

Land, Water and People

The San Luis Valley Beach – Blanca Wetlands

By Jill Lucero, BLM Wetlands Biologist

When you think of gulls, sandpipers and pelicans, you picture a vacation paradise on an ocean beach, but few people realize there is a salty shore paradise located right here within our San Luis Valley. The location is Blanca wetlands and thousands of sandpipers, dozens of pelicans and hundreds of gulls find refuge at these wetlands along with the other 158 bird species found there. Blanca Wetlands is much more than meets the eye. At a glance, it is a salty desert environment with flooded low areas, but after time, the more studious observer finds a plethora of birds, amphibians, mammals, fish, and yes, insects.

These wetlands are part of the closed basin – located within the low area of the San Luis Valley at the base of Mt. Blanca where both Lake Alamosa and Lake Sawatch occurred in former wetter periods. Encompassing about 10,000 acres, over 200 irrigated basins provide habitat for hundreds of thousands of birds annually. The area has the status of an Important Bird Area in Colorado, a nationally significant area for shorebird migration, and is home to the largest population of western snowy plovers in Colorado. Locally, it is a key area for amphibian production. Globally, it hosts the only known population of a distinct fairy shrimp in the world.

These wetlands were part of a restoration effort by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The basins became dry due to water diversions and well pumping within the San Luis Valley, which altered the delivery of water to the area and eventually, the former lake became a series of dry basins. Efforts began in the 1960s to rewet the 200 basins BLM identified as a priority. Although natural basins were used for the restoration, artesian wells were drilled to replace the natural water source that at one time was surface runoff from the closed basin streams as well as ground water. Over time, BLM's continued flooding with well water increased salt levels in the ponds that allowed incredibly high numbers of desirable insects, such as fairy and brine shrimp to thrive within the basins. These insects became the food for hundreds of species of birds and amphibians. Currently, 13 threatened, endangered and sensitive species have found refuge there and nationally significant numbers of Baird's sandpipers, Wilson's phalaropes, western snowy plovers, and American avocets are known to flock to Blanca Wetlands' basins.

These wetlands, that many locals still call "Dry Lakes," are now a thriving ecologically significant wetland complex. This restoration effort would not have been possible without the BLM's many partners including, Duck's Unlimited, Colorado Division of Wildlife, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Great Outdoors Colorado, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Intermountain West Joint Venture, Alamosa County, Bureau of Reclamation, San Luis Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Rio Grande Water Conservation District, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

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