

American Avocet

Recurvirostra americana



Photo by Larry Neel

Habitat Use Profile

Habitats Used in Nevada	
Ephemeral Wetland and Playa Open Water (shorelines)	
Key Habitat Parameters •	
Plant Composition	Cattail, bulrush, sedges, rushes, saltgrass
Plant Density	Sparse or no emergent vegetation ⁹
Mosaic	Shallow marsh with sparse emergent vegetation, large mudflats, and dry islands; also playa margins ⁹
Water Depth	< 20 cm [8 in] preferred ⁹
Water Quality	Tolerant of alkaline, saline conditions, but chicks require fresh water inflows ⁶
Hydrology	Requires shallow standing water ⁹
Response to Vegetation Removal	Probably neutral ^{EO}
Area Requirements •	
Minimum Patch Size	~ 130 ha [320 ac] ^{EO}
Recommended Patch Size	>150 ha [370 ac] ^{EO}
Home Range and Movements	Unknown breeding home range, but 200 km [125 mi] movements common post-breeding ⁷

Conservation Profile

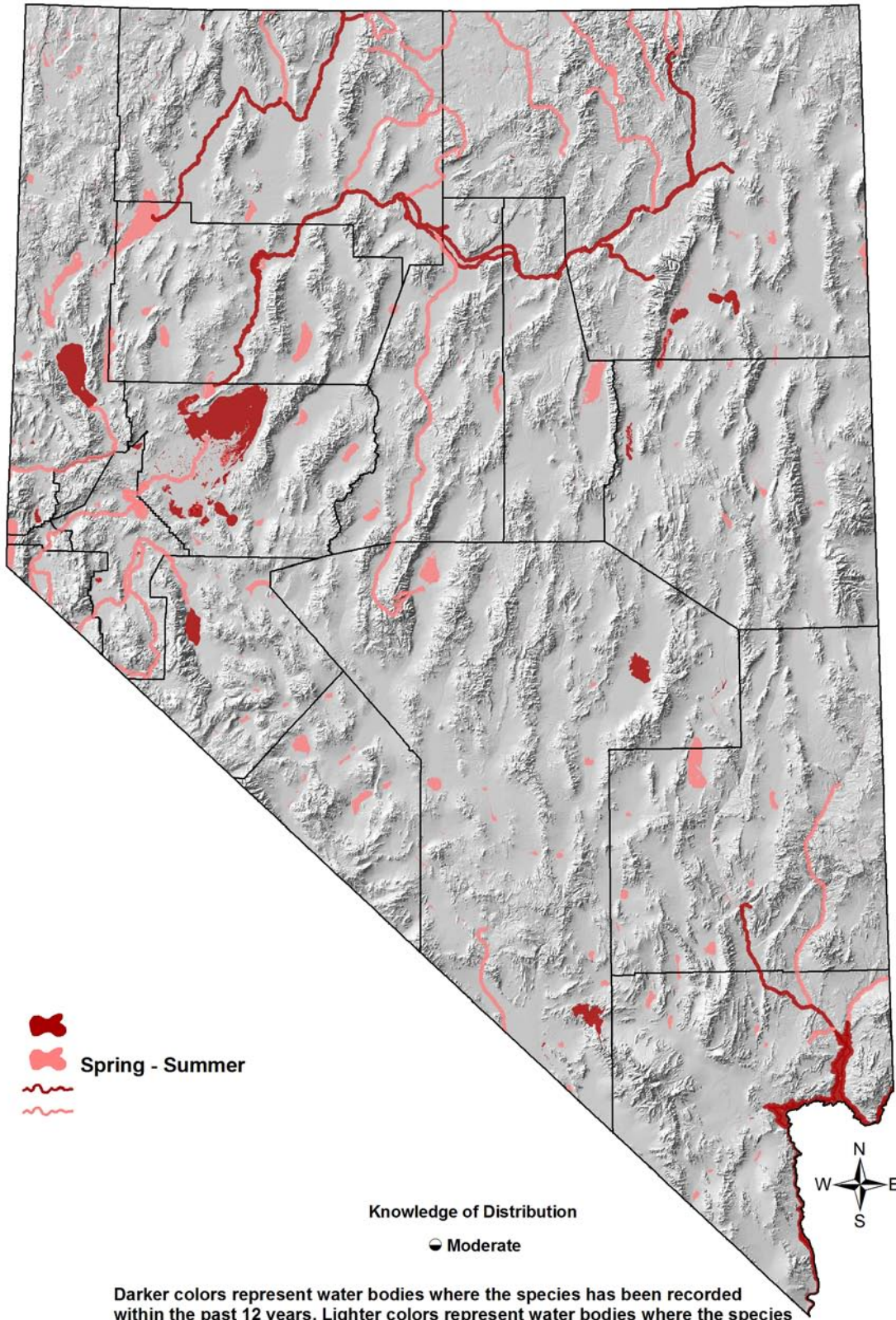
Priority Status	
Conservation Priority Species	
Species Concerns	
Habitat threats	
Other Rankings	
Continental PIF	None
Audubon Watchlist	None
NV Natural Heritage	S4B
USFWS	Migratory Bird
BLM	None
USFS	None
NDOW	Conservation Priority
IW Shorebird Plan	Critically Important
Trends	
Historical •	Range contractions, but extent of declines unclear ⁹
Recent •	Stable ¹
Population Size Estimates	
Nevada •	~ 18,000, with high annual variability ^{EO}
Global •	450,000 ¹
Percent of Global	~ 4%
Population Objective	
Maintain / Increase ^{EO}	
Monitoring Coverage	
Source	NDOW Lahontan Valley counts, NWR and WMA counts, Aquatic Bird Count
Coverage in NV	Good in managed areas, Fair / Poor elsewhere, especially playas
Key Conservation Areas	
Protection	Lahontan Valley, Humboldt system, Ash Meadows NWR, Lake Mead
Restoration	Degraded/dewatered marshes and playa wetlands, mitigation wetlands

