

READING THE WEST

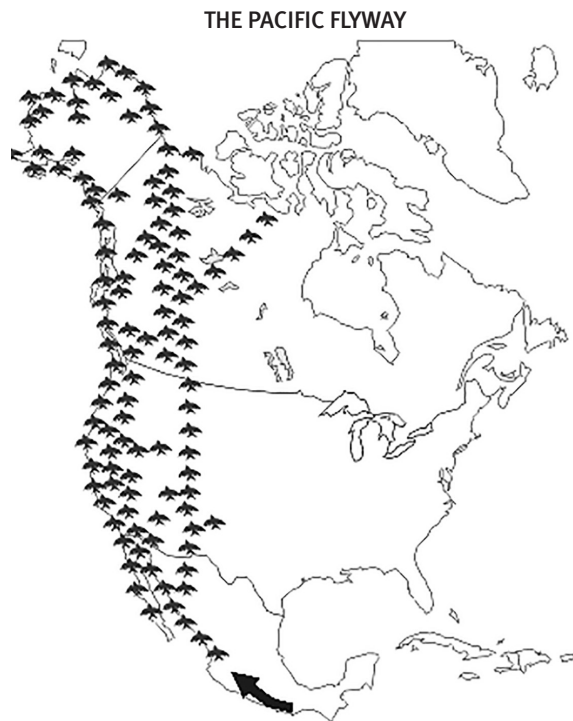
read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] - vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

THE GREAT SALT LAKE AND THE PACIFIC FLYWAY

The Great Salt Lake Strategic Plan was submitted in January by Brian Steed, Great Salt Lake Commissioner (appointed by Utah governor Cox last May). He noted the following:

Birds rely on the lake, a critical link in the Pacific Flyway between North and South America. Every year, ten to twelve million birds from 338 species come to rest, eat, and breed during migrations of a thousand miles or more. With the decline of other lakes, the Great Salt Lake is increasingly important to these species. . .

There are at least seven species of shorebirds and waterbirds that rely very heavily on brine shrimp and their eggs or brine flies and their larvae and pupae at the lake during the fall or winter months, including Wilson's Phalarope, Red-necked Phalarope, Eared Grebe, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Common Goldeneye, and California Gull. Even the Snowy Plover, a species of greatest conservation need in Utah (according to the Action Plan developed by Utah Division of Wildlife Resources), which frequents the open mudflat areas and shallow water interface, utilizes brine flies as a food source.



Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. "Migratory Flyways of North America: Pacific Flyway." *Texas Parks and Wildlife*, 2024, <https://tpwd.texas.gov/huntwild/wild/birding/migration/flyways/pacific/>.

Source: Steed, Brian. *The Great Salt Lake Strategic Plan*. Office of the Great Salt Lake Commissioner, 2024, Great-Salt-Lake-Strategic-Plan-1.pdf. See also: Utah Wildlife Action Plan Joint Team. *Utah Wildlife Action Plan: A plan for managing native wildlife species and their habitats to help prevent listing under the Endangered Species Act*. Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, 2015. Publication number 15-14. https://wildlife.utah.gov/pdf/WAP/Utah_WAP.pdf.

PHALAROPES

Most of the world's population of Wilson's Phalaropes use North American saline lakes as migratory staging sites. They double their fat reserves by eating brine flies and molt before migrating to South America.

The International Phalarope Working Group was formed in 2019 to coordinate research and conservation actions for phalaropes across the western hemisphere. Scientists monitored the Great Salt Lake (Utah), Mono Lake (California), Lake Abert (Oregon), Owens Lake (California), south San Francisco Bay (California), and Chaplin Lake (Saskatchewan). The scientists concluded that the Great Salt Lake hosts the vast majority of phalaropes compared to other sites.

... As saline lakes continue to be threatened by water diversion and climate change across the interior west of North America, it is increasingly important to monitor phalarope populations to understand their response to rapidly changing habitat. Phalaropes are a bell-weather indicator for the network of saline lakes, and the near-future is a crucial time in the effort to protect saline lakes.



Walter Raine (1861-1934), "Wilson's Phalarope and Nest," from *Bird-Nesting in North-West Canada*, 1892.

Source: Carle, Ryan D., et al. *Coordinated phalarope surveys at western North American staging sites, 2019-2022*. Unpublished report of the International Phalarope Working Group, 2022, https://www.oikonos.org/wp-content/uploads/2022-phalarope-report_final_3.8.23.pdf.

WILSON'S PHALAROPE IS WORTH SAVING

In March, hundreds gathered at the Utah State Capitol to advocate for a petition which calls on the federal government to protect Wilson's Phalaropes by listing it on the Endangered Species list. In turn, this might add further protection for Great Salt Lake. Utah writer and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams joined scientists, physicians, artists, and environmental advocates in calling for a threatened species listing.

"Today is a threshold moment," Williams said from the steps of Utah's Capitol during a rally Thursday. "The future of Great Salt Lake is no longer confined to being a local concern, or a state concern, but a national priority with global implications."

Wilson's Phalaropes are among the Great Salt Lake's most charismatic visitors. They completely molt, regrow their feathers, and double their weight during their stopover there. Unlike most bird species, phalarope females are larger with brighter plumage. They court the males, then the males tend the eggs and raise the chicks.

"They are a progressive species," Williams joked. "The female engages in polyandry, the female equivalent of polygamy. A bird worthy of our respect, especially in Utah."

Phalaropes also have a unique feeding pattern. They spend most of the day in the water, spinning in circles and creating vortices that help them gobble up brine flies and brine shrimp.

