

# Your favorite Utah outdoor activity is likely tied to the Great Salt Lake

WEDNESDAY , MAY 04, 2016 - 6:00 AM



BENJAMIN ZACK, LEIA LARSEN/Standard-Examiner

Large change to the Great Salt Lake can change recreational opportunities both on the lake and around the region.

## LEIA LARSEN, Standard-Examiner Staff

It might not have the allure of red rock country; it might not draw big dollars like the winter sports industry. But the notion that the Great Salt Lake has no appeal for tourists — or for hikers, bikers, boaters and birders — is misguided.

“Visitors come here, they stay here, they want to see iconic places and have these very meaningful experiences with natural resources that they can’t get anywhere else,” said Bob Barrett, manager of the [Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear_river_migratory_bird_refuge/) ([http://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear\\_river\\_migratory\\_bird\\_refuge/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear_river_migratory_bird_refuge/)). “And they’re willing to spend a significant amount of their income to do these things.”

Around 1 million people visit the Great Salt Lake each year to recreate and to enjoy its unique landscape. Those visitors walk along the Spiral Jetty in the north and on Stansbury Island nature trails in the south. They hunt at 25 private duck clubs and five different state Waterfowl Management Areas. They spend around \$74.6 million annually, according to a 2012 study.

But with the dropping lake levels, much of the recreation tourists and residents of the Wasatch Front enjoy — and the dollars that come with it — also fall under threat.

“As we look at challenges in the future for the state of Utah, with water, pollution and growth, one of the greatest assets Utah has when it comes to its economy is outdoor recreation,” Barrett said.

Here are some of the outdoor assets threatened by the lake’s declining elevation.

## **Skiing**

With all its salt, the Great Salt Lake doesn’t freeze. When winter weather moves over the lake, it collects extra water and dumps it as snow in the nearby mountains. Lake effect storms account for between 5 to 10 percent of the total snow in the Wasatch, which might not sound like much.

“But in any given winter, the difference between getting a big lake effect and not getting one can have more significant impacts on (the) ski season,” said Erik Crossman, an atmospheric scientist working at the University of Utah.

Lake effect snow also tends to come early in the season and help build a base for Christmas visitor traffic. Non-resident skiers and snowboarders spent around \$1 billion in Utah during the 2012-13 season, according a 2014 economic study.

As the lake shrinks and more lakebed becomes exposed, [blowing dust becomes problematic for snow.](http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=7842) (<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=7842>)

Experts say snowpack is melting earlier, part of which seems to be brought on by dust collecting on snow.

Because dust is darker than snow, it absorbs more heat from the sun. Dust-covered snow could melt out as much as a month earlier, a disastrous prospect for both the ski season and water supplies in northern Utah.

## **Biking and hiking**

Antelope Island has around 10 trails for all ability levels. Stansbury Island has a nine-mile loop. Road cyclists also bike through the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and along the Davis County Causeway leading to Antelope Island.

Antelope Island is the second-most visited state park in Utah, falling just behind Dead Horse Point near Moab. Only around one-quarter of the island's visitors come from the Wasatch Front, according to park officials. Around 40 percent of those visitors come from places outside the U.S.

While a dropping lake doesn't impact hiking and biking activities directly, it does impact the scenery enticing visitors to summit Frary Peak or survey Stansbury Island.

As more water is diverted there won't be much more lake for those hikers and bikers to look at.

"People say 'let's dam Bear River. And the other side wants to make more evaporation ponds,'" said Jolene Rose, a biologist at Antelope Island State Park.

Decisions like that have a domino-effect that impacts the lake more than they think.

## **Birdwatching**

Over 250 bird species visit the lake to the east and rest during migration. They also draw avian enthusiasts from around the globe. Around 200,000 people visit the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge each year and 60 percent of those visitors travel more than 100 miles to get there, according to Kathi Stopher, the refuge's visitor services manager.

All that bird tourism helps boost the economy.

For every dollar the government appropriates to national bird refuges like Bear River, \$4.87 goes back to local economies, according to the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

Birders also visit over 10 Waterfowl Management Areas and public birdwatching sites around the lake, from Locomotive Springs in the north to Timpie Springs in the south.

The Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands estimates waterfowl viewing in Utah had an economic value of \$100 million to \$189 million in 2008.

The dropping lake, however, puts pressure on birds.

"The birds are here for three reasons. Water, water and water," said Barrett, the bird refuge manager. "As we change the system, lessening the amount of water and the amount of habitat associated with those waters, that has a tremendous impact on wildlife populations, especially water-dependent wildlife populations."

## Waterfowl hunting

Hunters make around 100,000 trips to the Great Salt Lake ecosystem, visiting both public lands and private clubs, according to a 2012 economic report

([http://www.gslcouncil.utah.gov/docs/2012/Jan/GSL\\_FINAL\\_REPORT-1-26-12.PDF](http://www.gslcouncil.utah.gov/docs/2012/Jan/GSL_FINAL_REPORT-1-26-12.PDF)).

