grazed, disced and burned fields of alfalfa and bermudagrass and asparagus are also important for the Mountain Plover. Finally, the Salton Trough has proven to be a major migratory pathway for migrant songbirds, including warblers, flycatchers and vireos, moving north out of western Mexico and into the western United States.

If the Salton Sea is successfully restored without adequate protections for wildlife, then development, tourism and recreation pressures will further crowd out and threaten wildlife in the ecosystem. In addition if Imperial Valley farmers cease using flood irrigation or the variety of crop types and covers becomes too limited, the impacts on birds and other wildlife would be quite serious. Much of the current farmland could be lost to development, as is already occurring around the major cities in the valley, then the habitat loss would be even greater.

Much of the work will be as simple as removing small patches of standing salt cedar and other evasive habitat on farmer's fields and replacing it with native trees and shrubs such as mesquite, palo verde, and willows which will support a broader range of species as they move through our valley.

If you as a farmer would like to participate in California Audubon's Land Stewardship Program in Imperial Valley please call the Imperial Country Farm Bureau at (760) 352-3831 for more information.