

# Salton Sea

## State Recreation Area



### Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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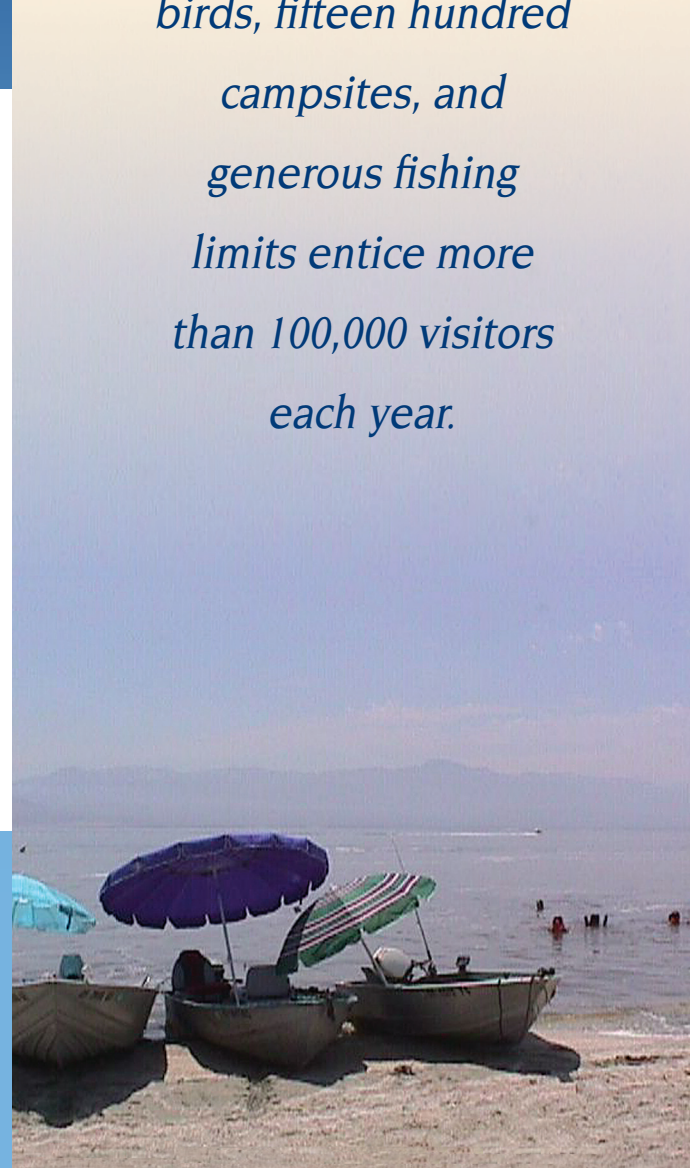
**Salton Sea State Recreation Area**

**100-225 State Park Road**

**North Shore, CA 92254**

**(760) 393-3059 or (760) 331-9944**

*At the Salton Sea,  
millions of migrating  
birds, fifteen hundred  
campsites, and  
generous fishing  
limits entice more  
than 100,000 visitors  
each year.*



*A* long the northeastern edge of the Salton Sea—

one of the world's most important winter stops for birds traveling the Pacific Flyway—Salton Sea State Recreation Area is a

birdwatcher's delight. Birds begin arriving by tens of thousands in October. By January the wings of more than 400 species of migrating birds form living clouds across crystal clear skies. By May most of them have continued to their ultimate destinations, but while they make use of the Salton Sea's rich offerings, the birds are an unforgettable sight.

Typical of the Colorado Desert area, average low and high temperatures in spring and fall range from about 50 to 85 degrees. July and August are the hottest months, with 75-degree mornings and afternoons well over 100 degrees. Winter days average 60 degrees, but nights can drop to freezing.



*Salton Sea*

## PARK HISTORY

### Native People

Perhaps two thousand years ago, the Cahuilla and other native groups occupied these lands. When they first arrived, the Salton Sink held a

much larger body of water—the ancient Lake Cahuilla—well above sea level. Cahuilla oral traditions told of a huge freshwater lake, full of fish and teeming with abundant wildlife. Archaeological proof of the ancient lake's existence comes from early house pits, middens and various artifacts found along former sandbars, creeks and washes.

Tradition held that this enormous lake covered the entire valley. As it shrank, the people moved their villages down from the mountains and settled in the areas once covered by water. Their fishing camps generally followed the contours of that ancient lake, and they built fish traps of stones in the lake's shallower waters.

