

BIRD OF THE MONTH

At Mono Lake



RIPARIAN SONGBIRDS: Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica Petechia*)

About Mono's Yellow Warblers... The streams flowing into Mono Lake and their associated riparian (stream-side) habitat provide a breeding ground and migration respite for many species of songbird, including Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, Willow Flycatcher, Bewick's Wren, and Bullock's Oriole. Yellow Warblers, along with most of the other migratory songbirds, begin to arrive by late April. They nest and raise their young in June and July, and leave by late September to fly south—as far as northern Peru—for the winter. Throughout the summer months, the gentle “sweet sweet sweet, I'm so sweet” song of these small yellow birds is heard intermingled with the gurgling water of Mono's tributaries.

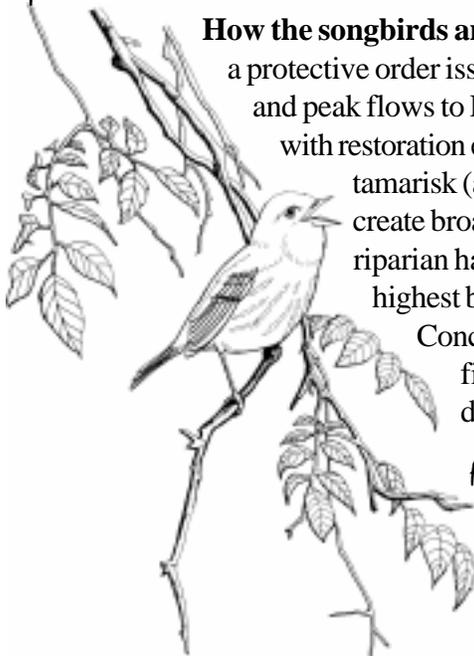
About riparian habitat... Riparian habitat forms a transition zone from aquatic to upland habitats. It is characterized by a multistoried vegetation structure: small plants at the ground level, low shrubs and bushes, primarily willows, at mid-height, and taller cottonwood and willow trees as high as 10–20 meters. This habitat not only depends on, but also helps to maintain the health of the streams around which it forms. The vegetation holds stream banks in place, slows and filters runoff water, allowing it to sink into the soil, provides food for aquatic organisms, and reduces water pollution. The bushes and trees also provide cover for many animals and nesting sites for a wide range of birds.

Songbirds as a measure of Mono's health... Yellow Warblers and other songbirds rely on riparian habitat, and riparian habitat relies on the flow of water through the creeks. Because of this chain of dependence, the songbird population—which has been intensely studied here by Point Reyes Bird Observatory since 1998—can be used to understand the health of Mono Lake's tributaries. In scientific jargon, songbirds are a good “ecological indicator” at Mono Lake. They help us understand how well the basin's streams and riparian systems are functioning.

Threats to the health of Mono's streams... In 1941, the City of Los Angeles began diverting the water from four of Mono Lake's five tributary streams. As years passed without water in the creek beds, the riparian vegetation along these streams died back significantly. The loss of vegetation reduced the habitat for songbirds and without plant roots protecting the stream banks, periodic floods cut stream channels down into their floodplains—further lowering the water table. Rush Creek, with a multi-channeled delta spanning over a half mile of lakeshore and supporting significant wetland and riparian habitat, was reduced to a single, sparsely vegetated channel, lying more than 20 feet below the historic delta.

How the songbirds and the streams are doing today... Injunctions issued in 1984 and 1986, and a protective order issued by the State Water Resources Control Board in 1994 returned minimum and peak flows to Parker, Walker, Rush, and Lee Vining creeks. This precious water, combined with restoration efforts including the planting of cottonwood, willow, and Jeffrey pine seedlings, tamarisk (an invasive exotic) removal, and the re-watering of old stream channels to create broader floodplains, has allowed the riparian zones to begin regenerating. And with riparian habitat come songbirds! In the summer of 2000, Rush Creek supported the highest breeding densities of Yellow Warbler—a California State Species of Special Concern—recorded in California. And last year, three Willow Flycatcher nests—the first documented in the Mono Basin for this State Endangered Species in three decades—were found on Rush Creek!

