

SONNY BONO SALTON SEA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

1999 FISH AND WILDLIFE MORTALITY EVENTS

Following 6 weeks without any significant wildlife mortalities, over 100 dead ruddy ducks were found in the New River delta area on December 18, 1998. Since then, over 900 dead birds have been picked up. The majority of dead birds are ruddy ducks and eared grebes. The U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center has diagnosed avian cholera. Since the onset of this die-off, the refuge staff have picked up 2,387 birds -- mostly eared grebes and ruddy ducks.

The nesting colony of double-crested cormorants on Mullet Island is doing well and does not show any signs of disease. The refuge staff estimate 2,000 - 3,000 nests are present.

Meanwhile, seven research projects have been initiated on the Salton Sea to establish baseline data. Areas of research are limnology, avian botulism, fisheries populations and species composition, bird contaminants, shoreline vegetation surveys, and contaminants.

MORTALITY ROSTER BY SPECIES AS OF April 14, 1999

Eared Grebe	724
Clark's Grebe	2
Western Grebe	9
Unidentified Grebe	2
American White Pelican	22
Double-crested Cormorant	27
Great Blue Heron	8
Black-crowned Night Heron	2
Cattle Egret	2
Snow Goose	31
Ross' Goose	20
Green-winged Teal	16
Mallard	2
Northern Pintail	29
Blue-winged Teal	1
Cinnamon Teal	3
Northern Shoveler	102
Gadwall	4
American Wigeon	2
Canvasback	4
Redhead	7

Ring-necked Duck	2
Lesser Scaup	11
Common Goldeneye	1
Bufflehead	2
Red-breasted Merganser	1
Ruddy Duck	1049
Duck spp.	4
American Coot	43
Black-necked Stilt	14
American Avocet	15
Greater Yellowlegs	2
Willet	3
Marbled Godwit	3
Long-billed Curlew	1
Western Sandpiper	3
Ring-billed Gull	108
California Gull	19
Herring Gull	55
Yellow-footed Gull	2
Gull spp.	22
Caspian Tern	4
Forster's Tern	4

Total Birds = 2387

Total Species = 40

[Summary of 1997 Fish and Wildlife Mortalities](#)

[Summary of 1996 Avian Botulism Event](#)

[Why is the Salton Sea Important?](#)

[Summary of 1996-1997 Fish Pathology Findings](#)

[Wildlife Mortality Estimates 1987-1996](#)



The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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Outdoors

Maligned sea yielding fish for `armpit' anglers

Ed Zieralski
STAFF WRITER

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Salton Sea

SALTON CITY -- Gary Reagles says the rotating, amber emergency light atop his shop here helps folks find the place during predawn runs for bait and supplies.

But the flashing light on Salton City Bait, Tackle & Variety symbolizes something else, too.

These lights once identified homes inhabited by people with potential medical emergencies, so it's fitting that there's one blinking so near the Salton Sea. This area has been sending out environmental and ecological warnings for decades. Regular users of this vast mismanaged resource have been begging for solutions to rescue a sea that is dying a slow death from too much salt and nutrients, too much algae and too little oxygen for its fish.

But in the midst of the scientific studies and environmental impact reports that many hope will deliver solutions soon, fishing has busted loose here in a way veteran anglers haven't seen in a couple of decades.

It's not uncommon for fishers to catch and release 30 to 50 orangemouth corvina in a few hours, and the fish aren't small. The corvina, the headliner fish of this sea and a cousin to the ocean white seabass, average 2 to 8 pounds, with lots of 3- to 5-pounders. One angler walked off the shoreline one day here with five corvina weighing 110 pounds, the biggest going 21 pounds.

They're catching these fish in a body of water that those who want to save

it say has been maligned by the media and misrepresented by federal, state, county and city bureaucrats. But those who want to see it become the recreational mecca it was in the '60s face a long, uphill battle.

Imperial County to this day has a health warning about the selenium levels in the Sea's fish. Yet, preliminary results from recent scientific studies indicate most of the concerns about pollution from Mexico's sewage, selenium levels in the fish and pesticides in the water were largely exaggerated.