Natural History Profile

Seasonal Presence in Nevada	
Spring – Summer Fall and Spring (migration)	
Known Breeding Dates in Nevada	
Early April – July ²	
Nest and Nesting Habits	
Nest Placement	Ground on sparsely vegetated shoreline or island, or on matted-down vegetation ^{9, EO}
Site Fidelity	Probably low ^{EO}
Other	Semi-colonial breeder ⁹
Food Habits	
Basic	Prober
Primary Diet	Invertebrates from sediment or water ⁹
Secondary Diet	Small fish, seeds ⁹

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Darker colors represent water bodies where the species has been recorded within the past 12 years. Lighter colors represent water bodies where the species could potentially occur. Smaller water bodies may be difficult to visualize on the map.

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Overview

The American Avocet is one of Nevada's most visible and characteristic shorebirds, often seen in association with Black-necked Stilts, which it typically outnumbers. Compared to stilts, avocets are more tolerant of alkaline and saline conditions, are more colonial, and are less likely to forage in emergent vegetation. Although the avocet's breeding range extends throughout Nevada, they are more often recorded in the northern half of the state, and more intermittently distributed in the south. American Avocets readily use ephemeral wetlands, including playa lakes, and as such, their numbers can vary substantially from year to year depending on precipitation patterns. They are also found on mudflats along larger waterbodies, particularly on shorelines recently exposed by receding water, or where newly-flooded areas become available.⁴ As is the case with many other Conservation Priority shorebirds, Lahontan Valley is Nevada's most consistently important site for American Avocets. For this reason, it has been designated as a Site of Hemispheric Importance by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (www.whsrn.org).

Avocets in our region wander widely among Great Basin wetlands after breeding to locate alternate wetlands as the summer progresses and some sites dry up or become otherwise unsuitable. Migrants are also very common in Nevada, particularly in the fall,¹⁰ when they are often seen on mudflats exposed by receding waters.⁶ In fact, peak fall migration numbers probably exceed peak breeding numbers by a considerable margin.⁵ During the post-breeding and migration period, avocets depend on the availability of low-elevation ephemeral and permanent wetlands scattered across very large landscapes (> 10,000 km² [2.5 million ac]).⁷ This ability to shift among seasonally-available ephemeral wetlands is a critical feature of the avocet's biology.⁸ Conservation strategies should therefore address the protection of suitable wetland habitat well beyond the breeding season and across regions. This complicates the management challenge, since the sites that are important for breeding may not be the same as the sites that are important for post-breeding wandering and migration.

Abundance and Occupancy by Habitat

- The Nevada population estimate is based on an average count of 12,500 for Lahontan Valley, plus 5,500 birds from other consistently productive sites (L. Neel, *pers. comm.*)
- The most recent ten-year population peak is ~ 33,000 birds³

Nevada-Specific Studies and Analyses

No information

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Main Threats and Challenges

Habitat and Other Threats

- Loss or degradation of ephemeral and permanent wetlands due to water diversions or development
- Loss of fresh-water inflows needed by chicks during brood-rearing⁶
- Because American Avocets use ephemeral wetlands and wet playas extensively, they are likely to be impacted by changing precipitation patterns associated with climate change

Research, Planning, and Monitoring Challenges

- Populations using ephemeral wetlands are not well monitored
- Although American Avocets are tolerant of alkaline and somewhat saline conditions, the impact of other water quality parameters is not well-studied

Conservation Strategies

Habitat Strategies

- Ephemeral Wetland and Playa (p. Hab-6-1) and Open Water (p. Hab-15-1) habitat conservation strategies benefit this species
- Promote seasonal fresh-water runoff into ephemeral wetlands and playas, as well as into sparsely-vegetated permanent marshes, sufficient to create mudflats and maintain a shallow-water shoreline for the longest possible period
- Manage or restrict playa activities to protect the integrity of the clay soil pan and maximize water retention
- Wetlands with uneven bottoms and shallow islands are especially important for nesting^{EO}
- Artificial mitigation wetlands can provide productive breeding habitat. Ideal configuration is > 130 ha [320 ac] wetland with 2:1 ratio of shallow water (<15 cm [6 in]) feeding areas to elevated nesting areas⁹

Research, Planning, and Monitoring Strategies

- Improve monitoring coverage of ephemeral wetlands and playas from the breeding season through the post-breeding and fall migration periods¹¹
- Conduct additional study to determine tolerance to water quality variations

Public Outreach Strategies

- None identified

References: ¹Brown et al. (2001); ²GBBO unpublished Atlas data; ³IWJV (in prep.); ⁴Manning and Paul (2003); ⁵Neel and Henry (1996); ⁶Oring and Reed (1996); ⁷Plissner et al. (1999, 2000); ⁸Robinson and Oring (1997); ⁹Robinson et al. (1997); ¹⁰Shuford et al. (2002); ¹¹Warnock et al. (1998); ^{EO} Expert opinion