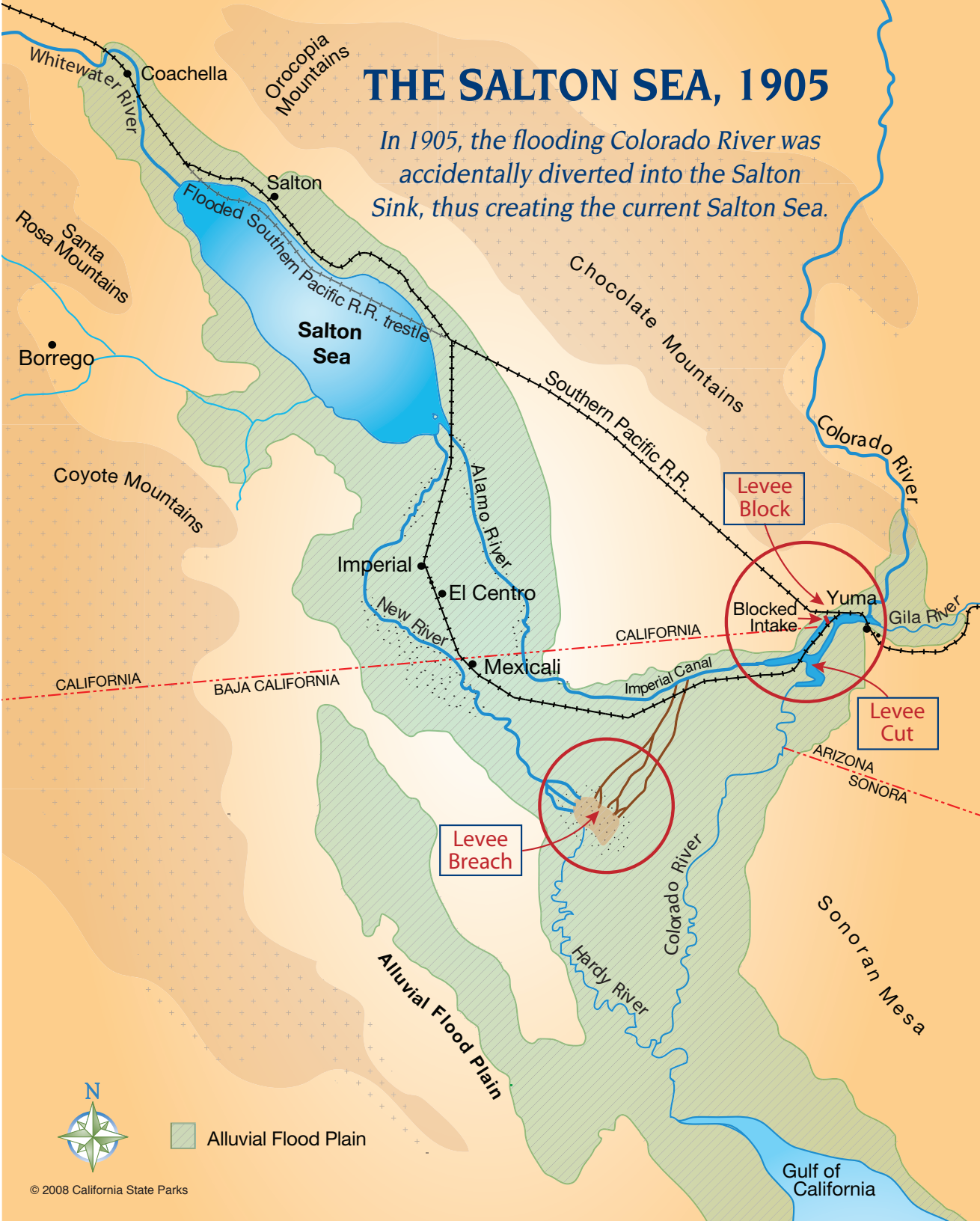
The native people may have met their first Europeans in 1540 when Melchior Diaz explored the area for Hernán Cortés. Later Juan Bautista de Anza, looking for a trade route, traveled through the Salton Sink in 1774.

Historians estimate that as many as 10,000 Cahuilla once lived here. Their first encounter with Anglo-Americans came in the 1840s, when they permitted travelers to pass through their lands. By the 1850s the Cahuilla lands had been given to settlers, and the native people lost the resources they needed to survive. Finally, the introduction of diseases to which they had no immunity nearly decimated the Cahuilla. Today, about 3,000 Cahuilla descendants live on reservations administered by elected tribal councils. The Cahuilla have revived their traditional ceremonies, languages and crafts, and they are passing these skills on to the next generation.



# THE SALTON SEA, 1905

*In 1905, the flooding Colorado River was accidentally diverted into the Salton Sink, thus creating the current Salton Sea.*



## THE SEA'S GEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Geologically, the Salton Sink is a landlocked extension of the Gulf of California. The Salton Sea, California's largest lake, is 35 miles long, 15 miles wide, and 227 feet below sea level. Unlike most lakes, it has no natural outlet flowing to the ocean; whatever flows in, including agricultural runoff, does not flow out.

