

## Songbirds and waterways pay no mind to barbed-wire fences or map legends.

▼ *Songbird enhancement east of the Sierra*

# Great Basin Riparian

**S**acha Heath

Beginning at the western edge of the Owens Valley floor, I meander up an alluvial fan of the eastern Sierra escarpment, my path guided by Independence Creek. Shaded by water birch, black cottonwood, black oak and Jeffrey pine, this creek snakes its way through a seemingly endless sea of bitterbrush, big sage, buckwheat and Mormon tea. Morning light creeps over the White Mountains, casting a pink glow on the Sierra Nevada. Point by point, my data sheet reflects the breeding inhabitants of this riparian (or streamside) oasis: Spotted Towhee, Western Tanager, Bushtit, Western Wood-pewee and Black-chinned Hummingbird.

For the past three years, I have similarly made my way along the eastern Sierra Nevada, from Olancho in Inyo County north to Bridgeport in Mono County. I cover a long stretch of the study area—230 kilometers in all—establishing indices of songbird abundance, diversity and species richness, and confirming breeding status. To complement my point counts, two crews of dedicated prbo biologists join me along the way. The hours they spend searching for and monitoring nests, banding birds, and assessing vegetation lead to estimates of survival and productivity, and the factors that influence these—habitat quality, predation and brood parasitism to name a few.

Our work is supported by seven federal, state and private land management entities that create the political mosaic of land ownership in the region. Contributions by three non-profit



Sacha Heath records birds inhabiting streamside willows within a Mono Basin landscape

groups reflect strong local support for conservation and education.

The collaborative nature of the project is essential. Songbirds and riparian waterways pay no mind to barbed-wire fences or map legends. But management practices do influence songbirds and their habitats. By conducting standardized monitoring on a bioregional and watershed scale, we develop and provide songbird-enhancing recommendations to the largest landholders and managers in the region.

Prbo provides data to the Mono Lake Committee's web-based Restoration Clearinghouse, a tool to guide restoration efforts on Mono Basin's recovering creeks. Our results have been used by the Bureau of Land Management to propose seasonal changes to a year-round grazing allotment, and by Inyo National Forest to recommend appropriate timing for prescribed burning. To encourage the use of prbo's standardized methods, California Department of Fish and Game is coor-

inating songbird monitoring efforts throughout the Owens Valley. These are just a few of the ways that prbo participates in protecting Great Basin habitats.

Having left one field crew in the heat of the Owens Valley, I meet up with another, in the higher Mono Basin. Here water birch remains, but a mixture of willow species is more common. Jeffrey pines are joined by lodgepole, and black cottonwood mixes with quaking aspen. The next morning, my point count data forms are filled with singing Yellow Warblers, Song Sparrows, Dusky Flycatchers, and Green-tailed Towhees.

The look and sounds of riparian habitat are very different here than west of the Sierra. But as our fieldwork is showing, there is one key similarity—its importance to nesting songbirds.

**Sacha Heath**, PRBO staff biologist, has taken the lead in developing the Eastern Sierra Riparian Songbird component of our Great Basin Project.

PRBO's Great Basin Project, including Eastern Sierra Riparian Songbird Conservation, is modeled on our work in California's Central Valley. Our goal is to research and provide management recommendations to ensure the greatest diversity, productivity and abundance of birds in the rich and varied Great Basin habitats. Partners include federal agencies, California Department of Fish and Game, the City of Los Angeles, consulting firms, the Mono Lake Committee, and many others. PRBO efforts within the Great Basin Project include: using songbird productivity to evaluate restoration of streams running into Mono Lake after decades of water diversion; making management recommendations to the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to enhance songbird habitat; working with forest managers to reduce songbird predators near campgrounds; and protecting threatened Snowy Plovers nesting on dry Owens Lake as restoration efforts begin there.—  
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