

A world record big year for birds

By Nicholas Lund, Slate

I doubt anyone had a busier 2015 than Noah Strycker.

Beginning in Antarctica on New Year's Day 2015, the 29-year-old Oregon man crisscrossed 41 countries on all seven continents on his way to shattering the record for most bird species seen in a single year.* Of the estimated 10,400 bird species on Earth, Strycker saw 6,042 of them in just 365 days.

Big Years—birder slang for yearlong benders to see as many birds in a given area as possible—are a huge undertaking, even when focused on the birds in a given county or state. Hardcore birders with lots of spare time (and money) and a permissive spouse occasionally make a run at the American record, currently held by Neil Hayward, who saw 749 species in 2013.

But worldwide Big Year attempts are almost unheard of. Too grueling. Too expensive. Too many logistics. American ornithologist James Clements made the first real attempt at a global Big Year in 1989, finishing with 3,662 species. Two Brits, Alan Davies and Ruth Miller, took on Clements in 2008 and finished with 4,341 species while dodging armed robbers and abandoning sinking boats.

Read the whole story

Letter: Questioning Liberty Utilities rate increase

Publisher's note: *These comments were delivered to the CPUC last week in Kings Beach by North Shore resident Ellie Waller regarding the proposed Liberty Utilities rate hike and are republished with permission.*

Many of you may not know that Liberty Utilities is owned by parent company Algonquin, a Canadian based Company. **Algonquin Power & Utilities Corp.** is a \$4.5 billion North American diversified generation, transmission and distribution utility.

Algonquin Power Income Fund was established in September 1997 and first listed its trust units on the Toronto Stock Exchange on Dec. 23, 1997. [1] Having raised nearly \$75 million, Algonquin used \$27.5 million to purchase 14 hydroelectric generation facilities located in Ontario, Québec, New York and New Hampshire.

From Liberty Utility webpage: The last time Liberty filed a general rate increase was in 2013 which resulted in an overall 4.97 percent increase in rates effective Jan. 1, 2013. This increase request is for 17.34 percent effective Jan. 1, 2016.

There is no specific information in Liberty Utilities (LU's) application about how much of the increase is for the 650 line upgrade. The public is being shut out of the details. Can you provide a breakdown? The 625 and 650 line upgrade project is seeking \$50 million for the entire upgrade project translating into base rate increase of about \$9 million per year with limited approval of Phase 1 at about \$18 million and the requirement of a new network study to set the trigger points for Phases 2 and 3 due to numerous deficiencies in the technical studies. The big cost of the upgrade project is still ahead and very little of this increase is the upgrade

project portion of Phase 1. Phases 2 and 3 have not been done yet.

Whatever the number it is small compared to the other base rate items.

The money attributed to capital improvements should be detailed for the specific improvements and criteria provided for: depreciation, taxes, insurance, and other costs related to the system's capital improvements.

What is a fair capital cost? NV Energy just lowered rates in neighboring Reno by 5 percent.

Liberty Utilities (LU) has been aggressively raising rates since they purchased the system from Sierra Pacific Power in 2011. At the time of purchase, to get approval from the CPUC, LU insisted that its small size (lack of economy of scale compared to Sierra Pacific Power) would not cause rates to rise beyond what SPP would have done. The opposite has happened. The current increase of \$13 million-plus per year would boost the base rate to over \$50 million, not counting the cost of power which is just passed through to customers. The deception of the first increase in 2012 was due to LU keeping the money from the lower cost of wholesale power, which made the net increase to the customer seem small. The reality was a 47 percent increase in their base rates. Now LU wants to add \$13 million to the \$38.5 million.

On website under social responsibility header: **Corporate Responsibility** is about increasing stakeholder value and financial performance. We are responsible to the communities where we operate, where we can create a more lasting, sustainable prosperity for all.

Our distribution business takes a local, responsive, and caring approach in every utility service territory. This continues to be a key differentiator and competitive advantage for the company. Our customers' issues are our issues—our

frontline people live them every day.

All customer classes will get hit hard with the increases because these rate increases are much higher than the level of general inflation. LU is aggressively inflating rates, effectively doubling their base rates over five years from \$26 million to over \$50 million. How does this help support sustainability for the businesses in Lake Tahoe?

I'd like to better understand the difference between small, medium and large commercial. What category do ski resorts fall under versus a locally run restaurant?

