

Despite the aridity and heat, there is bird life here, spread thin like the desert plants themselves. There is also the small matter of a certain gull, called the Yellow-legged Gull.

HIGHWAY 86 CLEAVES a path through the heat waves of the desert. You hit Salton City, the only significant dot on the map, and realize, with a start, that you've passed it! Those streets leading off to nowhere, the ranch houses spread painfully thin across the landscape—that was it.

Somewhere, in a developer's files (or his attorney's) are plans for a full-blown community. But the speculative dream withered in the desert. It was a mistake. Like California's Salton Sea itself.

"Like this trip," I thought unkindly (but not inaccurately), studying the temperature gauge on the van, cursing the inadequacies of its air conditioning. "Only a fool," I thought, "would visit the Salton Sea in summer." A fool ... or a birder.

"If you had a choice, would you rather be a birder or a fool?" I asked.

"I'd have to think about it," my wife and fellow traveler Linda replied.

"They might not be mutually exclusive," I amended, philosophically.

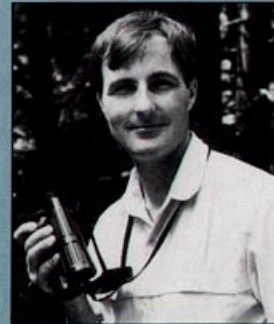
"I'll keep that in mind," she promised.

The Salton Sea Desert was denied the more evocative attributes of the Sonoran Desert. There is no cactus landscaping here; no sculpted spires to inspire. What vegetation there is has been driven to its knees by the sun—rabbit brush, creosote bush, and two or three other plants.

The desert is the kind of place that makes you drive faster; the kind of place that undermines faith in a

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



The Salton Sea in Summer

Illustration by Keith Hansen

Perfect Being. But despite the aridity and heat, there is bird life here, spread thin like the desert plants themselves. And on the Salton Sea itself, particularly in winter and during migration, there is an obscene wealth of it!

There is also the small matter of a certain gull, called the Yellow-legged Gull, that was once thought to be just a curious sort of Western Gull. But that, too, was another in a long string of mistakes.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"About what?"

"Birders and fools?"

"I think 'fool' is the genus and 'birder' is a species."

"That's a good answer."

"I knew you'd like it."

"But what distinguishes birders from other fools? From rock collectors or fishermen?"

"Objective maybe?"

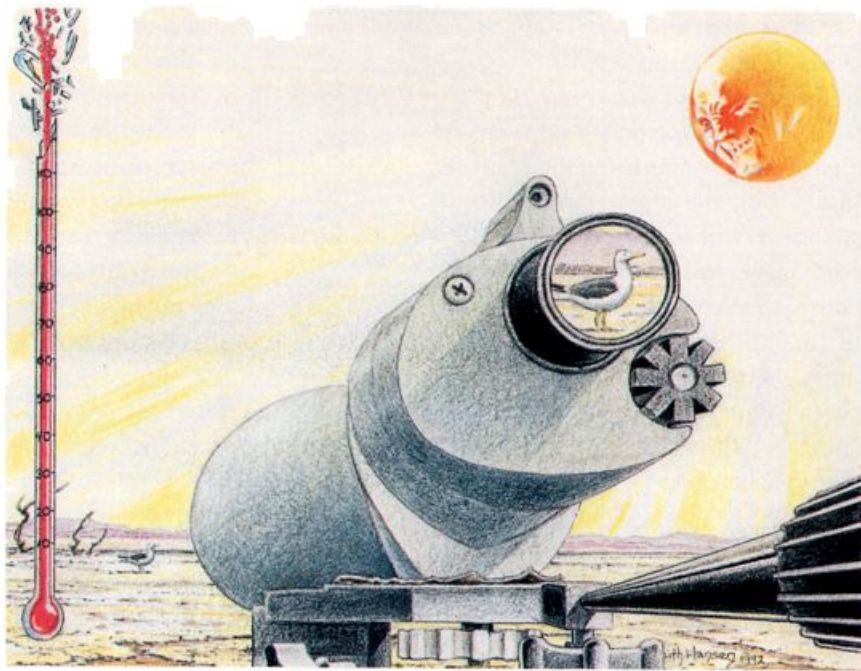
"Seems weak to me. Seems like differentiating fools on the basis of prey selection is cutting it pretty fine."

"Leg color makes more sense?"

"Hmm. Good point."

Once the Salton Sea—now 40 feet deep, 200 feet below sea level, and 380 square miles in area—was an extension of another sea: the Sea of Cortez. Then the Colorado River erected a barrier of silt. The bodies of water were separated, isolated, and in time developed different characters. The Sea of Cortez remained a sea. The disjunct aquatic appendage evaporated into thin, hot air.

Then in 1905 this dead sea was re-



born. By accident. A water diversion structure, used to siphon off a portion of the Colorado River's water for agriculture, "failed" (or maybe succeeded too well). For the next three years, the entire river emptied onto the old sea bed. By the time the river was finally coaxed back into place, an inland sea had formed.

Since that inauspicious beginning, agricultural runoff from the surrounding farmland has more than kept pace with evaporation, so the Salton Sea continues to grow. The problem is that when water escapes into the atmosphere, it leaves suspended fertilizer and salts behind. Year after year, this toxic plasma grows more concentrated in the Sea. It kills fish, coats the shore, and makes the super-heated air reek. The Salton Sea in summer is most unsavory.

