



hosting the highest concentrations in North America of several species. Formed in 1905 when the Colorado River burst its canal and flooded the alkaline basin of the Imperial Valley, the lake has no outlet and is 25 percent saltier than the Pacific Ocean. At 227 feet below sea level, temperatures exceed 100 degrees for half the year; annual rainfall is less than an inch. In the past decade, the 380-square-mile lake has seen recurrent, massive die-offs of fish and water birds. In 1992, an estimated 150,000 eared grebes died of unknown causes. In 1996, avian botulism killed an estimated 20,000 birds, including 1,200 federally endangered California brown pelicans and 10-12% of the population of American white pelicans west of the Rockies. This year, nearly 6,000 birds died from avian botulism and Newcastle's disease. The '96 and '97 events were associated with a die-off in tilapia, an introduced African fish that is now the predominant species in the lake; diseased fish are suspected to be the source of the botulism toxin. *Vibrio* bacteria may have caused some of the fish mortalities; a lethal parasite of warm-water marine fish has also been identified recently. Under closed conditions, such as aquaria and the Salton Sea, *Amyloodinium ocellatum* can build up to extremely high levels; healthy fish can die after only 12 hours of exposure. The parasite lives only in high-saline conditions. Now that it is present and able to reproduce without control, persistent, chronic die-offs of fish may be expected to continue. The *Amyloodinium* parasite represents a threat to the overall health of the Salton Sea ecosystem. Additional environmental stresses include runoff from 500,000 acres of industrial farmland and 25 million gallons a day of (often raw) sewage from a Mexican border city 30 miles away. Congress has appropriated \$5 million to the Salton Sea Authority in fiscal year 1998 to identify an engineering solution to the sea's rising salinity. On October 3, the House Subcommittee on Water and Power conducted a field hearing in Palm Desert, California, to assess the situation and hear testimony on engineering solutions. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service led a group of nearly 100 scientists and other interested parties in a 5 day workshop that developed a \$36 million needs assessment for research and restoration of the Salton Sea ecosystem. For further information, Contact: Carol Roberts, U.S.FWS, <carol\_a\_roberts@mail.fws.gov>.

## RELAXATION OF ANTI-BAITING REGULATIONS PROPOSED

Defenders of Wildlife, National Audubon Society, and American Bird Conservancy have led efforts to resist changes in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's baiting policies under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The proposals that are in draft regulation form would result in the greatest changes to the anti-baiting provisions under the MBTA since the initial regulations were adopted in 1935. U.S.FWS Field Agents are strongly opposed to the changes as is their Federal Wildlife Officers' Association and several State law enforcement agencies such as the Maryland Natural

Resource Police. Conservationists and the agents strongly believe that the proposals to require proof of scienter (knowledge) in all baiting cases and easing the present restrictions allowing for the manipulation of grain crops to attract birds to the gun will seriously undermine the enforcement of the MBTA and anti-baiting regulations. On August 26, representatives of Defenders, Audubon, and ABC met with the Director of the FWS, Jamie Clark, on this issue and subsequently sent a joint letter to her outlining their concerns. The groups detailed their concerns that: 1) the changes could have serious implications for the future viability of the MBTA as a means of protecting migratory birds by relaxing the strict liability standard; 2) the proposed changes rather than simplifying hunters' responsibilities, create loopholes for virtually any hunter who is baiting birds; and 3) allowing hunting associated with manipulated natural vegetation, including millet, will not result in significantly more habitat or food for birds, but will make enforcement more difficult, and will only increase the killing of migratory birds. The FWS is under pressure from some Congressmen and hunters to ease the restrictions on baiting ducks, geese and doves. House Resources Chairman Don Young of Alaska has introduced H.R. 741 to force these changes legislatively. It appears likely that some form of regulations will be forthcoming, probably at the end of this year or the beginning of next year. Write or Call: Jamie Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Contact: Kathleen Rogers, NAS, 202-861-2242 or <krogers@audubon.org>.

## DEPREDAATION ORDER FOR DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANTS AND OTHER BIRDS

In response to complaints from fish farmers (primarily in the Southeast), the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has proposed allowing fish farmers in 33 states to kill an unlimited number of cormorants preying on their fish stocks without obtaining individual permits. According to the FWS, 92,000 cormorants would be killed annually. The population of Double-crested cormorants is estimated at 1-2 million birds and is growing by 8% a year. After reviewing the written concerns of leaders in the bird conservation community led by members of the Policy Council, FWS is revising the rule to be more restrictive. The rule may be finalized later this month. Now, recreational fishermen and guides in the North are seeking similar relief from cormorants and other fish-eating birds that consume wild fish. Fishing and tourism play a significant role in the local economy in depressed rural districts of Minnesota and New York, where many believe cormorants are causing a decline in fish populations. In response to pressure from Representatives Colin Peterson (D-MN) and John M. McHugh (R-NY), FWS has pledged to draft a control strategy by next summer; the congressmen are calling for an interim plan. Further, language was

