

DOCKETED

Docket Number:	09-AFC-07C
Project Title:	Palen Solar Power Project - Compliance
TN #:	200926
Document Title:	Intervenor CRIT Ex. 8019
Description:	N/A
Filer:	Winter King
Organization:	Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger LLP
Submitter Role:	Intervenor Representative
Submission Date:	10/16/2013 4:42:58 PM
Docketed Date:	10/16/2013



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August a Bad Month For Birds at Genesis Solar

(<http://www.kcet.org/news/rewire/wildlife/august-was-a-bad-month-for-birds-at-genesis-solar.html>)

by [Chris Clarke](#)

on October 8, 2013 12:00 PM



American kestrel found dead at the Genesis solar project | Photo: Nextera Energy Resources | California Energy Commission

More than 60 dead birds were found in August at the Genesis Solar Project west of Blythe in Riverside County. The bird species found range from an American kestrel to sparrows and doves, with a surprising number of brown-headed cowbirds among the casualties.

Among the dead were at least 18 birds more usually associated with watery habitats than with deserts, including common loons, grebes, and at least one [sora \(http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/sora/id\)](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/sora/id). ReWire has

[reported on water bird mortality at the Genesis project \(http://www.kcet.org/news/rewire/solar/water-birds-turning-up-dead-at-solar-projects-in-desert.html\)](http://www.kcet.org/news/rewire/solar/water-birds-turning-up-dead-at-solar-projects-in-desert.html) in the past.

The concentrating solar project is being built by NextEra Energy Resources on almost 2,000 acres of land near Ford Dry Lake, using hundreds of thousands of parabolic trough mirrors to focus sunlight on a fluid that powers two 125-megawatt turbines.

Story Continues Below

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The bird mortalities were reported by NextEra to the California Energy Commission in the project's [Monthly Compliance Report for August \(http://docketpublic.energy.ca.gov/PublicDocuments/09-AFC-08C/TN200657_20130930T120056_August_2013_Monthly_Compliance_Report.pdf\)](http://docketpublic.energy.ca.gov/PublicDocuments/09-AFC-08C/TN200657_20130930T120056_August_2013_Monthly_Compliance_Report.pdf). At least eight of the birds found in August may have died in earlier months: their aged carcasses were discovered when a temporary construction laydown area was moved.

In addition to the 61 bird mortalities reported, project biologists also noted four dead bats (a California and Yuma myotis, along with two unidentified bats) and two injured birds. The injured birds, a brown-headed cowbird and a gull the biologists tentatively identified as a ring-billed, were taken to a rehabilitation facility. Their fate is not mentioned in the report.

According to the Monthly Compliance Report, none of the mortalities were discovered during systematic mortality surveys, but were instead so-called "incidental" discoveries, noted by project staff while going about other duties. Without systematic mortality surveys of the 1,950-acre project site, it's possible that other mortalities during the month of August have gone unrecorded.

The bird species with the highest August death toll at Genesis was the [brown-headed cowbird \(http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/brown-headed_cowbird/id\)](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/brown-headed_cowbird/id), with nine dead individuals positively identified and one more with a tentative identification. Cowbirds are more commonly associated with forests and agricultural land, but they're not particularly rare in the desert, with the citizen science site [eBird \(http://ebird.org/ebird/map/bnhcow?bmo=1&emo=12&byr=2009&eyr=2013\)](http://ebird.org/ebird/map/bnhcow?bmo=1&emo=12&byr=2009&eyr=2013) recording sightings at a nearby highway rest area and the Wiley's Well Campground, as well as throughout Joshua Tree National Park. Cowbirds are noted for their evolutionary strategy of nest parasitism, in which they lay eggs in the nests of other birds and leave the "adoptive parents" to do the work of feeding the chicks, usually to the detriment of their own offspring.

Project biologists also found six dead tree swallows in August, placing that migratory bird at second place in the Genesis mortality records. Tree swallows generally inhabit places with open water. Four individuals each of the water bird species Bullocks' oriole and cliff swallow were also found at Genesis in August, and two each of the water birds yellow-headed blackbird, common loon and eared grebe. Mortalities of one confirmed and one possible sora, a freshwater marsh bird were also reported.

Eleven of the birds found could not be identified beyond family. Other species found included four mourning doves, two lesser nighthawks, and individuals of the species American kestrel, black phoebe, black-headed grosbeak, blue winged teal, hermit warbler, herring and ring-billed gull, rough winged swallow, Say's phoebe, and white-winged dove.

The desert surroundings of the Genesis solar project are increasingly well known for bird diversity, including desert residents and migrating birds heading between the Colorado River and the coast. Genesis is one of more than half a dozen very large solar power projects either under construction or in the planning stages in the stretch of desert between Joshua Tree National Park and the Colorado River, and the project's just-under 2,000 acres a mere fraction of the acreage of solar development slated for the area.



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