The sea is bordered by the Santa Rosa and Coyote Mountains to the west, the Orocopia Mountains to the north, and the Chocolate Mountains to the east. This present body of water is only the latest of many lakes that have filled this basin over the years, sometimes for centuries at a time, which explains the remains of both freshwater and sea creatures that can be seen high in the surrounding hills and mountains.

The Salton Sink basin was originally the northern part of what is now the Gulf of California. Flowing from the Rocky Mountains to the gulf, the river scoured out the formations of Arizona's Grand Canyon. In wet times, the river would fill the sink; at other times, it would bypass the sink, causing the lake to shrink or even to disappear.

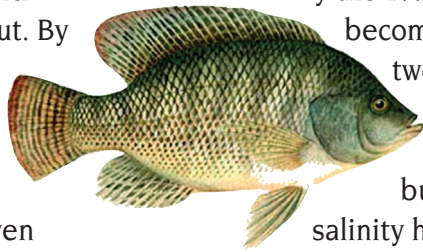
At times the gulf waters would flow upwards to meet the river, depositing salt water and sediment. With nowhere else to flow, these deposits formed a delta—a fan-shaped plain—southeast of the Salton Sink.

## THE “ACCIDENTAL SEA”

During the late 1800s, the California Development Company (CDC) envisioned an agricultural empire in the Colorado Desert. But they needed water to irrigate the fields and orchards they dreamed about. By 1901 the Colorado River had been tapped for this purpose; in two years it was irrigating more than 100,000 acres in what was even then being called “the Imperial Valley.”

However, the CDC had not provided an effective method for dealing with irrigation runoff or high water levels. In 1905, after an unusually wet winter, the Colorado River broke through poorly constructed canals and gates; for about 18 months, the river’s entire volume poured unchecked into the nearest low spot—the Salton Sink. Water inundated entire communities, the main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Torres-Martinez Reservation, and the New Liverpool Salt Company, a long-standing operation that mined the pure salt deposits from around the lake.

The Southern Pacific had re-routed forty miles of track, but another flood season could jeopardize the new route. In 1907, the railroad built a trestle and gathered tons of fill matter and boulders that they dumped into the streambed. When the last loads were dumped, cars and all, the water



subsided. By then the lake had flooded nearly 350,000 acres in the alluvial plain. The Salton Sea is so large that from some vantage points, the earth’s curvature hides the opposite shore.

By the 1950s, the Salton Sea had become a popular resort area with two yacht clubs. A large marina and a championship golf course attracted celebrities, but by the 1960s, increasing salinity had marred the dream of a desert Eden.

## PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

Over centuries the fragile ecosystem of the Salton Sea has provided sanctuary to an extremely diverse collection of wildlife and the critical habitats that nurture them. The sea holds hundreds of millions of fish that feed millions of wintering birds, including egrets, brown and white pelicans, Canada geese, snow geese, and northern pintails. Resident birds include Gambel’s quail, greater roadrunners, and endangered Yuma clapper rails. Birds of prey arrive in the spring, among them rough-legged hawks and peregrine falcons.

The vegetation includes drought-tolerant desert scrub, creosote bush, several varieties of desert saltbush, fan palms, and tamarisk. Cottonwoods and willows grow alongside freshwater streams, springs and salt marshes.

## THE PRESENT SALTON SEA

The Salton Sea supports significant segments of many migratory bird populations that eat fish. Unfortunately, the sea’s rising salinity threatens its vital importance to more than 400 bird species. With less than three inches of rainfall per year and limited sources of fresh water flow, the sea is now about 30 percent saltier than the ocean itself.



*Wintering birds*



*Sunset over fan palms and scrub*

The Salton Sea lacks any outlet, with inflow from only a few sources—the Whitewater River to the north, the Alamo and New rivers to the south, runoff from surrounding agricultural fields, and some municipal effluent and storm water. Growing concentrations of salt may cause all but the hardy tilapia to stop reproducing. As salinity increases, dissolved oxygen in the water decreases, making the sea unsustainable for most species of fish. Less food for migrating birds could eventually mean fewer birds overall.

### CAN IT BE SAVED?

The sea presently supports 80 to 90 percent of the North American endangered bird populations. With more than 90 percent of California's wetlands converted to other uses, at least 50 species of birds listed as threatened, endangered, or of concern rely upon the Salton Sea for survival during migration.

