

THE SALT PLAYA HABITAT

The **salt playa (flats) habitat** is a large desert to the west and south of the Great Salt Lake. It is an area that has been and can still be covered by water when the lake is extremely high. As waters have receded the salt left behind accumulated creating a dry habitat with hypersaline soil. This surface is famous for the conditions it provides for high-speed cars.



Plants living in the salt flats have special adaptations that allow them to deal with the high salt content in the soil. These plants are known as **halophytes**, meaning that they have specialized cells for storing salt. Salt grass (pictured) secretes salt crystals through glands on the surface of the leaves. Iodine bush stores salt in fleshy, succulent segments arranged like sausage links. Other halophytes like greasewood or four-winged saltbush store salt in leaves only temporarily. When leaves can hold no more salt, they die and fall off the plant. Shadscale shrubs have spines to protect them from consumers and leaves covered by salt-secreting

hairs. When the hairs are full of salt they burst, covering the leaves with a shiny coating of salt.

Animals in this habitat have adapted to the unusual conditions in many ways. The meadow vole (pictured) tunnels extensively under the salty soil clearing areas where seeds from the salt grass and other plants can be stored. The tunnels also provide a way to quickly escape predators like the harrier hawk. Harriers build nests low to the ground from a variety of halophytic plants and fly near to the playa in search of voles, snakes and insects like tiger beetles.



Tiger beetles live in salty soil consuming dropped grass seeds and are eaten by plovers, hawks, red foxes, skunks and raccoons. Plovers build shallow nests on the ground in the salt playa and fly south when the weather turns cold.