

**DEDICATED TO THE PRESERVATION OF THE CALIFORNIA
NATIVE FLORA**

The California Native Plant Society



Bristlecone Chapter

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September General Meeting

The September General Meeting of the Bristlecone Chapter will be held at 7:00 pm Wednesday, September 22, at the Green Church (intersection of US 395 and Benton Crossing Road, south of Mammoth Airport). Join us for a spectacular photo presentation by local professional photographer, John Dittli, about his recent book, "Walk The Sky: Following the John Muir Trail." John will talk about some of his hiking and photographing adventures while working on this beautiful book about the High Sierra. He will also have a few books to sell after the program.

September Board Meeting

September 15, 2010. Details TBA. Check the Bristlecone Chapter website at www.bristleconecnps.org. Members are welcome.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

High Sierra botany—the agony and the ecstasy

I see more new, to me, plants during the summer in the high mountains than anywhere else in the Eastern Sierra. So I look forward to my summer hiking each year. But each year it gets more and more difficult. I have two hypotheses about why that is so. The first is that while tectonic activity is raising the Sierra Nevada, making the slopes steeper, global warming is causing the atmosphere to become less dense, thereby lowering the available oxygen. The second hypothesis is that I'm getting older, fatter, and slower. While I'd like to believe the former, I have to admit that the latter is probably the more parsimonious. There may be slower hikers on the trail, but I don't seem to pass many. In four summers now I think I've actually passed a total of six other hikers, but all of them appeared to be toting 60-pound backpacks. So when I see some new and interesting plant I seldom have the energy to key it out on the spot or stop to collect it. That's the agony part.

The ecstasy part is that so many of the subalpine and alpine plants I do encounter are real treasures that I'm thrilled to find. Species of *Parnasia* with their elaborate staminodes; *Hulsea* species with their densely glandular phyllaries; alpine *Raillardellas*, distant relatives of the lowland tarweeds; *Erigeron linearis*, a fleabane with short yellow rays (thanks to Cathy Rose for pointing this one out to me); species of *Pedicularis* with their bizarre elephant-like floral morphology; delicate *Saxifragas*; colorful *Dodecatheons*; *Primula*

suffruticosa, the shrubby primrose with its hot-pink flowers, and species of *Gentianopsis* with their intensely-colored blue-violet flowers, to name just a few. And then there are the true alpine cushion plants, low-growing, extremely compact species adapted to survive the rigorous conditions high above treeline, including various species of *Astragalus*, *Draba*, *Erigeron*, *Penstemon*, *Phlox*, and *Polemonium*, among others. And there are many more plants I'll probably never see. Alpine species constitute a disproportionately large share of the recently described species precisely because they can be hard to get to. But even on those hikes when I don't find some great new personal botanical discovery, the alpine meadows, waterfalls, steep cliffs, lakes, tarns, and vistas provide sufficient cause for ecstasy.

I'd like to see a field guide and checklist specifically focused on the high-elevation flora of the Eastern Sierra. Nothing on my library shelf fills that bill; available books treat only selected species, are written primarily for the west slope of the Sierra, or exclude taxa whose ranges don't extend downslope to the more arid habitats. Before I moved here I thought that this was a project I might want to attempt, but that was before I began to re-experience the realities of hiking the steep trails of these beautiful mountains. Floristic field work is for younger, more energetic botanists, and I hope more come along.

Steve McLaughlin

FROM THE EDITOR

If you haven't already contacted me, please leave a message stating your preference as to whether you would accept an electronic version of this newsletter or would prefer a hard copy. The Bristlecone Chapter Board encourages members to choose the electronic option to save energy, trees, and money. Over the past year we have reduced our hard copy newsletter mailings from about 320 to 195. Contact me at: 760-873-8943 or email: newsletter@bristleconecnps.org.

