



[Collette Gaal: Protecting Owens Valley's Natural Habitat](#)

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Maintaining and operating nearly 315,000 acres of mostly undeveloped watershed lands is no small feat, but LADWP's Water System does just that in the Eastern Sierra where a major portion of Los Angeles' water supply comes from.

LADWP's [Northern District Water Operations Division](#) has over 250 employees who work and live in Kern, Inyo and Mono counties. Their job: maintaining a number of water supply facilities including, the First and Second Los Angeles Aqueducts, several reservoirs, and hundreds of miles of canals and ditches. Within Water Operations is a dedicated [watershed management](#) group, staffed with biologists, botanists, a soil scientist, and other technical and administrative personnel who monitor the Owens Valley watershed ecosystems and the preserve water supplies to the city while protecting water quality, habitat and wildlife.

Recently, we sat down with Watershed Resources Specialist Collette Gaal, who has worked with LADWP for nine of her 25 years in the environmental field. Focusing on LADWP's water management projects, Gaal has been a part of several enhancement projects including the Owens Lake Dust Mitigation Project and the Lower Owens River Project.



Collette Gaal with members of the LADWP Northern District Watershed Resources team at Owens Lake. From left: Jeff Nordin, Ron Tucker, Gaal, Jason Morgan and Debbie House. (Photo courtesy of Collette Gaal)

Intake: What inspired you to follow a career in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)?

CG: Growing up, I liked biology, hiking, camping and anything to do with being outdoors.

Intake: Tell us more about what you do, and some of your favorite projects you have had the chance to work on.

CG: My job includes fulfilling LADWP's biological mitigation requirements for exporting water to Los Angeles, obtaining environmental permits for projects, maintaining the Los Angeles Aqueduct waterways and Owens Lake dust control. I also help coordinate the annual [Owens Lake Bird Festival](#), held each April. In addition, I support measuring flow in the creeks high in the mountains. The field trips for this project are interesting because we're in the beautiful countryside, and you have to travel a rugged four-wheel trip to get to some of these spots.

Intake: What are some of your favorite recreational activities in the Eastern Sierra?

CG: The Eastern Sierra is marvelous for many outdoor activities. Some weekends, it is hard to decide what to do. You can cross-country ski, road- or mountain-bike, kayak, explore historical mining ruins or Native American wickiups (lodges) or view the beautiful wildflowers at many elevations. I have not yet rafted the Owens River, but it is on my list!

Intake: In your opinion, what makes the Owens Valley watershed unique?

CG: The Owens Valley watershed is high desert, adjacent to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Much of the land is owned by the City of Los Angeles and federal agencies (Inyo National Forest) and so the area is lightly populated and relatively undeveloped. There is abundant wildlife, fascinating geology, and cultural history. The Paiute have a large presence in the area and carry on traditional activities such as pine nut harvesting. Some of the interesting geology includes volcanic cinder cones, Bishop tuff, consolidated ash, hot springs and the weathered granite formations in the Buttermilks (Sierra Nevada foothills) and Alabama Hills.

Intake: There are a lot of community events in the Owens Valley - what events do you most look forward to each year?

CG: My favorite local event is the [Bishop ultra-marathon](#), a benefit for Eastern Sierra Youth Outdoor Program and Inyo County Search and Rescue. I do the 20-mile fun run (I walk a lot of it!). It is in the Buttermilks and is a locally supported event. They even have a local caterer who cooks food at the finish line.

