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Another Layer of Protection for ESLT’s Black Lake Preserve

Follow Highway 120 northwest from Benton and you’ll enter Adobe Valley. There, distant mountain peaks frame wide expanses of fragrant, blooming sagebrush. Native Americans once used this valley as a trading and hunting route, traversing vast fields where wildlife like pronghorn, pygmy rabbits, and more abound. Crowds of Bi-State sage-grouse once gathered here in traditional annual mating dances, on dancing grounds called leks. Waterfowl frequented a string of alkali lakes and wet meadows between the Owens Valley and Mono Lake, many of which still exist today.

After thoroughly exploring Adobe Valley, a woman named Michelle Browner fell particularly in love with one place: Black Lake. The lake is one of Adobe Valley’s rare desert wetlands that some call “emerald islands,” a name that captures their breathtaking quality. After many visits, Michelle came to feel that she “could not and would not ever want to have the land around Black Lake developed.” When it came up for sale, she purchased Black Lake and donated the property in 2014 to Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT).

Now, a three-year collaboration between Eastern Sierra Land Trust and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has led to the permanent protection of this oasis in the desert with a Wetlands Reserve Easement. This means that the property is now restricted from all development, hardscaping, and road building.

Michelle donated the property to ESLT because she knew she could trust them to protect it from development. Although ESLT has owned Black Lake Preserve since 2014, they believe that land is most permanently protected once development rights are extinguished, something that can be accomplished through tools like conservation easements or Wetlands Reserve Easements. Not only does ESLT help other landowners place their land under such easements, but they also put their own land under easements. As a result of this new Wetlands Reserve Easement, Black Lake is protected forever and can never be developed by any landowner, even by ESLT.

This is good for visitors who can forever enjoy the natural beauty of this historic place. And it’s great for all the wildlife that depend on sagebrush areas. Many iconic species like pronghorn and Bi-State sage-grouse require vast open areas like Adobe Valley in order for their populations to thrive.

ESLT and NRCS have also together created a plan to care for Black Lake in the years to come. NRCS funding associated with this three-year conservation plan will help care for native plants, repair fences, and install new pedestrian gates for visitors to Black Lake Preserve to easily access the wetlands and lake area.



In past years, volunteers have helped care for Black Lake Preserve. ESLT has welcomed students from Orange Lutheran High School and University of Redlands to the Preserve to remove debris and care for habitat there. Members of the Eastern Sierra Audubon Society and the Bristlecone Chapter of the California Native Plant Society have also volunteered at Black Lake Preserve. Their help has ensured that the Preserve can continue providing safe and healthy homes for wildlife.

Once it's safe to host volunteer Stewardship Days once again, ESLT will announce such opportunities on their website and social media and in local press.

In the meantime, ESLT encourages the public to visit Black Lake Preserve. Its natural beauty is striking, and it's teeming with wildlife. Bring your binoculars too—Black Lake is a great place to spot rare birds. Its wetlands are an important stopover for migratory birds, earning it a designation by Audubon Society as an “Important Bird Area.”

To get to Black Lake Preserve from Bishop, drive 34 miles north on Highway 6 to the town of Benton. Turn left (west) on Highway 120. Go through the historic town of Benton Hot Springs and climb the hill to the intersection of Benton Crossing Road and Highway 120. Two primary dirt roads access the property from Highway 120—both are accessible by most passenger cars, though the presence of shrubs next to the narrow roads means that cars may receive scratches (“Nevada pinstripes”) from wayward branches. Enjoy!

Eastern Sierra Land Trust works with willing landowners to protect vital lands in the Eastern Sierra region for their scenic, agricultural, natural, recreational, historical, and watershed values. To learn more about ESLT's work, visit www.eslt.org.



Photo Caption 1: Black Lake Preserve is a rare desert wetland in Adobe Valley. Such areas are sometimes called “emerald islands,” a name that captures their breathtaking quality. Photo by Randy Keller, ESLT.



Photo Caption 2: ESLT’s new wetland reserve easement at Black Lake Preserve ensures that wildlife and migratory birds like the American avocet can always find a home at the Preserve. Photo by Nicole Beaulac.

You may contact kristen@eslt.org for high resolution files of these images.