

# Abert's Towhee

*Melospiza aberti*



Photo by Martin Meyers

## Habitat Use Profile

| Habitats Used in Nevada  |  |
|--|--|
| Mojave Lowland Riparian<br>Mesquite-Acacia<br>Springs<br>(Agriculture) |  |
| Key Habitat Parameters •   |  |
| Plant Composition  | Willow, cottonwood, mesquite, acacia, saltcedar, quailbush, and other dense, mesic or semi-mesic shrubs and small trees <sup>7</sup> |
| Plant Density  | Dense shrub and forb/grass cover   |
| Mosaic   | No known landscape mosaic requirements   |
| Distance to Water  | Most abundant close to water <sup>EO</sup>   |
| Response to Vegetation Removal   | Negative to shrub/understory removal <sup>7</sup>  |
| Area Requirements ○  |  |
| Minimum Patch Size   | Unknown, estimated 3 ha [7 ac] <sup>EO</sup>   |
| Recommended Patch Size   | > 20 ha [50 ac] <sup>EO</sup>  |
| Territory Size   | 1.2 ha [3.0 ac] <sup>7</sup>   |

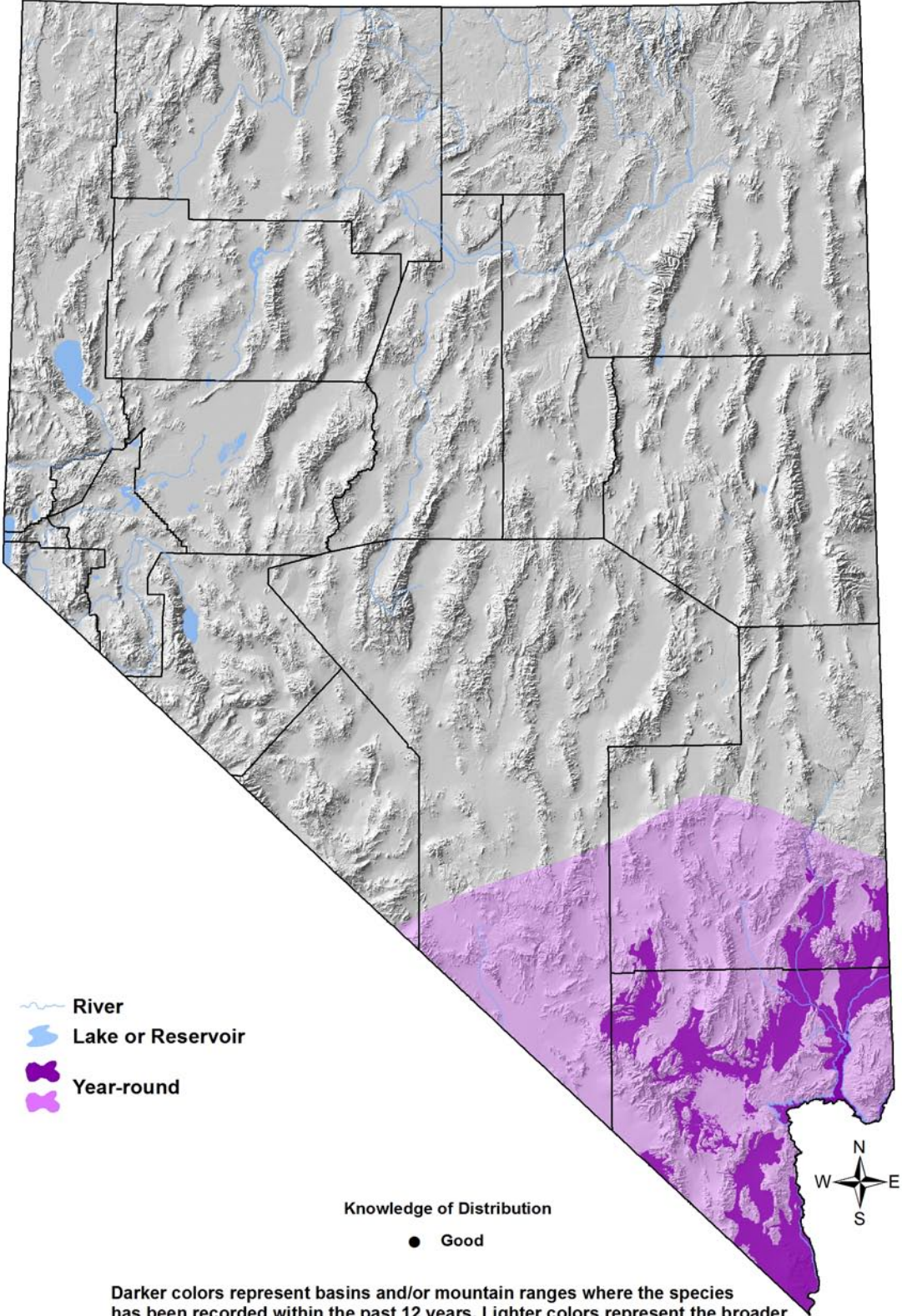
## Conservation Profile

| Priority Status                        |   |
|--|---|
| Conservation Priority Species          |   |
| Species Concerns                       |   |
| Historical declines<br>Habitat threats |   |
| Other Rankings                         |   |
| Continental PIF                        | Watch List                                      |
| Audubon Watchlist                      | Yellow  |
| NV Natural Heritage                    | S3  |
| USFWS                                  | Migratory Bird                                  |
| BLM                                    | None  |
| USFS                                   | None  |
| NDOW                                   | Conservation Priority                           |
| Trends                                 |   |
| Historical •                           | Rangewide declines <sup>7</sup>                 |
| Recent •                               | Stable <sup>6</sup>                             |
| Population Size Estimates              |   |
| Nevada (NBC) •                         | 2,300   |
| Global •                               | 210,000 <sup>5</sup>                            |
| Percent of Global                      | 1%  |
| Population Objective                   |   |
| Maintain / Increase <sup>5, EO</sup>   |   |
| Monitoring Coverage                    |   |
| Source                                 | Nevada Bird Count                               |
| Coverage in NV                         | Good  |
| Key Conservation Areas                 |   |
| Protection                             | Muddy and Virgin Rivers, Mesquite-Acacia washes |
| Restoration                            | Muddy and Virgin Rivers, Springs                |

## Natural History Profile

| Seasonal Presence in Nevada             |  |
|---|--|
| Year-round                              |  |
| Known Breeding Dates in Nevada          |  |
| Early April – early August <sup>2</sup> |  |
| Nest and Nesting Habits                 |  |
| Nest Placement                          | In dense shrub or tree, 1.5-2.5 m [4.9 – 8.2 ft] above ground <sup>7</sup> |
| Site Fidelity                           | High; species is sedentary with year-round residency                       |
| Other                                   | Usually nests near water <sup>7</sup>                                      |
| Food Habits                             |  |
| Basic                                   | Ground / litter forager  |
| Primary Diet                            | Invertebrates <sup>7</sup>   |
| Secondary Diet                          | Seeds, especially outside the breeding season <sup>7</sup>                 |

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## Overview

