



The Chat



Kerncrest Audubon Society, Ridgecrest, California

May 2014

May CALENDAR

Sat	May 3	all day	BIRDATHON
Wed	May 7	9:00 am	Cow Heaven Spring
Sat	May 10	7:00 am	Desert Tortoise Natural Area
Wed	May 14	6:00 pm	Board Meeting: Suttons'
Thu	May 15	6:00 pm	Annual Meeting

FIELD TRIP

DESERT TORTOISE NATURAL AREA

Field Trip Leader: Hector Villalobos
 The Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) encompasses over 25,000 acres of public land. It was established in 1976 as an area of critical environmental concern because it has one of the highest known densities of desert tortoises in the Mojave Desert. The desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) is a threatened and endangered species. The BLM teamed-up with the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee to manage this habitat in its natural state, free from conflict with other land uses such as grazing, mining, and motorized recreation. This has benefited many other species that can be seen at the DTNA.

The DTNA is home to desert species as the greater roadrunner, Le Conte's thrasher, loggerhead shrike, burrowing owl, and other songbirds and raptors. Don't forget the desert tortoise and other reptiles. During wet seasons there are plenty of annual wildflowers and grasses.

Field trip participants should meet at the Albertson's parking lot, near the gas station, on South China Lake Blvd. From there, we can car pool to the DTNA. We should depart the parking lot at 7 am. The

DTNA is located near California City. We will travel south on Hwy 395 to Randsburg Mojave Road, a graded dirt road that intersects Hwy 395 just south of Red Mountain, taking that about 12.5 miles SW to the DTNA parking area.

Bring plenty of drinking water, hat, sunscreen, good hiking shoes or boots, snacks and/or lunch, and your bird watching gear. There are several hiking trail options, 1/2 mile to longer.

To sign up or ask questions, call Hector Villalobos at 760-446-4908.

BIRDATHON

By the time you get this newsletter, the Birdathon will be past, BUT IT IS NOT TOO LATE TO CONTRIBUTE! The number and list of species sighted will have to wait for the June edition of The Chat, but fixed contributions are always welcome. Mail contributions to PO Box 984, Ridgecrest CA 93556.

COW HEAVEN SPRING CLEANUP

It's time for our annual trip with the BLM and Quail Unlimited folks to check on, clean up and maintain the watering "system" at Cow Heaven Spring.

Meet at the Inyokern post office at 9:00 am on Wednesday, May 7th and car pool from there. Bring a 4-wheel drive high-clearance vehicle if you have one, otherwise plan to ride with someone who does.

Bring a lunch, gloves, sturdy shoes and your binoculars! If you don't feel up to working, come anyway and enjoy the trip!

SURPRISE CANYON - WHAT A SURPRISE!

Our program for the month of May will include a presentation by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees Shelley Ellis and Marty Dicks.

Shelley and Marty are longtime employees of the local BLM Ridgecrest Field Office. Shelley is the lead wildlife biologist, overseeing natural and biological resource programs. Marty is the wilderness expert and lead recreation specialist overseeing the management of designated wilderness areas. Both Shelley and Marty have dedicated many years to evaluating and monitoring some very surprising BLM areas within the Ridgecrest Field Office area. One such area is known as Surprise Canyon, the focus of Shelley and Marty's presentation. With many beautiful photographs, they will present a virtual tour of this sensitive area where a perennial spring-fed stream gives life to a lush riparian habitat in the middle of a rugged desert wilderness with a surprise around every turn.

This is our annual meeting, so refreshments will be provided. Come to the Maturango Museum on Thursday, May 15 at 6:00 pm.

Kerncrest Audubon Society Board of Directors

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Vice President	Hector Villalobos	760-446-4908
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Valley Sightings – April 2014

Please report unusual sightings to Susan Steele at 377-5220 (home) or 939-1722 (work), or by email at steele7@verizon.net.

A female **Common Goldeneye** was noted at the ponds Apr 22 (SLS). What maybe the same bird was also seen Apr 27 (TW, LA, TL), Apr 28 (AS), and Apr 29 (SLS).