One of the most popular public sites for waterfowl hunting, Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge ([http://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear\\_river\\_migratory\\_bird\\_refuge/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/bear_river_migratory_bird_refuge/)), saw hunter visits jump dramatically in recent years.

“From last year to this year’s hunt season, we’ve seen a 67 percent increase in hunting use,” said Kathi Stopher, visitor services manager at the refuge.

And since most of the refuge’s visitors aren’t local, those hunters benefit the local economy.

“We know when water fowlers come into town, if they’re aren’t part of local hunting clubs, they spend money on lodging and on miscellaneous things, like food and supplies,” Stopher said.

In 2010, waterfowl hunters from the public spent \$180 per day ([http://www.gslcouncil.utah.gov/docs/2012/Jan/GSL\\_FINAL\\_REPORT-1-26-12.PDF](http://www.gslcouncil.utah.gov/docs/2012/Jan/GSL_FINAL_REPORT-1-26-12.PDF)) on their trips, according to the 2012 report. Private club hunters spent around \$563 each day. Those waterfowl hunters spent an estimated \$26.5 million total on their trips, and another \$35.4 million on equipment bought within the Salt Lake City area.

But the waterfowl depend on the wetland habitat around the lake. As the Great Salt Lake drops in elevation, that habitat is threatened by loss of water and blowing dust from the exposed lakebed.

“If you get habitat that’s inundated constantly by that accumulation of salts ... it impacts the soils and the plants. It makes them much less productive,” said Refuge Manager Barrett. “There’s a fine line between very productive habitat and less productive habitat.”

## Boating

The Great Salt Lake lures a passionate group of sailors

(<http://www.standard.net/Environment/2015/10/11/Marinas-in-jeopardy-as-Great-Salt-Lake-continues-to-dry-up>) who have been stuck high and dry as the water levels fall.

The lake has only two public access points for boats. The marina at Antelope Island is out of water. Sailors, kayakers, paddleboarders and rowers at the marina at Great Salt Lake State Park await much-needed dredging. Rocky bioherm reefs are surfacing and becoming navigational

hazards for duck hunters.



### Great Salt Lake State Park & Marina

about 2 years ago

CAUTION TO ALL DUCK HUNTERS! The area most hunted by boat (Lee Creek, North Canal, and Goggins) now is partially obstructed by a reef known as the Goggins Reef. This is a large bioherm complex that has now broken the surface of the water and could be a hazard to navigation. We have posted some danger buoys and will be posting more to mark this area. It is still possible to get to your favorite Great Salt Lake hunting grounds this season but caution should be used when navigating to those areas. If you have any questions about how to safely navigate the reef please call the Harbor Master or post a question on Facebook

6      2      1

But even Utah boaters who have never spent time on the Great Salt Lake still benefit from it.

The Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (<http://www.ffsl.utah.gov/>) collects royalties from mineral companies on the lake. It's the division's main source of funding. The Utah Legislature appropriates ([http://le.utah.gov/lfa/reports/cobi2015/LI\\_RDA.htm](http://le.utah.gov/lfa/reports/cobi2015/LI_RDA.htm)) those funds to projects throughout the state.

In 2015, Great Salt Lake royalties helped fund ([http://le.utah.gov/lfa/reports/cobi2015/LI\\_RDA.htm](http://le.utah.gov/lfa/reports/cobi2015/LI_RDA.htm)) access improvement at Bear Lake and dredging the marina at Utah Lake.

They funded removal of navigational hazards from rivers, like fences, concrete and abandoned pipelines. They helped stabilize the banks of the Jordan River. They funded more inspections for invasive quagga mussels.

"(The Great Salt Lake) allows us to do a lot of good restoration work on the Green and Colorado rivers, on the Jordan River, on Utah Lake. It's important for all our sovereign lands for sure," said Laura Ault, sovereign lands program coordinator. "So we have concerns about lower lake levels."

Last year, FFSL collected just under \$10.7 million in royalties from the Great Salt Lake. Ault said if the lake keeps falling, it could impact mineral companies on the lake as their cost of operation keep going up.

Combine that with a drop in the global price for the minerals companies harvest from the lake, and "you could have a perfect storm, potentially," Ault said.

Contact Reporter Leia Larsen at 801-625-4289 or [llarsen@standard.net](mailto:llarsen@standard.net). Follow her on [Facebook.com/leiaoutside](http://www.Facebook.com/leiaoutside) (<http://www.Facebook.com/leiaoutside>) or on Twitter [@LeiaLarsen](http://www.twitter.com/leialarsen) (<http://www.twitter.com/leialarsen>).