



# Desert Wetlands *News & Views*

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## *Upper Las Vegas Wash*

The U. S. Department of Interior Bureau of land Management (BLM), Las Vegas Field Office, recently released the Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the Upper Las Vegas Wash Conservation Transfer Area (CTA). The SEIS is part of the formal process to identify the environmental consequences that may result from disposing of approximately 46,700 acres of land for the growth of the City.

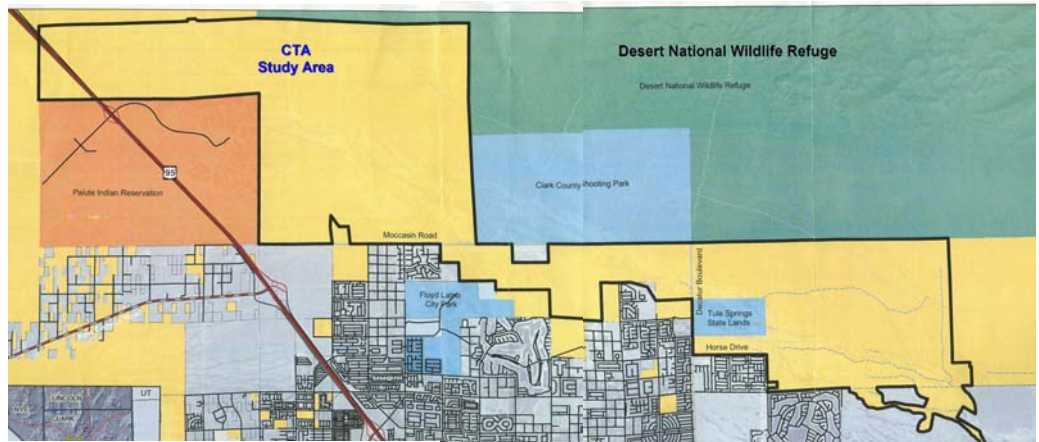
The CTA study area, encompassing 13,622 acres, is west of the Paiute Indian reservation and south of the Desert National Wildlife range. The southern boundary roughly approximates the southern edge of the Upper Las Vegas Wash. The Wash provides for the natural drainage of approximately 500 square miles of the valley's watershed. The Wash is normally a dry, very wide, sandbed channel highly susceptible to erosion and headcutting. The study area includes about 13 linear miles of the Wash.

The SEIS has been developed through nu-

merous CTA public meetings between 2004 and 2006. Because of the significance of the paleontological, botanical, hydrological and cultural resources present within the CTA study area, further analysis and public input will take place before a final EIS is formulated. The purpose of the CTA action is to protect the natural functioning of the Wash and protect the sensitive natural resources in the CTA.

The Pleistocene-age Las Vegas Formation within the CTA study area is known to be fossiliferous and is considered to be the most significant assemblage of late Pleistocene invertebrate fossil remains within the entire Great Basin. A 2003 review revealed 44 known resource localities and field surveys located 438 previously unrecorded resource localities. The Tule Springs National Registry of Historical Places is an 1125-acre archeological site that has produced substantial important data relevant to the paleoenvironmental history of the Great Basin. About 660-acres of Tule Springs is located within the CTA study area.

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### Desert Wetlands Conservancy

The mission of the DWC is to influence policy, create partnerships, and initiate activities in advocacy or the Las Vegas Valley Watershed, including the Desert Wetlands Park.

## Marsh Bird Survey

This article is excerpted from the draft report prepared by Deborah Van Dooremolen, "Marsh Bird Monitoring, including the Yuma Clapper Rail, along the Las Vegas Wash, Clark County, Nevada, 2007-2009". The final report is available on the [www.lvwash.org](http://www.lvwash.org) web site.