Daniel Pritchett

Next Newsletter Deadline: October 27, 2010

Send articles to: newsletter@bristleconecnps.org

EVENTS

September 25, Saturday - CNPS Annual Native Plant Sale - Bishop

Come to the annual native plant sale at the White Mountain Research Station (3000 E. Line St. Bishop). Our plants are grown from locally collected and propagated seed, so they should do well in your garden. To learn more go to http://bristleconecnps.org/native_plants/sale/

October 6, Wednesday – Creosote Ring Subchapter meeting.

The Creosote Ring Subchapter will meet at 7:00 pm at the Maturango Museum, 100 W. Las Flores,

Ridgecrest. Amber Swanson, Botanist and CNPS Program Coordinator will speak about the CNPS Rare Plant Treasure Hunt. The first season of the Rare Plant Treasure Hunt has been highly successful. Participants in Mojave Desert hunts have made over 20 field trips, logged more than 550 volunteer hours and found 34 separate rare plant species. This totals to over 195 occurrences that have been documented on BLM land, about 150 of which are new. Come and learn more about this year's results, next year's goals and how you can be involved! For information go to <http://www.rareplanttreasurehunt.blogspot.com/>

October 17, Sunday. Highway clean-up.

Leader: Scott Hetzler. Meet at the intersection of Highway 395 and Pine Creek Rd., west of 395, at 9.00 AM. We will try to be done by 1:00 PM. For more information contact Scott at 873-8392.

REPORTS

Hurray for the Little Guys!

Update on the Ridgecrest Solar Power Plant project

I could also have titled this report "Creeping but Not Yet Dead" as the approval process for this ill-conceived project has slowed considerably since last spring. At that time, we thought recommendations would be made by both the BLM and the California Energy Commission (CEC) in time for final rulings by the end of this calendar

year with construction to begin in 2011, if the project was approved.

However, once the CEC Staff Assessment/Draft Environmental Impact Report (SA/DEIR) was released in late March it became apparent that the CEC approval schedule would likely change (the BLM timetable was & remains different). This was due to the CEC staff's findings that the biological resources of the proposed site could not be mitigated, nor could the visual impacts. This is the first time that CEC staff has made such an unequivocal finding for preserving a site and it's intact, fully functioning ecosystem.

Their decision was based on the high number of Desert Tortoises of all ages and the functioning genetic corridor for Mojave Ground Squirrels. Of course neither of these species would thrive without high quality habitat. The Creosote Ring's plant survey on April 17 showed just that. 23 participants helped to document the annual and perennial plant species found on the proposed RSPP site. 72 species from 25 plant families were observed, indicating a complex well-functioning ecosystem. Especially note-worthy were the existence of Winter Fat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*) and Spiny Hop-Sage (*Grayia spinosa*), indicators of Mojave Ground Squirrel habitat and, perhaps more importantly, the occurrence of many preferred food plants for both juvenile and adult Desert Tortoises.

At the opening of the May 3-4 public workshops we were most pleased to hear Dick Anderson, CEC biologist, reference our plant list. Jane McEwen's terrific research documenting the preferred DT food plant observed bolstered CEC's position that this is a unique site. During the workshops Dave Hacker (CA Dept. Fish and Game) very strongly supported the need to preserve biological connectivity for the MGS and DT as well. It was clear that the mitigation measures proposed by Solar Millennium do not meet the requirements of DFG & USFWS.

There are some other major issues with RSPP besides the biological and visual ones. The plan is to use trucked-in propane to keep the transfer fluid thin enough to work. We think that they have greatly underestimated how much propane they will need, as our fall-winter-spring air temps are lower

than they have allowed for. This will increase the cost of generation, the carbon foot-print and traffic. Ridgecrest sits downwind of the site giving concerns about Valley Fever with the grading of such a large area (over 2000 acres). They claim mitigation will control 75% of the dust but that leaves 25% that can infect people. Valley Fever is not a fun disease.

