Abert’s Towhee
*Melozone aberti*

**Conservation Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Status</th>
<th>Conservation Priority Species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Species Concerns</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical declines</td>
<td>Habitats threats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other Rankings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Nevada (NBC)</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Percent of Global</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Nevada Bird Count</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Population Objective**

Maintain / Increase 5, EO

**Population Size Estimates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nevada (NBC)</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Percent of Global</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>210,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trends**

Historical • Rangewide declines7

Recent • Stable6

**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

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**Habitat Use Profile**

**Habitats Used in Nevada**

- Mojave Lowland Riparian
- Mesquite-Acacia Springs (Agriculture)

**Key Habitat Parameters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plant Composition</th>
<th>Willow, cottonwood, mesquite, acacia, saltcedar, quailbush, and other dense, mesic or semi-mesic shrubs and small trees7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plant Density</td>
<td>Dense shrub and forb/grass cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaic</td>
<td>No known landscape mosaic requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to Water</td>
<td>Most abundant close to water EO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Vegetation Removal</td>
<td>Negative to shrub/understory removal7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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                                                                                                       |

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**Natural History Profile**

**Seasonal Presence in Nevada**

Year-round

**Known Breeding Dates in Nevada**

Early April – early August2

**Nest and Nesting Habits**

| Nest Placement          | In dense shrub or tree, 1.5-2.5 m [4.9 – 8.2 ft] above ground7 |
| Site Fidelity           | High; species is sedentary with year-round residency                                                                 |
| Other                   | Usually nests near water7                                                                                        |

**Food Habits**

| Basic                   | Ground / litter forager                                                                                             |
| Primary Diet            | Invertebrates7                                                                                                       |
| Secondary Diet          | Seeds, especially outside the breeding season7                                                                     |

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Confidence in Available Data: • High ◇ Moderate ○ Low
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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, 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. 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. 59-1) poses similar risks. Fortunately, Abert’s Towhee responds very well to most riparian restoration efforts, including those that target Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Habitat at Transect</th>
<th>Transects Occupied</th>
<th>Birds/40 ha (95% C.I.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowland Riparian</td>
<td>50% (18/36)</td>
<td>5.3 (3.3 – 7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>80% (4/5)</td>
<td>2.6 (0.6 – 4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesquite-Acacia</td>
<td>14% (2/14)</td>
<td>0.5 (n/a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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*).
Main Threats and Challenges

Habitat Threats

- Heavy livestock grazing that significantly reduces foliage density in the shrub and ground cover layers
- Water diversions or groundwater pumping that lower water tables and reduce density of native riparian shrubs, forbs, and grasses. Saltcedar is more resistant to these impacts.
- Flood control and other channel engineering activity that physically damage habitat or alter hydrology
- Removal of large areas of saltcedar without revegetation efforts of native riparian habitat
- Loss of habitat to fire

Research, Planning, and Monitoring Challenges

- Patch size and landscape mosaic preferences are not well characterized
- Factors promoting the use of agricultural lands and mesquite-acacia washes are not explicitly known, although foliage density of understory and ground cover is important
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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); ⁸⁰Expert opinion
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Mojave Lowland Riparian Habitat. Photo by Jen Ballard.