Those key food species nearly collapsed when the Great Salt Lake hit its lowest recorded elevation in 2022. Other salty systems that phalaropes depend on aren't faring much better. Lake Abert in Oregon has dried up multiple times in the last decade. California's Mono Lake received some protection after a band of scientists and students sued the state, but in three decades, it has not managed to rise to a mandated minimum elevation.

... At the Great Salt Lake, which hosts more Wilson's Phalaropes than any other U.S. saline system by far, populations have declined by 36% since the 1980s, the petition document notes. At Great Salt Lake, Mono Lake, and Lake Abert combined, populations have dropped by 42%.

... Williams called the Endangered Species Act an act of love and compassion. She called the Wilson's Phalarope Utah's "canary in the coal mine."

"There is no separation between a healthy phalarope population and a healthy human population along the Wasatch Front," she said. "Both of our lives are threatened by a shrinking Great Salt Lake."

... An endangered or threatened listing gives the federal government authority to fine or even imprison people and water users who harm the phalaropes, even if it is unintentional.

Source: Larsen, Leia. "How a Tiny Bird Could Trigger a Federal Response on Great Salt Lake." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 Mar. 2024, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2024/03/29/threatened-species-listing-tiny/>.

GREAT SALT LAKE – HEMISPHERIC IMPORTANCE

The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network was organized in 1985 by folks doing aerial shorebird surveys of coastal South America and the International Shorebird Surveys being done by folks at the Manomet Bird Observatory in Massachusetts. In 1991, the network declared the Great Salt Lake a site of "hemispheric importance," the highest such designation.

Salt Lake receives the largest percentage of the world's population of migrating Eared Grebes, nearly one-third of Wilson's Phalaropes, more than half of American Avocets, and 37 percent of Black-necked Stilts. The lake's shoreline, playas and mudflats also support 21 percent of the North American breeding population of Snowy Plovers, a species identified as one of greatest conservation needs by Utah's Wildlife Action Plan.

Source: "Great Salt Lake." *Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network*, 2019, https://whsrn.org/whsrn_sites/great-salt-lake/. See also: Castellino, M., et al. *Conservation Plan for Wilson's Phalarope (Phalaropus tricolor)*. Version 2.0. Manomet Inc., 2024, https://www.oikonos.org/wp-content/uploads/plan_wiph_2024_final_en.pdf.

PELICANS RETURN

Biologists with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources have rediscovered American white pelicans nesting on two previously abandoned islands at Great Salt Lake—Hat Island and Gunnison Island.

... However, due to low water levels, neither island has actually been an "island" for many years, and predators like coyotes have gained access to the islands via land bridges. Because pelicans are extremely susceptible to disturbances while nesting, eventually the birds stopped nesting at Hat Island—with the last confirmed reports of nesting there in 1943—and biologists believe they abandoned the Gunnison Island nesting colony last year due to repeated disturbances from predators.

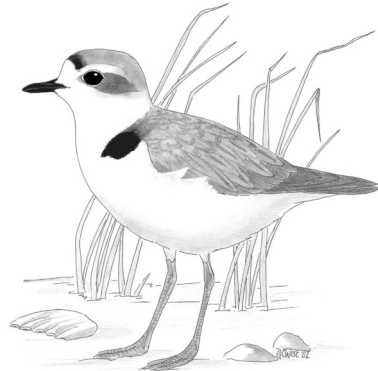
... Because monitoring surveys are still ongoing and the pelicans are continuing to arrive at the nesting colonies, the DWR doesn't yet have a final count of how many pelicans are nesting on each island. However, initial estimates are around 800 birds on Gunnison Island and around 1,300 on Hat Island. The average number of nests at Gunnison Island over the last ten years was 4,290, with 8,580 breeding adults. In 2022 and 2023, the Gunnison Island pelican colony only had about 2,900 nests, with roughly 5,800 breeding adults—the lowest number since the 1970s.

Source: "DWR confirms pelicans nesting on Hat Island for first time since 1943." *Utah Division of Wildlife Resources*, 6 May 2024, <http://wildlife.utah.gov/utah-wildlife-news/1884-pelicans-nesting-on-hat-island-for-first-time-since-1943.html>.

SNOWY PLOVER PROJECT

This year, the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City is offering a new community science project to monitor Snowy Plover nests at several sites on the Great Salt Lake South Shore. This project is a partnership between the Aviary, Audubon Rockies, and the Saline Lakes Program at the National Audubon Society. Volunteers include:

- *Nest Monitors: Full site survey for new and existing nests, nest checks near estimated hatch dates.*
- *Camera Crew: Help set up nest cameras and retrieve SD cards. Retrieve camera assembly from hatched and lost nests.*
- *Rec Team: Recreational Use Surveys, education/outreach for south shore visitors, installing cameras to monitor the nests and determine nest fate, and doing surveys and outreach for visitors to these sites to better understand the recreational impacts these birds face.*



"Snowy Plover." G. C. West, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Source: "Snowy Plover Project." *Tracy Aviary Conservation*, 2024, <https://tracyaviary.org/conservation/projects/snowy-plover-project/>.

EDITORIAL MATTER

ISSN 0891-8899 – Weber is published biannually by The College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah 84408-1405. Full text of this issue and historical archives are available in electronic edition at <https://www.weber.edu/weberjournal>

Indexed in: *Abstracts of English Studies, Humanities International Complete, Index of American Periodical Verse, MLA International Bibliography, and Sociological Abstracts.* Member, Council of Learned Journals.

Subscription Costs: Individuals \$20 (outside U.S., \$30), institutions \$30 (outside U.S., \$40). Back issues \$10 subject to availability. Multi-year and group subscriptions also available.

Submissions and Correspondence: Editor, **WEBER | THE CONTEMPORARY WEST** | Weber State University
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