Over the next weeks and months many excellent comment letters from both environmental organizations and private citizens were submitted to both the CEC & BLM (<http://tinyurl.com/2dmkv2c>). Most have supported the position that this project would irreparably alter a biological treasure and should not be built. I wrote a detailed letter for CNPS. The Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake also wrote two letters expressing their considerable concerns.

Then on June 30 Solar Millennium requested a suspension of their application. They proposed conducting a 2-year survey to study connectivity issues for local populations of Mojave Ground Squirrels. This was approved by the CEC but the BLM approval process continues to move forward on its own timetable. After the July 8 mandatory status conference Solar Millennium realized that this request needed to be modified as it was perceived as "a complete halt to all activities." Therefore on Aug. 8 Solar Millennium asked for the suspension to be changed to "a modification of ... milestones". We will have to wait to see what this really means.

However, since Solar Millennium has two other California sites (Blythe and Palen) moving through the approval process, they may be hoping that approval of one or both of them will give them additional monetary resources to put into Ridgecrest down the road. In the meantime, we should not be complacent, thinking that the little guys (MGS) will do the heavy lifting for us. We must continue to monitor the CEC website for developments and maintain contacts with the excellent interveners. I am particularly grateful to two of them: Dan Burnett (Creosote Ring member and Kerncrest Audubon intervener) and Ilene Anderson (personal friend, Center for Biological Diversity biologist/intervener, and desert expert extraordinaire). My personal crash course in

conservation work would have been far less successful without their generosity and dedication.

Kathy LaShure

FEATURES

If you haven't visited
www.bristleconecnps.org recently...

In the past few months, the bristlecone chapter website has been overhauled and updated to become a perfect go-to site for information on events, field trips, newsletters, meetings, plant sales and more. Thanks to webmaster Maggie Wolfe-Riley, the website is attractive to look at and easy to navigate. If you haven't checked it out lately, take a few minutes to do so. You'll find:

- 1) A calendar of events where one click will give you information on either chapter events or events for several other local conservation organizations.
- 2) Wildflower and conservation alerts.
- 3) Links to Creosote Ring subchapter happenings and the state CNPS website.
- 4) Newsletters, current and recent past.

And speaking of the Newsletter: consider switching to receiving yours on-line. Every two months, you'll receive an e-mail from the editor giving you the option to click and download the newsletter (to read or print) or read on-line. Both the on-line and downloadable (PDF) versions are easy to read and include lovely photos and/or drawings. The Newsletter continues to provide members with up-to-date information on local activities that may impact sensitive flora and habitats, conservation news, and field trip reports. Jan Bowers' "Birch Creek Journal" adds flower reports and delightful personal musings on Nature's local happenings.

Why switch to an on-line Newsletter? The Board knows that the Newsletter is an important vehicle to provide information to members. But we also acknowledged that the Newsletter is the single most expensive item in the chapter budget.

Switching to sending an e-mail message rather than mailing hard copies is a great way to save money and resources. And that money will then be used for educational grants, conservation projects and other important work.

So, if you are connected (and we realize not everyone is), please consider the on-line option for receiving the Newsletter. Send an e-mail to newsletter@bristleconecnps.org with your request to switch.

Rosanne Higley

Birch Creek Journal

Summer, like a tedious house guest, seems determined to outstay its welcome this year. Even so, migratory songbirds apparently have faith that these hot days are nearing an end. Western tanagers are moving through our neighborhood in small numbers, and every morning tree swallows string themselves along the telephone wires like notes on a musical staff. Especially at dawn and dusk, rufous and black-chinned hummingbirds come so thick and fast to our feeders that I wonder if I should devote the garden to sugar beets rather than tomatoes, eggplants, and green beans. Along the stream, painted aster (*Symphoricarpos lanceolatum*) is beginning to bloom, and hips of wild rose (*Rosa woodsii*) are turning red. Leaves of birch, willow, and cottonwood are as green as ever but show signs of age. Birch leaves, especially, have had a hard five months. Here and there, leaf-cutter bees scissored into the margins, leaving neat, nearly circular holes, and other insects chewed ragged gaps in the middle of the blades. A few birch leaves look as though someone took the trouble to grind peppercorns over them; the multitude of tiny black dots are probably fungal pycnidia, leathery spore cases that contain thousands or (more likely) millions of spores. Frankly, it's a relief to see leaf damage that is not my responsibility—no need to search for cabbage loopers or tomato hornworms here, no reason to bring out the jalapeño pepper spray. Looks as though I'm in favor of nature as long as it stays out of my garden, which isn't far from the truth at times.

