

SCVAS and Burrowing Owl Protection

Through the early part of the 20th Century, open fields in the Santa Clara Valley supported large populations of Western Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*) and its hosts, the California Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*). Unfortunately, rapid urban development since the 1980s has reduced their habitat and populations.



Since that time, SCVAS and other conservationists have made strenuous efforts to preserve local habitat for this attractive species. Former SCVAS Executive Director Craig Breon summarized the 1990s period in "The Destruction of Burrowing Owl Habitat" and "Clearcutting the Valley."

The State of California has recognized the plight of the owls by designating the Western Burrowing Owl (BUOW) as a “Species of Special Concern” (SSC). The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) assigns this designation to animals and plants that are thought to be at a preliminary stage of risk of extinction — usually due to human activities. The goal of the SSC status is to make people aware of the vulnerability of a species and to help it recover wherever possible. This designation is intended also to stimulate collection of additional information on the biology, distribution, and status of poorly known at-risk species, and focus research and management attention on them. CDFG is required to consider Species of Special Concern during environmental review and conservation planning processes.

At the Federal level, the U.S. Department of Fish and Game listed the owl as a Species of Special Concern, and in 1994 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service nominated the Western Burrowing Owl as a Federal Category 2 candidate for listing as endangered or threatened. Unfortunately, none of these designations have given the owl sufficient special protection to prevent their rapid decline.



It is believed that in California breeding pairs of owls declined nearly 60 percent from the 1980s to the early 1990s. A census conducted from 1991 to 1993 by The Institute for Bird Populations (IBP) found

about 9,200 pairs of owls in California, with more than 90 percent living in the Imperial Valley. IBP found that BUOWs have been eliminated as a breeding bird from five California counties and is now very rare in six others.

In 2003, SCVAS joined with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and other groups to petition the CDFG Commission to list the owl as endangered. The Commission rejected the petition in December of that year, citing lack of evidence that the owl is "threatened with extinction over a significant portion of its range." Data from a 2006 and 2007 statewide IBP BUOW census will be available in early 2008, and may offer additional data that could be used to repetition the Commission if that is deemed appropriate. SCVAS continues to collaborate with groups such as the California Burrowing Owl Consortium and CBD to preserve habitat and help collect data about owl populations and lifestyle.

Burrowing Owl Conservation Facts

As the only owl that routinely lives and nests underground, BUOWs usually adopt burrows dug by ground squirrels or badgers. (Elsewhere they may use homes of prairie dogs). BUOWs regularly reuse burrows from one year to the next and are very "site-tenacious."



For this reason, the state-approved practice to "relocate" owls from development sites has accelerated the elimination of the birds from rapidly urbanizing areas such as Santa Clara County. IBP estimates that 91 percent of all Burrowing Owls remaining in California live on private land, much of it under enormous development pressure. Habitat favorable to owls is rarely purchased by agencies for public lands.

The failure of owl conservation efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area may illustrate the limitations of existing regional and local conservation planning for species not listed under the Endangered Species Act. Unfortunately, even an "endangered" designation may offer Burrowing Owls little protection because of their special vulnerability to destruction. Would-be developers can easily "accidentally bury" owls on their lands before they are even located by scientists.

Current and Future BUOW Conservation Efforts

A Santa Clara County Conservation Plan mandated by the Endangered Species Act is being prepared

in the county. Deliberations will take about three years. Audubon member Jan Hintermeister and Executive Director Bob Power are committee members. The conservation plan will be designed to protect the Burrowing Owl and other threatened species by determining in advance where development can and cannot go forward. This plan has real teeth. However, the details need careful watching.

Managing BUOWs on Public Lands. The IBP censuses have determined that currently all or most BUOWs in Santa Clara County are located at public or semi-public lands such as airports, golf courses, parks, water company facilities, and wildlife refuges. Not all of these sites support the owls now, though they did in the past. We want to determine the reasons for this change.

BUOWs flourish where grass near the burrow remains short, and predators are rare. There must be enough open fields nearby to supply their insect and rodent prey. We already know that some of these potential sites do not support owls because the grass is allowed to grow tall during spring, or pets are allowed to run free.



In recent years, scientists and land managers have demonstrated that BUOWs will accept artificial burrows that are placed *near their existing burrows*. Jack Barclay, <http://www.albionenvironmental.com/> a wildlife biologist who manages a Burrowing Owl colony at the Mineta San Jose International Airport, has used this technique to relocate owls that conflict with airport activities to sites nearby where they can co-exist with airplanes. Managers at Mountain View Shoreline Park have used a similar plan to enable owls to flourish at that location.

The Burrowing Owl Advocates, a group led by SCVAS volunteers, is developing Burrowing Owl management protocols for public areas with suitable habitat. Advocates will encourage officials to adopt these plans. They will also monitor the BUOWs at existing sites to develop data on the year-round use of these habitats.

Information on California Species of Special Concern was obtained from Wikipedia.

Last modified in November 2007