

Better for Birds: Solar

A guide to responsibly sited and operated solar energy development that protects birds and the places they need today and tomorrow

Solar Energy and Birds

CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE NUMBER ONE THREAT TO BIRDS

National Audubon Society's climate science reveals that 389 species of North American birds face extinction if global warming reaches 3° C above pre-industrial levels. We can help fight climate change and support a responsible clean energy transition by supporting solar energy policies and projects that are better for birds!

AUDUBON'S SOLAR ENERGY POLICY

Audubon strongly supports solar energy that is properly sited and operated to avoid, minimize, and mitigate effectively for the impacts to birds, other wildlife, and the places they need now and in the future. We do not currently support concentrated solar power tower technology (CSP), as the environmental consequences seem to outweigh the benefits.

Support Policies that Support Solar and Birds

EXAMPLE POLICIES THAT HELP BIRDS

- Incentives for siting on previously developed sites, like parking lots, brownfields, and landfills.
- Incentives for native landscaping, wildlife-friendly fencing.
- Remove barriers for homeowners to install rooftop and residential solar (e.g., eliminate caps, provide tax breaks, improve perceptions to HOAs).
- Support community solar programs, so that all residents can participate in solar.
- Consider environmental health impacts to frontline communities and increase access to clean energy for these communities.



A Real Voice for Birds

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Opposition groups often use wildlife as an excuse to stall solar energy. Audubon chapters can be a voice for birds by supporting policies and projects that promote environmentally sustainable solar development and by advocating against unreasonably restrictive policies. Examples of prohibitive policies include unreasonable setbacks and bans against projects in Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Many IBAs include privately owned, unprotected lands; solar projects offer opportunities to conserve valuable habitat in IBAs.

THE IMPACTS OF OPPOSING GOOD SOLAR

All activities come with some level of risk to birds. When considering opposing a project, first consider:

- Is there a way this project could be designed to avoid, minimize, or mitigate effectively for the most serious risks to birds and wildlife?
- How might marginalized or frontline communities be affected by opposing the project?



Support Landscape-level Planning

Landscape-level planning processes for solar developments within a region can be a big commitment, but it creates more regulatory certainty for developers and stakeholders and can ultimately expedite the build-out of responsible solar that is better for birds.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PLANNING PROCESS

- Make sure to bring many stakeholders to the table early and often: Tribes, clean energy developers, environmental NGOs, wildlife agencies, energy agencies, environmental agencies, environmental justice NGOs, farmers, local and frontline communities.
- State Wildlife Actions Plans (SWAPs) often estimate general regions of conservation importance—these can be used as guidance to identify areas of higher/lower conflict for clean energy development.
- IBAs and eBird records can also be helpful in identifying areas of high importance for bird conservation, but both come with limitations.
- IBAs and SWAPs are useful tools but are not prescriptive—make sure to use these to identify areas that need extra attention. They should not be interpreted as exclusion zones.
- Keep an open mind! There are a lot of different voices and priorities to juggle.
- Don't let perfect be the enemy of the good.

Projects That Are Better for Birds

SUPPORT PROJECTS THAT SUPPORT BIRDS

While it is important to support responsible solar policies and planning processes, utility scale solar is getting developed quickly, and for good reason! You can help make sure that each project is developed and operated in a way that helps to support bird communities in our fight against climate change:

1. Arrange a listening session with the developers to learn about the solar project and share your ideas for making the solar project better for birds.
2. Provide letters of support for projects that are developed in a way that is better for birds.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SOLAR PROJECTS THAT ARE BETTER FOR BIRDS AND OTHER WILDLIFE

- Consider adjacent ecosystems; design buffers to allow for recruitment of native vegetation.
- Create connectivity between pockets of wetlands and other intact natural systems when possible.
- Minimize impacts from above ground transmission.
- Conduct surveys during migration and breeding to learn of any sensitive species using the area prior to construction.
- Reserve some land for conservation (through purchase or conservation easement).
- Maintain and enhance existing wetlands through native planting and exotic plant removal.
- Consider wildlife use patterns during construction timing and maintenance.
- Abide by bird-friendly mowing regimes.
- Use native plants, grasses, shrubs, and trees for ground cover, hedgerows, and buffers.
- Using wildlife-friendly fencing that allows for safe animal movements through solar facilities.
- Add elements such as perches, platforms, nest boxes, bee boxes, and burrows with priority for species of conservation concern and threatened and endangered species.
- Leave some biomass (i.e., from smaller downed trees) behind to support herpetofauna.

Questions?

Reach out to your Clean Energy Initiative team:
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