But no matter what you do, nature keeps shoving in. We garden in raised beds filled with soil from a grove of black locust (*Robinia*

pseudoacacia). Three years after Steve built and filled the beds, I am still extracting black locust seedlings by the hundreds. There seems to be an endless supply. In Japan, where bee-keepers grow black locust for their bees, the soil in one grove contained 13,000 seeds per square meter. I have not measured seed density in my raised beds; all I know is that every time I dig the beds, I put another batch of seeds within striking distance of the soil surface. All they need then is warmth and moisture, which they get in abundance all summer long. As with many legumes, the seed coats are extraordinarily hard—I would need a razor blade or a rasp to penetrate them—so the seeds can live a long time in the soil without succumbing to molds or bacteria, as long as 10, 39, or 88 years depending on which study you read. In any case, it seems entirely possible that our black locust seed bank will outlive either of us. Long after summer savory and cherry tomatoes have stopped volunteering in the raised beds, a small forest of black locust will doubtless be busting down the garden gate.

Black locust is of course not native to California, although in the Owens Valley it has become so thoroughly naturalized that you could be forgiven for thinking that it belongs here. As elsewhere in the West, black locust was brought in by Anglo settlers as an ornamental and as a source of wood for fence posts, mine timbers, and fuel. In the 1890s, settlers in our Birch Creek neighborhood apparently planted hundreds of black locust trees so that they could file land claims under the Timber Culture Act. An elaborate system of irrigation ditches must have kept the trees alive. Those black locust plantations are long gone—once the City of Los Angeles acquired neighborhood water rights, most of the irrigation ditches were shut down—but their descendants grow thickly here and there along our neighborhood creeks, providing shade for cows, nectar for bees and hummingbirds, and nesting spots for great horned owls.

I must admit that I have mixed emotions about this species. It's hard to object to any tree when the temperature is 100 degrees in the shade, and it's fun to watch black-headed grosbeaks nibble at the flowers. On the other hand, I know from experience that a grove of black locust in spring is a quiet place not much inhabited by migrating songbirds. Apparently the larvae on which warblers and other

insectivorous birds depend cannot be found in adequate quantities on black locust leaves. If you love songbirds, this is a matter for concern because black locust replaces the native cottonwoods and willows where small insects *are* abundant. Black locust has other flaws, as well. Like many legumes, it fixes nitrogen in the soil and adds even more nitrogen through leaf litter. The result is a gardener's dream come true. The same traits that produce great soil for my raised beds, however, are not so great outside the garden fence. Even after locust trees are physically removed, the soil retains high levels of nitrogen to which native plants are not adapted. In the Owens Valley, native plant diversity declines where black locust takes over, and exotic grasses such as cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) and rip-gut brome (*Bromus diandrus*) proliferate.

Short of a full-scale eradication program, the Owens Valley is not going to get rid of this species anytime soon. But we can at least refrain from adding to the population. Yes, black locust grows fast and provides quick shade. Yes, it burns well and makes rot-resistant fence posts. Yes, it makes terrific garden soil, and the heady fragrance of the flowers will knock your socks off every spring. But we have enough black locust; we don't need more. Next time you plant a tree, give some thought to selecting a California native that will stay where it's planted instead of spreading across the landscape like a weed.