"I take so much kidding and ribbing at work for fishing here," said Salton City resident Ron McCormick. "No one there understands why I would want to fish here. But I don't care. I catch more fish in a couple of hours in the morning than most fishermen catch in a month. And there's nothing wrong with the fish. We eat them all the time."

McCormick fished one recent morning with his wife, Rena, and their 9-year-old son, Joe. They were doing something unique to the Salton Sea. They were "arm-pit fishing," wading in from shore up to their armpits and fighting corvina eyeball-to-gill plate. Pint-sized Joe was practically up to his earlobes fighting fish.

Rena just started fishing in May, but she was next to the guys and up to her armpits in water, getting relief from the flies and the already 90-degree-plus heat at 6 a.m.

"I really enjoy it because it's something we can do as a family together," Rena McCormick said.

As Rena McCormick talked, schools of baitfish were being pushed in waves through the rust-colored water by the feeding corvina.

"You'll find these corvina are very, very aggressive fish," said John Dougherty, a retired schoolteacher from Borrego Springs who is area manager of PESCA, the Professional Surf and Shore Casters Association. PESCA members believe the best fishing is done with two feet on the ground, or two armpits in the water.

Dougherty assembled a cross-section of the Salton Sea regulars for last Tuesday morning's outing. Reagles supplied the bait -- plenty of squirmy mudsuckers that were hooked through the mouth and head with No. 1 hooks. But on this day, the corvina hit anything thrown their way, attacking black plastic worms on the sink and Rat-L-Trap lures as soon as they hit the water or after a few cranks of the reel. Four and five fishermen were hooked at once.

All this while a couple of boat fishermen nearby looked as though they couldn't catch a cold.

"What I love about this fishery is it's a place kids or beginning fishermen

can come and are guaranteed to catch fish," Dougherty said. "It's such an untapped resource and such a beautiful place at sunrise."

The fishermen use simple rigging. They bait mudsuckers on 1/0 hooks tied to 15- to 20-pound test line with a 1-ounce sinker above a swivel. They use baitcasters or spinning reels with a medium-action rod 7 to 8 feet long.

The limit is five for corvina, but there are no limits on gulf croaker, sargo or tilapia, the Sea's troubled stepson.

Many, many tilapia, in fact, were floating bloated, dead and stinking in the water as the PESCA group fished Tuesday.

Locals such as Norm Niver, an activist and defender of the Sea, don't mind seeing the dead tilapia.

"It's bad public relations for millions of them to be dead on the beach with their bones rotting, but it's great for the Sea to get rid of them," Niver said.

Niver pointed to a recent finding by Dr. Barry Costa-Pierce of the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant College, the world's authority on tilapia. Pierce found that the Salton Sea had the world's largest population of tilapia, but they're also the slowest-moving and slowest-growing in the world. Some actually move so slow they get barnacles on their gills.

When the tilapia die, some are diseased and then are eaten by migrating birds such as pelicans. The birds get botulism and die, drawing more attention to the Sea's problems and not its resources, like the tasty, hard-fighting corvina.

Niver, Dougherty's PESCA group and men such as Steve Horvitz, state park superintendent at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area on the north shore, are working to change the Sea's image with an educational blitz about what's right and wrong with the Sea and what needs to be done to fix it.

Until then, Reagles' amber warning light will keep on spinning.

The Salton Sea

WHERE Most of the Sea is in Imperial County, but the northern portion is in Riverside County.

HISTORY It was formed by a mistake when flood waters in 1905 broke through a poorly constructed head gate on a canal that brought irrigation water to Imperial Valley from the Colorado River. The river flowed for 18 months through the break and into the Salton Basin and formed the new lake before engineers were able to stop it. It became the nation's biggest recreation attraction, actually out-drawing at its peak Yosemite or Yellowstone national parks. It peaked in 1961 when it drew 750,000 visitors and had 400,000 boats launched. It bottomed out to 87,000 visitors in 1993-94 following publicity surrounding bird and fish die-offs, pollution and a

selenium scare. Visitation is coming back, with 250,000 visitors the last two fiscal years.