A **Wood Duck** was at the ponds Apr 26 (TW, LA).

A **Horned Grebe** was at the ponds Apr 27-28 (TL).

An **American Bittern** was at the ponds Apr 27 (TL).

A **Swainson's Hawk** was S of Inyokern Apr 28 (SLS).

An **Osprey** flew in from the SE and went from B Mt, over the ponds and off toward the Sierra on Apr 17 (SLS). Another **Osprey** was at the ponds Apr 27 (TW, LA).

FOS for **Snowy Plover** was from the ponds Apr 19 (TW).

FOS for **Semipalmated Plover** was from the ponds Apr 10 (SLS).

FOS for **Spotted Sandpiper** was from the ponds Apr 16 (SLS).

FOS for **Lesser Yellowlegs** was from the ponds Apr 5 (TL).

Whimbrels were at the ponds Apr 8-10 (SLS, TL), the golf course Apr 14 (SLS), and the evaporation fields Apr 12 (L&SSu).

FOS for **Long-billed Curlew** was from the ponds Apr 17 (TL).

FOS for **Marbled Godwit** was from the ponds Apr 26 (TW, TL).

The **Red Knot** at the ponds Apr 26 was our 8th valley record (TW).

Short-billed Dowitchers were at the ponds Apr 10, 22, 26, and 27 (SLS, TW, LA, TL).

FOS for **Dunlin** was from the ponds Apr 10 (SLS).

A **Sanderling** was at the ponds Apr 27 (AS).

FOS for **Wilson's Phalarope** was from the ponds Apr 16 (SLS).

FOS for **Red-necked Phalarope** was from the ponds Apr 19 (TW).

FOS for **Franklin's Gull** was from the ponds Apr 6 (AS).

A **Herring Gull** and a **Thayer's Gull**, 5th valley record, together made a nice comparison Apr 10 (SLS).

The **Least Tern** at the ponds Apr 19 was the 11th valley record and our earliest record by about a month (TL).

FOS for **Caspian Tern** was from the ponds Apr 1 (TL).

FOS for **Black Tern** was from the ponds Apr 22 (SLS).

Up to five **White-winged Doves** were in Ridgecrest throughout the month (EC).

FOS for **Lesser Nighthawk** was from Ridgecrest Apr 20 (LS).

FOS for **Vaux's Swift** was from the ponds Apr 26 (TW, LA, TL).

Belted Kingfishers were at the ponds Apr 8, 16, 19, and 21 (SLS, TL, BB).

A **Red-naped Sapsucker** was at the college Apr 7 (SLS).

A **Peregrine Falcon** was at the ponds Apr 1, 5, 17, and 19 (TL, TW, LA, SLS).

The **Prairie Falcon** in a Ridgecrest yard Apr 6 was a new yard bird (BBu).

FOS for **Olive-sided Flycatcher** was from Indian Wells Canyon on Apr 28 (L&SSu).

FOS for **Hammond's Flycatcher** was from Sand Canyon Apr 6 (SLS, BS).

FOS for **Ash-throated** and **Gray Flycatchers** were from Indian Wells Canyon on Apr 11 (L&SSu).

FOS for **Dusky Flycatcher** was from Sand Canyon on Apr 11 (SE, DBu).

FOS for **Pacific-slope Flycatcher** was from Ridgecrest Apr 10 (L&SSu).

FOS for **Cassin's Vireo** was from the cemetery Apr 6 (AS).

Two **American Crows** were in Ridgecrest Apr 9 and what were probably the same birds were seen at the evaporation fields on the 12 (LS).

A **Townsend's Solitaire** was at the college Apr 7 and 16 (SLS).

Seven **Western Bluebirds** were in Sand Canyon Apr 6 (SLS, BS).

Two **Black-and-white Warblers** in one month! The first was SW of Inyokern Apr 19 (SM), and the second was at the college Apr 27 (JS).

FOS for **Nashville Warbler** was from S of Inyokern Apr 9 (BS).