LU has separated out vegetation expense from the cost per kwh. SPP had incorporated Vegetation into the kwh cost, and LU pulled them out. The CPUC approved an increase in Vegetation Management expense from about \$ 1 million to \$2.5 million per year beginning in 2012. This was to pay for deferred maintenance over three years and then be reduced. No reduction is being proposed, and LU appears to never lower rates for anything. The medium commercial rate is increased by 56 percent.

We received the Notice of Public Participation Hearing in our recent bills there is a lack of specificity and general information for the public to comment on.

Criteria for what is included in the distribution infrastructure, customer service satisfaction, safety and reliability that is not part of what most of the public understands to be the CalPeco. Upgrade project must be provided to the public for transparency.

Provide us detailed criteria why Sierra Pacific included vegetation in kwh while Liberty submits as a separate cost. Also provide us info on what the Catastrophic Emergency Memorandum Account is, as well as the Solar Incentive Program as related to the Lake Tahoe residential and commercial ratepayers. And also provide detailed criteria for the 332

percent increase for irrigation

We have researched Liberty Utilities and increases like what is proposed is part of their corporate culture, i.e. to raise money in the stock market to buy projects and then exploit those projects to maximize their stockholders' returns. The rationale is ultimately what is good or necessary for their stockholders to maximize and secure their gains regardless of the consequences to the ratepayer. This rationale is made explicitly over nearly 100 pages of testimony by Dr. Morin justifying their request for a 10.5 percent. Return on equity. Their two most significant reasons for this were 1) the system is small and therefore demands a premium return, and 2) LU has a capital budget that calls for spending \$100 million over the next five years.

The point of this context is that LU appears to be using their monopoly license as a tool for generating profits at the expense of the relatively few (49,000) ratepayers.

When we were over 2 million customers with previous owners the smaller increases over many years was easier to swallow.

The PUC should not have approved the purchase of such a small ratepayer base and I oppose this ridiculously high increase and request that the rate case be studied further before approved to identify the details and criteria other than ROE. A poor investment by a multi-billion dollar company should not be the responsibility of the ratepayers. We the little ratepayers do not owe the investors a 10.5 percent return.

I am also submitting a comment letter that was provided to the Office of ratepayer advocates in May 2015. Unfortunately the ORA is underfunded and understaffed to deal effectively with our very small Liberty Utilities cases like this one.

EDSO going to the people to talk facilities

El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini is planning to have town hall style meetings throughout the county in each of the supervisor districts.

The topic of the meetings will be the new sheriff's office facility on the West Slope. D'Agostini will be discussing details of the building: progress, location and representatives from the local architectural firm, Arch Nexus, will also be present. The sheriff is looking for the public's feedback and input on the project and the design of the building.

Our current office was built in 1971. The department has outgrown the facility in size and functionality.

The meeting schedule is:

District 1

Jan. 28 at 6pm, El Dorado Hills Fire Department, 1050 Wilson Blvd., El Dorado Hills.

District 2

Jan. 25, 6pm, Pioneer Park Community Center, 6740 Fairplay Road, Somerset.

District 3

Jan. 26, 6pm, American Legion Hall, 4561 Greenstone Road, Placerville.

District 4

Feb. 1, 6pm, Pilot Hill/Cool Grange Hall, 1701 Highway

193, Cool.

District 5

Jan. 27 at 6pm, Pollock Pines Community Center, 2675 Sanders Way, Pollock Pines.

Nev. No. 2 most popular destination in West for movers

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Many U.S. residents are apparently considering a move to Nevada to be, well, a nice move.

A survey by national moving company United Van Lines found that the Silver State is the second most popular destination in the Western United States for folks moving to a new area.

Only Oregon was a more popular destination for movers in the West, according to the 2015 National Movers Study, which compared inbound and outbound moves for every state. Nevada's inbound rate of 57 percent also placed it seventh overall among all states in the country, with Oregon's 69 percent also getting the top ranking nationwide as well.

Read the whole story

CHP arrest man on attempted murder charge

A 65-year-old Stockton man was arrested Monday near Truckee on attempted murder charges.



Harris Riddle

Harris Riddle allegedly fired several shots from a 9mm pistol into a vehicle parked near the Donner Lake Vista Point. One bullet struck a woman in the leg.

