

In the News

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Birds scorched in mid-air by solar energy plants

A new type of solar power, known as a power tower, is coming under scrutiny because of its negative impact on bird populations, the Associated Press reported. Clustered into solar farms located in the Mojave Desert, California, and operated by BrightSource Energy Inc., the technique uses a concentrated array of mirrors



Figure 1. Yellow-rumped warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) was 1 species identified as a victim of new solar energy plants. (Photo by D. Dewhurst, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

to reflect and direct sunlight onto a central tower where water is heated to produce steam. As birds fly between the mirror fields and the central tower, they can be burned and fall to the ground. The burning birds have been nicknamed “streamers” by employees of the power plants, because they leave a trail of smoke while falling (Figure 1). The Center for Biological Diversity estimates the mortality rate of birds at the power plant as high as 28,000 birds per year. Because of the high rate of mortality associated with these plants, the National Audubon Society has called on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine an official total bird mortality count for 1 year of the plant’s operation. Meanwhile, California officials are considering construction of similar plants near Joshua Tree National Park, California, and the California-Arizona border. The bird kill further complicates power entities’ search to diversify power sources, including more options for renewable energy.

Airliner aborts take-off after engine fire

A JetBlue airliner taxiing before take-off from San Juan, Puerto Rico, on its way to JFK Airport in August 2014 aborted its flight when one of

its engines caught fire. WABC-TV of New York City reported that the cause of the mishap was injection of birds into an engine. All 186 passengers were evacuated to safety, with only 3 people suffering minor injuries.

Airline uses toxicant to mitigate avian hazards

United Airlines contracted to have pest birds, including feral pigeons (*Columba livia*) and great-tailed grackles (*Quiscalus major*; Figure 2), removed by a licensed pest control operator, WFAA-TV of Houston, Texas, reported. The operator used the toxicant Avitrol™ in 20 different bait stations to poison hundreds of birds. The operator apparently did not inform airport tenants of his plan or collect dead and dying birds in a timely manner. The presence of poisoned birds in and around the airport property caused much public disturbance. Avitrol, according to the company website, is used as a chemical frightening agent in conjunction with other nontoxicant bait. Ingestion of Avitrol causes physiological responses that frighten and alarm conspecifics. It may take about 1 hour for birds that have ingested a lethal dose to die. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review of the activities found that the toxicant’s use was within regulatory guidelines.



Figure 2. Great-tailed grackles were removed using a toxicant. (Photo by G. Kramer, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Dayton airport to test grass management technique

An article released by the Associated Press describes an experimental way the Dayton, Ohio, airport will manage its non-aeronautical

grass stands. The airport plans to plant 121 ha of native prairie grasses. These taller grasses are believed to deter avian use because the grass inhibits their ability to detect predators. This new management system will be implemented for 3 years and will be reviewed by the Federal Aviation Administration. Native prairie grasses also have other benefits, including filtering water runoff, capturing carbon dioxide, and absorbing jet blast.

Bear attacks in Alaska, West Virginia, and California

A man who was walking his dogs in a remote area of outside of Anchorage, Alaska, July 24, was attacked by a 90-kg brown bear (*Ursus arctos*; Figure 3). In the midst of the attack, he was able to fire 3 shots from his .44 Magnum sidearm, according to the *Alaska Dispatch News*.



Figure 3. Brown bear splashing in stream. (Photo by S. Hillebrand, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

He was taken to the hospital by his wife and treated for his injuries.

In Middletown, West Virginia, an unsuspecting man and his pet dog were attacked and severely injured by a mother black bear (*Ursus americanus*) in George Washington National Forest.

While bear attacks are relatively rare, they are more likely to occur during the seasons when female bears have cubs.

A third attack was reported by the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, but under very different circumstances. In this case, a woman was attacked by a bear in her yard. The California Department of Fish and Game warden found evidence that she had been feeding a lot of wildlife, including the bear, on the property. The victim had been warned several times since 2010 not to feed wildlife. She could be cited with a misdemeanor charge for feeding wildlife and could face penalties of up to 6 months in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Eight black bears were found on the property and 4 bears were captured at the site; but they were later released because none of their DNA matched the one that attacked the woman.

Wood chippers and birds do not mix

Early in May 2014, the U.S. Post Office in Oakland, California, contracted with a local tree trimmer to remove ficus (*Ficus benjamina*) tree limbs that were used as roosts and nesting locations for black-crowned night herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*; Figure 4). The roosting and nesting behavior of the birds led to postal trucks being covered in feces. The *SFGate* (<http://www.sfgate.com>), website of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, cited a



witness who said that several baby birds were fed through the wood chipper during tree branch removal, but that claim could not be verified. Five black-crowned night heron chicks were taken to a local rehabilitation facility. Even though it is unclear if any birds

Figure 4. Black-crowned night heron. (Photo by K. Whittmore, courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

were killed, cutting the limbs and destroying the nests is still a violation of both state and federal laws protecting migratory birds.

Humans hired to replace monkeys

Langur monkeys (*Semnopithecus* spp.) in New Delhi, India, are out of a job, replaced by humans. The large, aggressive primates were being used to scare off thousands of smaller rhesus monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*) that plague the city, invading homes, blocking traffic, and even attacking humans, according to a feature on National Public Radio. Monkeys are sacred in India because, many believe, they resemble the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman. Monkeys, therefore, are fed, encouraging them to congregate in the city in large numbers, which causes chaos and makes life difficult for humans. The city banned the use of langur monkeys to scare off the rhesus, and instead hired several dozen humans to mimic the cries of langurs and scare off the smaller but fearless rhesus monkeys.