FOS for **MacGillvary's Warbler** was from the college and cemetery on Apr 20 (BB).

FOS for **Yellow Warbler** was from the ponds Apr 8 (SLS).

FOS for **Black-throated Gray Warbler** was from SW of Inyokern Apr 2 (LK).

FOS for **Townsend's Warbler** was from the ponds Apr 19 (TL).

FOS for **Hermit Warbler** was from the college Apr 19 (TL).

FOS for **Green-tailed Towhee** was from Ridgecrest Apr 4 (BBu).

What could be our wintering **Swamp Sparrow** was seen again at the ponds Apr 10 (TL).

The **Harris's Sparrow** continued to be seen at the ponds through at least Apr 27 (BB, TL, TW, LA).

FOS for **Western Tanager** was from N of Inyokern Apr 20 (BB).

FOS for **Black-headed Grosbeak** was from SW of Inyokern Apr 2 (LK).

FOS for **Blue Grosbeak** was from the ponds Apr 27 (TW, LA).

FOS for **Lazuli Bunting** was from Indian Wells Canyon Apr 11 (LSu, SE).

Lawrence's Goldfinches were at the college Apr 5-7 and 19 (TL).

Thanks to the following observers: *Liga Auzins, Bob Barnes, Brenda Burnett, Encar Card, Shelley Ellis, Lisa Lavelle, Tim Ludwick, Louise Knecht, Susan Moore, Alison Sheehey, Joyce Seibold, Bob Steele, Lee and Shirley Sutton, Tom Wurster*



HOORAY!!

The California Energy Commission just dealt the final death blow to a proposed solar project that was once one of the most controversial in the California Desert. With no one making any moves to object, the CEC terminated the application process for the Ridgecrest Solar Power Project, which would have generated 250 megawatts on almost 4,000 acres of public lands in the western Mojave.

Tuesday's move by the CEC will surprise no one: the project has been effectively dead for some years. The proponent, Solar Millennium, filed for bankruptcy in 2012 and was liquidated by 2013. The Bureau of Land Management revoked the project's right to use public lands even earlier, in 2011, a year after the CEC staff recommended against approving the project because of the damage it would do to the desert's wildlife.

But today's action does close a chapter in the early history of utility-scale desert solar projects, and it's worth remarking upon as the end of an era -- and as good news for one of the Mojave's rarest mammals.

As ReWire has mentioned fairly often, Solar Millennium was an early casualty of the plunging price of photovoltaic panels over the last five years. Along with other now-defunct solar thermal companies such as Tessera, Solar Millennium's parabolic trough thermal technology just couldn't compete with cheap photovoltaics.

Before its bankruptcy, Solar Millennium had planned to put about 1,500 acres of parabolic trough mirrors and support infrastructure on the Ridgecrest Solar site along Brown Road south of Ridgecrest. The problem was that the land, under BLM management, was home to about 40 federally Threatened desert tortoises. It was also an important connectivity corridor for the Mohave ground squirrel, a state-listed Threatened species.

Concerned over those species as well as others such as the burrowing owl and desert kit fox, the CEC and BLM took the unusual step in 2010 of recommending against the project as proposed. They did so in a hybrid document that served both as the CEC Staff Assessment and the federal Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The CEC staff and BLM also proposed that if the project was approved despite their concerns, that Solar Millennium be required to preserve at least 10,000 acres of desert tortoise habitat as mitigation for the project.

The Ridgecrest project had been one of a number of utility-scale solar projects that had been "fast-tracked" for streamlined approval. The Staff Assessment/DEIS was a stumbling block, and Solar Millennium stumbled hard. In order for the project to qualify for Department of Energy loan guarantees and grants through the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), a.k.a. "Stimulus funding," all the project's permits needed to be in order by the end of 2010.

After the agencies voiced their concerns, it was clear several months out that Solar Millennium wouldn't be meeting that deadline. Solar Millennium's representatives proposed an agency hearing schedule in April that essentially took the project out of consideration for fast-track status and ARRA funding.