California Highway Patrol troopers made the arrest about 3pm Jan. 11. The vehicle was parked on westbound Interstate 80.

Troopers saw the bullet holes and determined there had been a domestic violence altercation.

Riddle also faces weapons charges.

The woman was taken to Tahoe Forest Hospital.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Country sensation Urban coming to Stateline

The first booking for the annual Harveys Outdoor Concert Series at Stateline has been announced. Country superstar Keith Urban will be taking the stage July 29 at 7pm.

Opening for Urban will be Brett Eldredge and Maren Morris.

Tickets range from \$69.50 to \$125.50, plus service fees.

Urban's RipCORD World Tour 2016 will debut on the heels of his soon to be released eighth studio album release of the same name, which has already produced two singles – his Grammy nominated, 19th No. 1 song, "John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16" and its second single "Break On Me."

Money available to restore sage grouse habitat

Funds are available through the Sagebrush Ecosystem Program for projects that will enhance and restore high quality sage grouse habitat on private and public land in Nevada.

The purpose of these funds is to not only improve habitat, but to also create a supply of "compensatory mitigation credits" to be used in the Nevada Conservation Credit System. Through the credit system, habitat projects generate credits that can be sold to parties to mitigate impacts to sage grouse habitat as a result of development projects.

Interested parties must submit a letter of interest by 5pm Feb. 8.

For more information, go **online**.

Scientist rings climate change alarm at Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – “The threat of climate change is not from what we have done in the past, but what we do in the future.”

Those are the words of Ken Caldeira, the keynote speaker at last week’s annual Operation Sierra Storm conference, a gathering of television meteorologists hosted by Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. Caldeira is with the Department of Global Energy at the Carnegie Institution for Science at Stanford.

His concern is that most of the carbon dioxide emissions are going to come from infrastructure that is not built. That prospect also offers him hope because it means there is still time for change.

“We need to stop using the sky as a waste dump for our CO2 pollution,” Caldeira said.



Ken Caldeira is worried not enough is being done to stop climate change. Photo/LTN

He was at the international climate conference in Paris last month. On the one hand Caldeira is encouraged that the world is acknowledging climate change to the point leaders want to do something about it. At the same time he is skeptical about the agreements that were made because he believes those actions were going to happen any way so in many ways nothing new came from the gathering.

“There is a mismatch in what is politically feasible and what is necessary,” Caldeira said.

Previous conferences – this was the 21st – sought binding agreements. The problem any president of the United States has with this is needing Congress to approve it.

President Obama committed to reducing emissions to 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. Using the Environmental Protection Agency is how he can circumvent Congress.

Caldeira’s repetitive mantra is stop building smoke stacks and tail pipes. He’s taking that call to the average person with the hope individuals will put pressure on elected officials to create the change he believes is needed to curb global warming.

He said the rate things are going now the Arctic ice will melt, sea levels will continue to rise, coral reefs will disappear and the world as we know it going to be very different – even if it's not in our lifetime.

"It's not too late to do something, but we need to start doing it now," Caldeira said.

Editorial: California needs a water strategy

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the Dec. 30, 2015, Ventura County Star.*

As we eagerly anticipate the rain of El Niño that is promised to start this month, we are hearing a growing drumbeat to find more and better ways to save that rainwater for California's next drought.

The expected wet winter will trigger more talk of building additional reservoirs in California. As we watch the rain wash out to the ocean, those of us who have so diligently cut back on our shower time and allowed our lawns to turn brown this summer will start thinking more dams and lakes are just what California needs.

It does seem like a good idea to have additional reservoir capacity to capture the water in the rainy years to save for the dry ones. But, like most everything else in California, it's all about the money.

Read the whole story

Natural cork making a comeback at wineries

By Megan Krigbaum, Food and Wine

Natural corks are effective, sustainable and even romantic. Here's why their reputation has been tainted, and why they're making a comeback.

Natural cork is a sustainable resource: It comes from cork-tree bark, which regenerates every eight to 10 years. Yet natural cork has fallen a bit out of favor over the past 30 years as a growing number of producers switched to synthetic cork or screw caps.

The problem is "cork taint," contamination with a nasty compound called TCA that can ruin wines that have taken years to make.

In recent years, however, winemakers have come to realize that synthetic cork and screw caps have their own set of issues.

Read the whole story