In southern Nevada, Abert's Towhees occur in dense, shrubby riparian vegetation up to 1,300 m [4,300 ft] in elevation,<sup>7</sup> and are especially numerous in the Colorado, Muddy, and Virgin River Valleys, and in the Las Vegas Wash. They also occur in smaller riparian and spring areas, Mesquite-Acacia washes characterized by dense understory, and in some agricultural lands.

Ideal habitat is characterized by high foliage density at the shrub and ground level, presence of cottonwoods and willows, and nearby water.<sup>4</sup> However, like several other southern Nevada riparian birds, Abert's Towhee has adapted to saltcedar stands in areas where native riparian vegetation has been lost or severely degraded. In such cases, it is important that efforts to restore native vegetation avoid removing large saltcedar stands very rapidly. Restoration should instead occur in a stepwise manner to ensure that a significant amount of usable habitat is always present in the project area. Unintended defoliation of saltcedar by biocontrol agents (see Willow Flycatcher account for details, pp. Spp-59-1) poses similar risks. Fortunately, Abert's Towhee responds very well to most riparian restoration efforts, including those that target Southwestern Willow Flycatcher.<sup>7</sup> For example, densities of Abert's Towhees doubled on the San Pedro River in Arizona only three years after cattle were removed to allow for recovery of riparian shrubs and ground covers.<sup>3</sup>

## Abundance and Occupancy by Habitat

### Birds / 40 ha on NBC Transects in the Mojave Region

| Primary Habitat at Transect | Transects Occupied | Birds/40 ha (95% C.I.) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Lowland Riparian            | 50% (18/36)        | 5.3 (3.3 – 7.3)        |
| Agriculture                 | 80% (4/5)          | 2.6 (0.6 – 4.6)        |
| Mesquite-Acacia             | 14% (2/14)         | 0.5 (n/a)              |

## Nevada-Specific Studies and Analyses

### Landscape Associations (NBC data)

The density of Abert's Towhee was statistically related to the amount of Lowland Riparian habitat present within survey transects (see figure below). Strong correlations were also found with the amount of Agricultural habitat present and the proximity to water (*Appendix 3*).



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## Conservation Strategies

### Habitat Strategies

- Mojave Lowland Riparian (p. Hab-11-1), Mesquite-Acacia (p. Hab-10-1), and Springs (p. Hab-19-1) habitat conservation strategies benefit this species
- Manage livestock grazing and other land uses to maintain dense riparian shrub and ground cover
- Pursue restoration of native riparian habitat in suitable areas, such as Las Vegas Wash and other revegetation projects. Where saltcedar is removed, ensure that native habitat is restored in a timely manner

### Research, Planning, and Monitoring Strategies

- In situations where water diversions or groundwater pumping may lower water tables or impact riparian shrubs, monitor for impacts on Abert's Towhees
- Develop fire management strategies that emphasize the protection of native riparian habitat
- Conduct additional research on the factors that promote Abert's Towhee use of agricultural lands and mesquite-acacia habitat

### Public Outreach Strategies

- None identified

References: <sup>1</sup>Brand et al. (2010); <sup>2</sup>GBBO unpublished Atlas data; <sup>3</sup>Krueper et al. (2003); <sup>4</sup>Meents et al. (1981); <sup>5</sup>Rich et al. (2004); <sup>6</sup>Sauer et al. (2008); <sup>7</sup>Tweit and Finch (1994); <sup>EO</sup>Expert opinion

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Mojave Lowland Riparian Habitat. Photo by Jen Ballard.