For more information visit www.monolake.org



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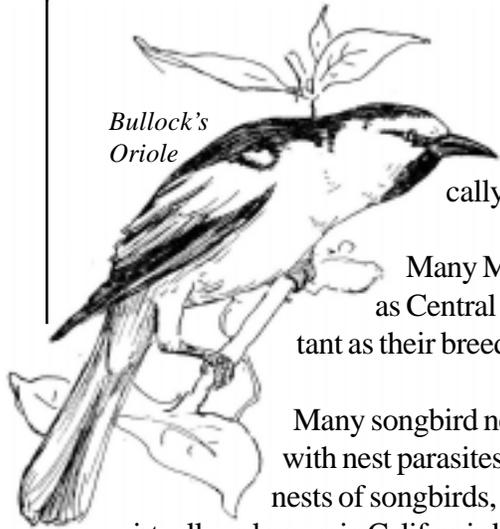
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INTERESTING TIDBITS

Bullock's Oriole



Songbird songs serve a variety of purposes, from territorial defense to mate attraction. Depending on the species, some songs are passed on genetically, some are learned, and some combine a little of both!

Many Mono Basin songbirds—neotropical migrants—spend the winter as far south as Central and South America (the neotropics)! Their winter habitat is just as important as their breeding habitat for the success of these species.

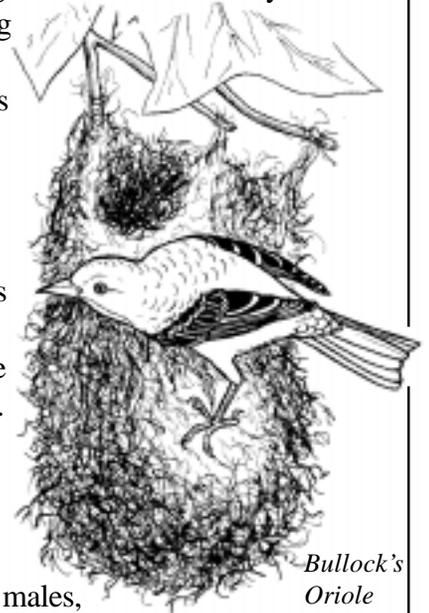
Many songbird nests fail because of predators, but nesting songbirds also have to contend with nest parasites. Brown-headed Cowbirds are nest parasites which lay their eggs in the nests of songbirds, forcing them to raise Cowbird chicks. A hundred years ago Cowbirds were virtually unknown in California but have been expanding their range following grazing and irrigated agriculture. Last year in the Mono Basin, approximately 39% of Yellow Warbler nests and 69% of Song Sparrow nests were parasitized by Cowbirds.

WHERE TO SEE YELLOW WARBLERS (AND OTHER RIPARIAN SONGBIRDS) & WHAT TO LOOK (AND LISTEN!) FOR

In the Mono Basin, songbirds are concentrated in the riparian zones surrounding Mono Lake's tributary streams. One of the most accessible areas is Lee Vining Creek on the Lee Vining Creek Trail, which runs from the Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center to the south end of Lee Vining, where Lee Vining Creek crosses Highway 395. Access from Lee Vining can be found just south of the Best Western Lakeview Lodge's annex section on the east side of Highway 395. Rush Creek is accessible from several roads leading east from Highway 395 and the June Lake Loop.

Songbirds are some of the smallest birds around. You might find them in the tops of trees singing away, searching for caterpillars among the branches of a cottonwood or willow, or scratching in the leaf litter looking for grubs. Though they are often hard to find, their songs and calls provide good clues to their whereabouts. Listen carefully!

Songbirds here vary in color from the bright yellow of the Yellow Warbler and the brilliant orange of the Bullock's Oriole, to the dull reddish-browns of Song Sparrows and House Wrens. Females are generally more dully colored than the males, though in some species, such as the Willow Flycatcher, it's impossible to tell the difference without actually catching the bird—which you may have the opportunity to do! Contact the Mono Lake Committee to find out about public mist-netting and bird banding sessions with Point Reyes Bird Observatory in the Mono Basin this summer!



Bullock's Oriole

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