It was downhill from there. By July, Solar Millennium's representatives asked the CEC to suspend the project for two years so that company biologists could examine the site's wildlife issues more closely. The BLM revoked Solar Millennium's pending Right Of Way to the land in March 2011. In the summer of that year, Solar Millennium announced that it was redesigning the project to use photovoltaic panels instead of trough thermal technology. Though the company was doing the same with some of its other California desert projects, notably the massive Blythe Solar project near the Colorado River town of the same name, in Ridgecrest's case the firm said that the redesign would also reflect concerns about wildlife, and avoid habitat and connectivity areas.

That launched a short-lived battle of the agencies. The CEC usually has jurisdiction only over power plants that use heat to generate power. Photovoltaic panels don't use heat. Kern County, which at that point had never seen a renewable energy project it couldn't rubber stamp, announced that it now had regulatory authority over the project instead of the CEC. But Solar Millennium, likely thinking of its existing organizational investment in the CEC process, invoked a little-known provision of the law that established the CEC to go through a voluntary CEC certification process.

Which never happened. In February 2012, bankruptcy proceedings began for Solar Millennium, which had fallen victim to the catastrophic shakeout in the solar thermal industry. In that same month, in a letter dated February 16, Solar Millennium's attorney Scott Galati told the CEC that the firm Solarhybrid AG had bought the Ridgecrest project from Solar Millennium and would be building it as a photovoltaic facility.

That was the last formal contact the CEC had from anyone claiming to want to build the Ridgecrest Solar Power Project. Solarhybrid went bankrupt in June 2012. And the project has sat, suspended with no owner, on the CEC's docket since then.

So there are no surprises in this week's final termination of the project. It's just the last bit of paperwork in what was, at the time, an unusual process: the CEC and the BLM each turned down a large desert solar project because of its likely effect on wildlife.

The Mohave ground squirrel was unavailable for comment.

This article by Chris Clark is from KCET's online news service, "Rewire" on April 22, 2014.

PS: We would like to think that we helped, along with the Center for Biological Diversity, the Desert Tortoise Council and the Great Basin Foundation, through our intervention and opposition.



BEFORE THE ENERGY RESOURCES CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
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IN THE MATTER OF THE
APPLICATION FOR CERTIFICATION FOR THE
RIDGECREST SOLAR POWER PROJECT

DOCKET No. 09-AFC-09
ORDER No. 14-0422-1A

**COMMISSION ORDER APPROVING THE TERMINATION OF THE
RIDGECREST SOLAR POWER PROJECT APPLICATION
FOR CERTIFICATION**

This Commission Order approves the termination of the Ridgecrest Solar Power Project AFC, Docket No. 09-AFC-09.

FINDINGS

The Commission hereby adopts the following findings:

1. The last filing with the Commission from the Applicant occurred on February 16, 2012. (Staff's Motion to Terminate, Appendix D)
2. The Applicant, Solar Trust of America and its German parent company, Solar Millennium AG, filed for Bankruptcy and were liquidated during 2012-2013 period. (Staff's Motion to Terminate, Appendix A and B)
3. The Bureau of Land Management terminated the Applicant's right to the project site in 2011. (Staff's Motion to Terminate, Appendix C)
4. The Applicant has failed to pursue an application with due diligence as required under California Code of Regulations title 20 section 1720.2.
5. No opposition to Staff's Motion to Terminate was received by the Commission.

ORDER

Therefore, the Commission **ORDERS** the following:

The Ridgecrest Solar Power Project AFC, Docket No. 09-AFC-09, is terminated. Staff is directed to take appropriate action as necessary to close out the Ridgecrest proceeding.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

CERTIFICATION

The undersigned Secretariat to the Commission does hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true, and correct copy of an order duly and regularly issued at a meeting of the California Energy Commission held on April 22, 2014.

AYE: Weisenmiller, Scott, Hochschild, Douglas

NAY:

ABSENT: McAllister

ABSTAIN:

Dated: April 22, 2014, at Sacramento, California.

ORIGINAL SIGNED BY

Harriet Kallemeyn
Secretariat
California Energy Commission