Federal, state, tribal, and local entities, as well as concerned interest groups and individuals, are now working together to try to save Salton Sea. In 2003 the California legislature passed the Salton Sea Restoration Act, directing the State to “undertake the restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem and the permanent protection of the wildlife dependent on that ecosystem.” Finding effective methods to save this extraordinary resource is urgent.

### RECREATION

At least 100,000 visitors annually enjoy such activities as camping, picnicking, fishing, boating, water sports, kayaking, bird watching and hiking the trails.

#### **Bird Watching—**

Annually, as many as 1.5 million eared grebes and nearly half of California's population of white-faced ibis have been counted at the sea. Cormorants and cattle egrets maintain year-round nesting colonies.

From November through February, ranger staff offers guided boat tours; visitors may see tens of thousands of snow geese, Ross's and Canada geese, and scores of thousands of ducks. Marsh birds, shore birds, and waterfowl of nearly every description stop over to replenish themselves.

**Fishing—**Although rising salinity limits the diversity of fish that thrive here, fishing is still excellent. Tilapia (similar to perch) abound and have no legal limits. Occasional mullet and bass are also caught. As a solution to the sea's salinity is developed, there may be hope for the return of the locally famous corvina and sargo. Both shore and boat fishing are equally successful. A fishing jetty is available at Varner Harbor.



*Fishing is popular at Salton Sea.*

**Boating—**The Salton Sea is called the fastest lake in the U.S. because its high salt content allows boats to be more buoyant, while its below-sea-level elevation gives engines greater operating efficiency. Obey all posted speed limits.

**Camping—**Six campgrounds offer a total of 1,500 campsites, including some with full hookups. Reserve a site at (800) 444-7275 or [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).

- **Headquarters—**This area has two campgrounds. Headquarters, near the visitor center, has 15 sites with hookups. New Camp has access to hiking trails, a fishing jetty, the main boat ramp, sanitation stations and a boat washing area. Flush toilets, showers, and some hookups, plus a group camp without hookups, are on site.
- **Bombay Beach—**a popular primitive campground with beach camping, chemical toilets and piped water. This campground is at the southern end of the park near the town of Bombay Beach.
- **Salt Creek Beach—**Salt Creek flows through a primitive campground with chemical toilets, beach camping and bird watching.

- **Corvina Beach**—a primitive campground, popular for fishing, with chemical toilets and water. Access to the beach is not as convenient as at others; it has a drop-off that can be difficult.
- **Mecca Beach**—a large, developed campground for swimmers, boaters, and anglers, with easy beach access, flush toilets, showers and some full hookups.

**Hiking**—Nature trails loop around each campground. The best hiking can be found along the lake's shoreline.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Accessibility is continually improving. For details, call the park or see <http://access.parks.ca.gov>. A small Visitor Center at the park is generally accessible.

**Camping**—Varner Harbor Campground has one site near the harbor that is generally accessible. The harbor restroom is usable and has accessible parking nearby. Showers are generally accessible.

**Picnic Area**—Varner Harbor has one accessibly-designed picnic site on a concrete pad at the jetty. No water is available. Accessible parking and a portable toilet are nearby.

**Fishing**—No designated fishing facilities exist in the park, but many visitors fish from the Varner Harbor picnic area. A concrete pad at the accessible picnic site reaches nearly to the water's edge, permitting persons with mobility impairments to fish, but without railings or edge protection.

### PLEASE REMEMBER

In desert country, carry extra water and other essential supplies, and stay on authorized roads. In case of trouble, remain near vehicles and in shade until help arrives.

- No pets are allowed on beaches. Pets must be kept on a six-foot leash, and in a vehicle or tent at night. Please clean up after pets.
- All park features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or collected.
- Do not gather firewood—dead wood must be allowed to decompose naturally. Firewood is sold at most campgrounds.
- Each angler over the age of 16 must possess a valid California fishing license.

### NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, east of San Diego via Highways 78 and 79 from the east and west, and via I-8 from the south (760) 767-5311
- Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, in east San Diego County via Highway 78 (760) 767-5391
- Mount San Jacinto State Park, 25905 Highway 243, Idyllwild, CA 92549 (951) 659-2607



*A day at the beach at Salton Sea SRA*

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information, contact Sea and Desert Interpretive Association  
100-225 State Park Road, North Shore, CA 92254  
(760) 393-3810

# Salton Sea State Recreation Area

- Freeway
- Highway
- Paved Road
- Hiking Trail
- Railroad
- Accessible Feature
- Boat Launch
- Boating
- Campfire Center
- Campground
- Fishing
- Information
- Marina
- Nature Trail
- Park Headquarters
- Parking
- Picnic Area
- Primitive Campground
- Restrooms
- RV Camping
- RV Sanitation Station
- Showers
- Swimming
- Wind Warning Light

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