GEOGRAPHY Chocolate Mountains to the east, Santa Rosa Mountains on the north. Lies in the Salton Sea Basin or Salton Sink. The watershed covers 8,000 square miles. Fed by the Whitewater River from the north, the Alamo and New rivers at the south, as well as many small streams and irrigation canals. It's California's largest lake at 40 miles long and 17 miles wide, the third-largest saline lake in the nation. It has no outlet, is 227 feet below sea level with an average depth of 29.9 feet and a deepest spot of about 50 feet.

MYTHS What is true about the Salton Sea, according to state park superintendent Steve Horvitz, is it has too much salt, is excessively rich in nutrients, lacks sufficient oxygen at times, has too much algae and not enough fresh water flowing into it. But Horvitz has a list of myths that he loves to debunk.

- Myth 1: Mexico's pollution ruined the Sea. False. Waste from Mexico is treated naturally in the New River and is diluted by agricultural drain water from Imperial Valley. By the time the New River courses 67 miles from the border, it makes no impact on the Sea.
- Myth 2: Pesticides from agriculture ruined the Sea. False. The State Water Resources Control Board tests water in the Salton Sea twice a year. Pesticides at any significant level are not found in the Sea. The water is rated Recreation Category I, suitable for an occasional, accidental gulp when recreating or fishing.
- Myth 3: Selenium exists at harmful levels in the Sea. False. Even though a human health advisory was issued in 1986 warning that the fish are unsafe to eat due to selenium, many, like Norm Niver on the West Shore, have been eating the fish for more than four decades without side effects. Horvitz said recent studies show selenium has not been found in great amounts in the Sea's water or fish.
- Myth 4: The Sea is an insignificant ecological resource. False. Part of

the Pacific Flyway, it is wetlands to millions of migratory birds and several endangered species. It also has healthy populations of fish -- orangemouth corvina, gulf croaker and sargo, plus tilapia, which have been susceptible to mass die-offs because of lack of oxygen.

- Myth 5: The Sea is an insignificant economic resource. False. A University of Redlands study suggests more than \$300 million could be generated here each year. Other recent studies project a "saved Sea" could generate billions of dollars. But a failed, smelly and ruined 380-acre square-mile lake just 20 miles from Palm Desert and Palm Springs might not be good for the neighborhood, Horvitz said.

Tips & Techniques

This is more of a request than a tip or technique, but it's something that needs to be said about summertime bass fishing. It comes from City Lakes program manager Jim Brown and city fisheries biologist Larry Bottroff. With the water heating up and the bigger bass starting to get vulnerable due to shrinking lakes, it's best to immediately release the fish once caught. One of the joys of fishing is showing off a fine catch, be it one big bass or a

nice limit. But this is one time of year that letting them go and not feeding the ego will ensure these big bass get bigger.

Get out and go

If you're heading to the Salton Sea for some fishing, you might want to take in some of the other activities available in the area. There are few better places for birdwatching than the Sea. More than 400 species of birds have been recorded, and many arrive in late summer on early fall migrations. Walking and hiking on trails in the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge is one way to explore the area. There are self-guided interpretive exhibits near the refuge office, and a wildlife list is available there. Call (760) 348-5278 for information. The Salton Sea State Recreation Area is on the North Shore and offers even more activities, such as boating, swimming, fishing, camping or birding. The park has five campgrounds that offer primitive camping on the shores of the Sea to full hook-ups. Call (760) 393-3052 or 393-3059 for information.

Catch of the week

Daniel Landsman, 11, is spending most of his summer enjoying the Southwestern Yacht Club's Junior Sailing Program, but one of his top memories of the summer likely will be the monster yellowtail he boated this week off Imperial Beach. Landsman was out on a fishing trip with his brother, David, and other members of the sailing club when he hooked and landed a 26.85-pound yellowtail. It bit a sardine fly-lined on 12-pound line, but Landsman was able to land it thanks to some expert boat maneuvering by Capt. Stan Miller, who put Landsman at the bow of the boat and positioned the young angler for an easier fight.

Note

Mike Sanchez is offering a hunter safety class Saturday at the San Clemente Gun Club. If that's too far to go, Sanchez has a class Aug. 14-15 at the Escondido Fish and Game Association. Call (760) 739-8434 for information.