The Las Vegas Wash Coordination Committee (LVWCC) is increasing wetland habitat along the Las Vegas Wash (Wash) by planting bulrush (*Schoenoplectus* spp.) in the impoundments of the weirs and along the weir faces and creating favorable hydrology so that cattail (*Typha domingensis*) and common reed (*Phragmites australis*) volunteer from upstream seed sources. Emergent vegetation can also be found in the constructed wetland ponds in the nearby Nature Preserve, the developed portion of the Wetlands Park through which the Wash flows. The increased wetland habitat could have a positive impact on secretive marsh birds (e.g. bitterns and rails). Consequently, in 2007, the Las Vegas Wash Project Coordination Team (Wash Team) began surveys for secretive marsh bird species along the Wash and within the Nature Preserve.

Part of the impetus for the study came in 1997, during informal Section 7 consultation regarding the proposed development of the Wetlands Park and associated erosion control structures. At that time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommended that annual surveys for the federally endangered Yuma Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris yumanensis*) be conducted during the breeding season to determine the species occurrence within the park.

The Yuma Clapper Rail is found in the lower Colorado River watershed and the Salton Sea, inhabiting freshwater and brackish water wetlands. Clapper Rail forages at the upper end of marshes, along the ecotone between mudflats and higher vegetated zones. Mussels, clams, arthropods, and small fish are its preferred foods, which it retrieves by probing and scavenging the surface while walking. The bird will only forage on mudflats or very shallow water where there is taller plant material nearby to provide protection. Studies state that maintaining a mosaic of shallow, open water pools interspersed with stands of emergent vegetation at different successional stages would best support Clapper Rails year-round. The habitat being created by the in-lieu fee mitigation ponds which will have sheltered mudflats should be attractive to

the Clapper Rails. However, the Wash is at the northern limit of the species' breeding range, which may also affect the presence/absence of Yuma Clapper Rail from year to year.

Sightings of the Yuma Clapper Rail in the Wash area have been rare. Eight Clapper Rails were observed in the City of Las Vegas Water Pollution Control Facility discharge channel on September 6, 1959, and then a lone individual was observed in the same location a few weeks later. A Yuma Clapper Rail was also detected along the Wash, within the

Wetlands Park, on May 28 and June 18, 1998, in a wet, tamarisk dominated area upstream of the future site of the Pabco Road Weir. Annual surveys for Yuma Clapper Rail began in 2000 and lone individuals were detected in 2005 and 2006.

A standardized North American marsh bird monitoring protocol was developed in 2005 allowing the Wash Team to collect data on a variety of marsh bird species while still meeting their requirements regarding the Yuma Clapper Rail. The methodology includes passive listening and call broadcast for target species. Six

species were targeted: American Bittern, Least Bittern, Black Rail, Clapper Rail (from 2008 on, after the federal permit to conduct surveys was obtained), Virginia Rail, and Sora. Detections of Pied-billed Grebe, Common Moorhen, and American Coot were also recorded. Three survey routes were established in marsh habitat along the Wash both within and adjacent to the Wetlands Park. Wash Team staff conducted the surveys during the breeding season in April and May.

Four surveys of each of the three routes were conducted. One to two observers conducted each survey. From 2007 through 2009, no Yuma Clapper Rail, American Bittern or Black Rail were detected in any year. Least Bittern, Virginia Rail, and Sora were detected in all years. Sora was the most abundant of the target species detected, Least Bittern was the second most abundant, and Virginia Rail was the least abundant.



Yuma Clapper Rail (Photo, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Of the target species, Sora (*Porzana carolina*) had the highest per point abundance and was fairly evenly distributed across survey routes, indicating that the study area provides suitable habitat for the species. Although it was the most abundant during surveys, it is difficult to determine whether or not the species is actually nesting in the study area. Sora, a quail-sized rail with short yellow bill, grey breast, and black face, is currently considered to be a winter resident and migrant in the area. While several individuals were detected only during the first and/or second surveys, some continuously occupied sites through the third survey, into early May. Yet, in three years of marsh bird surveys, no Sora have been detected in the fourth survey along any route, suggesting that they may have departed the Wash by mid to late May. Surveys conducted as a part of the Nevada Breeding Bird Atlas were unable to confirm Sora breeding in southern Nevada, although there were records of possible breeding on the Muddy River. However, Sora young have been observed by others at the Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve, which hosted a survey point in 2007 and 2008.