Jan Bowers

CONSERVATION

Inyo County Water Department goes rogue

In the last issue I documented my several futile attempts to be appointed to the Inyo County Water Commission (WC). I also noted that with two vacancies (and a third Commission member only serving until a replacement can be found) the Inyo County Board of Supervisors (BOS) was seriously considering abolishing the WC and dispersing its responsibilities to other county commissions rather than accepting my application to serve.

Shortly after I wrote my article, the WC met. It had only one agenda item: a discussion of whether it should recommend to the BOS that it be

disbanded. How many readers will ever have the bizarre experience of attending a public meeting devoted to discussing whether the commission which called the meeting should dissolve itself? One commissioner stated she thought the commission should continue, another thought it should be disbanded, while the third commissioner felt ambivalent.

Seven members of the public (two of whom are on one of the county commissions to which the WC responsibilities might be given) then commented. All argued strongly that the WC should not be disbanded because it has serious responsibilities. The WC then voted unanimously to recommend to the BOS that it not be disbanded.

The importance of the WC was demonstrated several weeks later. The WC had scheduled a meeting with numerous agenda items, one of which was a discussion of a proposal by the WC's staff, the Inyo County Water Department (ICWD), to increase the total volume of pumping exempt from the On/Off protocol by 150 af/yr. Granting an exemption means a well will be pumped without regard to the environmental impacts caused by the pumping. I have written repeatedly about the serious problems caused by the excessive volume of pumping from wells already exempt. Several people planned to go to the WC meeting and argue against the proposed exemption.

At the last minute the WC meeting was cancelled. Instead of waiting for the next WC meeting, ICWD (the WC's staff) went straight to the Inyo-LA Technical Group and recommended in the name of Inyo County that the exemption be granted. By going straight to the Technical Group ICWD eliminated any opportunity for public scrutiny of its proposal. I asked the Technical Group that ICWD's recommendation be withdrawn because the ICWD had not presented it to the WC for public review and discussion. ICWD Director Bob Harrington declined. He defended ICWD's recommendation only by stating that the WC had directed ICWD to investigate different alternatives for a water supply for a particular mitigation project. Needless to say, when a county commission directs its staff to consider alternative courses of action, it is not a direction to the staff to unilaterally choose one alternative and recommend

it with no public review in the name of Inyo County to an outside agency (i.e. DWP).

Also, needless to say, at the Technical Group meeting DWP jumped at the opportunity for another well exemption. ICWD's un-vetted proposal has now turned into a request to the Standing Committee to initiate review under the California Environmental Quality Act. Given that both ICWD and DWP assert that the exemption will have no significant impact (based on an embarrassingly superficial analysis), the CEQA analysis will almost certainly be nothing but a negative declaration. In short, in less than 3 weeks, another well exemption has been railroaded into existence.

There are several lessons here. One is yet another demonstration of the cliché that nature abhors a vacuum. When the WC is effectively dysfunctional (its current state), its staff (ICWD), being human, cannot resist over-reaching its authority. Even though the WC has generally approved ICWD proposals in the past, the WC only did so after soliciting public input and discussion. That is why the WC is so important. It is the only forum designed to foster discussion of Inyo County's interests regarding water management, and policy interpretation. It remains to be seen how the WC will respond to its staff's insubordination.

Daniel Pritchett

MEMBERSHIP

Membership Application

The California Native Plant Society is an organization of lay persons and professionals united by an interest in the plants of California. It is open to all. The society, working through its local chapters, seeks to increase the understanding of California's native flora and to preserve this rich resource for future generations. Varied interests are represented. To join, please see back of newsletter

To RENEW: please contact Sally Manning or

RENEW ONLINE:

Using a credit card, go to www.cnps.org

And click on the JOIN button

Aspen-glyph art:
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The California Native Plant Society

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Rare Plant Committee -

Please make membership checks payable to and send to:

CNPS – Membership Coordinator
2707 K. Street, Suite 1
Sacramento, CA 95816

Gift Contribution: Where most needed _____
 Conservation _____

Bristlecone Chapter Directory

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