But in August shorebirds mass here, begging for the touch of a spotting scope and discerning eyes. And don't forget that gull! The one that in most respects looks like an ordinary Western Gull—but is not. For this, a birder will do almost anything. Even visit the Salton Sea in summer.

The Red Hill Marina, one of the primary access points, is located on the Sea's southeast shore. It resembles a shanty-town mantling a slag heap,

and despite the morning temperatures (that hadn't quite broken three digits yet), there were few fishermen about.

Birds, however, were common—thousands of them—more than enough to make us forget (momentarily) the heat and the sleepless night. Below the town was a road leading out toward, and then into, the sea. There was a gate—but it wasn't closed.

Gates suggest proprietary intent and birders are subject to the same laws of trespass governing most other fools. By accident (of course!), we ran into the Red Hill Marina manager, who was on his way for the mail. We asked if anyone cared if we went out on the road.

"Oh, they care," he assured us. "But nobody does much about it."

It wasn't exactly permission, but it wasn't eviction, either. It was, in fact, an answer very much in keeping with the dispirited nature of the place.

The shoreline was made of fish skeletons, sun bleached and brittle. The water was syrupy and harsh and strewn with rusting debris. Upon our arrival, several thousand sandpipers were probing the shallows—mostly Westerns, but a fair number of Least Sandpipers occupied the higher ground. Without preliminaries, Lin-

da and I got down to business, scanning first for Yellow-legged Gulls (of which there were none), settling for shorebirds.

There were pods of Wilson's Phalaropes—gray-backed adults and juveniles with taffy-edged feathers. There were Long-billed Dowitchers that glowed like pumpkins in the sun; Stilt Sandpipers of the jittery bills and Red-necked Phalaropes floating in pools of mercury. There was lots to see and much worth seeing—unless, of course, you've seen it all before, and better, and in greater comfort. Unless, of course, you are really looking for something else.

"What are you seeing?" Linda wanted to know.

"Mostly Westerns," I replied. "You?"

"Same," she said. "The light is getting bad."

"Goes with the air," I observed.

A trickle of sweat flowed down the middle of my back and collected in a pool. A wind that cooled nothing succeeded in raising a cloud of alkali dust. It settled on bare arms, stung the insides of noses and coated the inside of mouths with hot, sour ash.

The morning progressed. The sun climbed—bleaching the color out of things and putting a lacquer of glare over the flocks. The birds gathered in dispirited mounds, and soon only the noisome Black-necked Stilts still yapped and fed.

The legs of our tripods warmed until they were hot to the touch. The flats absorbed the sun's heat and threw the excess back into the sky in rippling waves. Forty-power eyepieces found their way into pockets because they were useless.

The smell of the sea rose with the heat—a fecund reek that made throats swell and noses boycott each breath. It was a smell that makes you choke. A smell that makes you...

"Want to leave?" I asked, closing the legs on my tripod, not even waiting for an answer.

"I thought you'd never ask," Linda replied.

We scanned the shore from several vantage points and were rewarded by distant silhouettes of pelicans and cormorants. We drove to the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters, to inquire about Yellow-legged Gulls, but were told that the Refuge Manager was on vacation; the Refuge Biologist, too. The Assistant Manager had found a reason to go to Los Angeles that day, and had taken it. Clearly, the man was no fool.

"Maybe if you come back tomorrow," the secretary suggested.

We went on to another portion of the refuge designated Unit I on a map. Furrowed farmland fanned out on either side. Some shimmered with irrigated water and the rest shimmered with rising heat. A distant Northern

There is no cactus here...What vegetation there is has been driven to its knees by the sun.

Harrier rode the heat waves aloft and a Burrowing Owl glowered as we passed. No gull. No joy.

We followed a directional sign that promised parking but then, inexplicably, the road frayed and lost its conviction in an agricultural maze. We returned to the sign and pushed on again, this time to reach a crossroads posted with other, contradictory signs advising that vehicular traffic was prohibited.

These signs, at least, seemed in accord with reality. There might have been a refuge here, once. But by all the signs, it was a memory, now.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Leave," she said.

"Without the gull?"

"Stay," she said.

We went back to the Red Hill Marina. Saw no one and nothing we hadn't seen before. By this time the

sun had hunted down the last of the shadows and stropped a brittle edge on everything it touched. The sea was flaked with leprous light and the glare threw laser blades into our eyes.

The distant hills seemed muted, muffled behind a rippling veil of heat. Only the air-conditioned van could cool the atmosphere to the point where it could support life. Only one thing kept us from leaving. The thing that distinguishes a birder from a more common brand of fool.

"On the shore," Linda announced, finally.

"I've got it," I said.

"Looks good," she added.

"Looks like a Western Gull with yellow legs, if that's what you mean."

"Yes."

There weren't any smiles on our faces—the sort that you often see on the faces of people who are studying a "Life Bird." There wasn't any glow of success or sense of achievement. There was, in fact, little feeling at all—unless you count relief.

"Let's get out of here," one of us said, or it might have been that we said it simultaneously

On the way back to I-10, on our way through Salton City, I came up with the answer to the question that had puzzled us on the way down—the one that tried to define the difference between a birder and a fool.

A common fool is the sort who might travel to the Salton Sea in summer. But only a birder would stay until they got the bird. A bird that nobody, not even a birder, would have gone out of their way to see when it was considered just a form of something else; back when it was a mistake.

Like the Salton Sea. Like going there in summer. ➤

—Peter Dunne is the author of Tales of a Low-Rent Birder, coauthor of Hawks in Flight, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society

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