Least Bittern (*Lxobrychus exilis*), the smallest heron found in the Americas, was the second most abundant target species. Least Bittern is a covered species under the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program (LCRMSCP), and is a relatively new arrival to the Wash. The first confirmed detection occurred in April 2005 and the species, which is now considered a summer resident, was confirmed nesting near the Bostick Weir in 2006. After increasing from 2007 to 2008, per point abundance of Least Bittern slipped below 2007 levels in 2009. However, this could be related in part to survey timing. Least Bittern detections tend to increase late in the season. The greatest number of Least Bitterns detected on a single survey was reported on May 29, 2008, which was more than a week later than the 2007 and 2009 final surveys.

Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) had the lowest per point abundance of all species in all years, and its abundance declined by nearly 50% from 2007 to 2009. This may indicate that the habitats present within the study area are less suitable for Virginia Rail than for the other marsh bird species. These birds also probe with their bill in mud or shallow water, picking up food by sight. They mainly eat insects and aquatic animals. Virginia Rail are known to be present in the Wash year-round (although the population may increase in the winter) and were confirmed nesting at the Bostick Weir in 2006.

As wetland revegetation efforts conducted by both the

LVWCC and Clark County continue, potentially suitable nesting habitat for marsh birds should increase along the Wash and within the Wetlands Park. In spring 2010, revegetation at the 112-acre in-lieu fee mitigation ponds should begin maturing, a significant addition to emergent marsh habitat within the study area.

Three years of marsh bird monitoring have been conducted, two of which included calling for Yuma Clapper Rail. More years of data collection will help determine trends in the richness, abundance and distribution of these secretive species within the study area and whether any changes to breeding status have occurred. Also, annual monitoring for Yuma Clapper Rail is needed to comply with informal Section 7 consultation measures. The Wash Team recommends that marsh bird monitoring continue in 2010 and that a new survey route be added to cover the in-lieu fee mitigation ponds, should their revegetation be mature enough by the onset of the survey season. □

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### **WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT**

**PLEASE CHECK THE EXPIRATION DATE ON YOUR MAILING LABEL TO SEE IF IT IS TIME TO RENEW!** If you have not yet taken the plunge to join, please do so now. You will demonstrate that you want to help in the development of new features in the Park for our community!

**The Park is a place to enjoy! Have you visited the Park recently?** The temporary Visitor Center is at the very end of Wetlands Park Lane. Cross Boulder Highway and travel 1 mile east, then look for the Wetlands Park sign, just where Tropicana turns into Broadbent Ave. If it has been a while since you've visited the Park, you will be amazed at the changes and improvements that have taken place. The Park is for your benefit, come and enjoy it!

There are many opportunities to get involved and to show your support-not only through membership in the Friends, but by contributing funds or labor for needed physical improvements, and educational materials. If you have put off renewing, remember your membership ends one year from the date you paid your dues.

## ***Upper Las Vegas Wash*** (from Page 1)

Three rare plant species occur within the CTA study area, the Bearclaw Poppy, Bearpoppy (Las Vegas and Merriam's), and Las Vegas Buckwheat. All three plants are listed as special-status species by the BLM and the Bearpoppy is classified as critically endangered by the State. The Eglington Preserve is a 300-acre parcel of public land that is managed to protect two of these special status plants. The Preserve is within the CTA and also contains fossils and an active portion of the Wash. Sensitive wildlife species within the CTA include the burrowing owl, Phainopepla (in the silky-flycatcher group), and the threatened Mojave Desert Tortoise.

The selection of the final CTA boundary is the first step in the process for the protection of sensitive resources. From extensive public input, BLM identified six alternative CTA boundaries for analysis, ranging from approximately 1500 acres for the No-Action Alternative to almost 13,000 acres. The BLM preferred alternative encompasses 11,008 acres and includes the fossil formations, sensitive cultural and plant resources, the active Wash, the 100-year flood plain, the adjacent upper alluvial fan, and the Eglington Preserve, but does not include the Tule Springs State lands. However Tule Springs is protected by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Desert Wetlands Conservancy supports the BLM recommended alternative. □



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