

The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership

Building Collaborative Action for Shorebird Conservation

2 April 2018

Dr. Rob Clay, Director
Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network Executive Office
Manomet
P.O. Box 1770
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Dear Dr. Clay,

The WHSRN-US Committee of the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership Council has reviewed the nomination package for Owens Lake for designation as a WHSRN site of International importance. Although we support the recommendation of International status, we believe the submitters could have provided a better justification for this level of designation. Although the sum of the maximum counts provided was 101,742 individuals, the time frame for the maximum counts ranges from 2000 to 2017. Additionally, providing a maximum count for unidentified *Calidris* sandpipers in a year that differed from maximum counts of identified Least and Western Sandpipers likely inflates the sum of the maximum counts. Because the WHSRN-US Committee's primary purpose is to assist sites in the USA, we searched for additional, and more modern, count data and explored other analytical approaches to support the nomination.

First, we found surveys conducted by Point Blue Conservation Science, between 2012 and 2014, for a habitat suitability project (citations and data provided in the attached spreadsheet). These monthly area searches were conducted from March to May, August to October, and in January. We used these three-year monthly counts to determine annual use, which assumed a 30-day turnover during migration, excluded breeding season counts for American Avocet, only included breeding counts for Snowy Plover, and subtracted out wintering numbers. The large differences between monthly counts during migration suggests that the 30-day turnover value is a realistic, and likely conservative, assumption and exceeds all published values of migratory turnover rate/stopover duration (example citations provided in the attached spreadsheet).

Maximum single-day counts were also updated for the period between 2012 and 2017, primarily from results of the Eastern Sierra Audubon Society's Big Day counts. The combined counts of Least, Western and unknown Sandpipers were used to determine the year to extract the maximum counts for these species. Several papers demonstrate that maximum counts underestimate total population size by at least 30%, so maximum counts were multiplied by 1.3. Estimates of turnover rates at stopover sites also substantiates the idea of maximum counts under-estimating total population size (citations provided in the attached spreadsheet). The updated, adjusted maximum counts and the average annual sums of the Point Blue counts meet the 100,000 bird criteria for designation as a site of International importance.

Proportions of biogeographic populations were also re-calculated based on the annual summations of Point Blue counts and the adjusted maximum counts. No population met the 10% threshold, although Snowy Plover, American Avocet, Least Sandpiper and Western Sandpiper met the regional importance threshold ($\geq 1\%$ but $< 10\%$; see attached). Snowy Plovers at Owens Lake are part of the Interior/Gulf Coast *nivosus* population, not the Pacific Coast population listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

The pertinent landowners are included and support the nomination. Like the Cargill Bonaire Salt Ponds nomination, it is good to see non-traditional partners involved in shorebird conservation, even if it is indirectly due to other interests. That said, we do question if the pilot solar project (and potential build-out) and the pumping of groundwater will negatively affect the quality of the site and available habitat for shorebirds. If these proposed activities will significantly reduce the quality of the site for shorebirds, or if management practices at the site change, the designation might need to be downgraded.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert L. Penner II".

Chair, WHSRN-US
U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership Council

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