

Abert's Towhee

Melospiza aberti



Photo by Martin Meyers

Habitat Use Profile

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

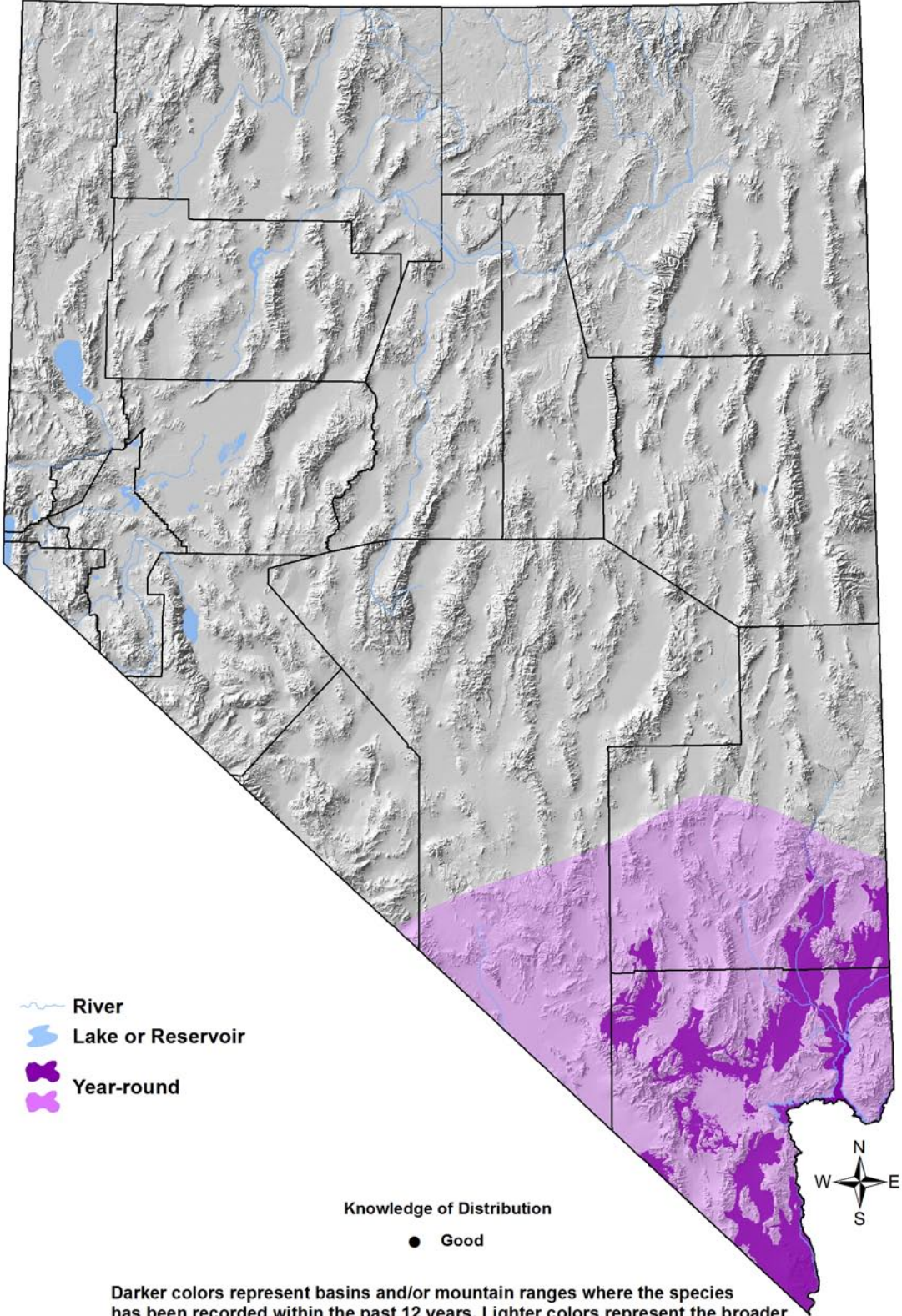
Conservation Profile

Priority Status	
Conservation Priority Species	
Species Concerns	
Historical declines 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 ⁷
Recent •	Stable ⁶
Population Size Estimates	
Nevada (NBC) •	2,300
Global •	210,000 ⁵
Percent of Global	1%
Population Objective	
Maintain / Increase ^{5, EO}	
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 ²	
Nest and Nesting Habits	
Nest Placement	In dense shrub or tree, 1.5-2.5 m [4.9 – 8.2 ft] above ground ⁷
Site Fidelity	High; species is sedentary with year-round residency
Other	Usually nests near water ⁷
Food Habits	
Basic	Ground / litter forager
Primary Diet	Invertebrates ⁷
Secondary Diet	Seeds, especially outside the breeding season ⁷

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Darker colors represent basins and/or mountain ranges where the species has been recorded within the past 12 years. Lighter colors represent the broader area within which the species is presumed to occur in appropriate habitat types.

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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,⁷ 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.⁴ 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.⁷ 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.³

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 (2010); ²GBBO unpublished Atlas data; ³Krueper et al.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

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Mojave Lowland Riparian Habitat. Photo by Jen Ballard.