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THE BURROWING GUARDIAN

THIS ISSUE

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Photo: Larry Jordan

The Western Burrowing Owl Needs a Conservation Plan

by Larry Jordan

"Probably one of the most common birds in California, and known to almost everybody, as they are visible at all times of the day, and not timid." This was the description of the Burrowing Owl, *Athene cunicularia*, in the Geological Survey of California, Ornithology, Volume 1, Land Birds, published in 1870. What has happened since then is a sad tale of indifference, neglect and mismanagement.

Burrowing Owls are listed as endangered in Canada and threatened in Mexico. They are considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to be a "Bird of Conservation Concern" at the national level, in three USFWS regions, and in nine Bird Conservation Regions.

They are also listed as endangered in Minnesota, threatened in Colorado, and as a "Species of Special Concern" in California, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

"Owl numbers have dropped steadily since the 1940s; by the mid-1990s surveys estimated 9,450 owl nesting pairs in the primary range of California burrowing owls, with 5,600 pairs thought to nest in the Imperial Valley. The number of breeding owl colonies in the survey area declined by nearly 60 percent from the 1980s to the early 1990s, and the statewide number of owls is now thought to be continuing to decline by about 8 percent per year due to urban

THANKS TO ALL
OUR
SUPPORTERS!

As a fledgling project of Earth Island Institute in 2010, we have spread our wings and are very excited about the future. More projects, increased conservation efforts, novel educational programs, and a goal to obtain added protections for burrowing owls in 2011. Thanks for all your support and we look forward to your assistance as we work to save burrowing owls in North America.

MISSION

Burrowing Owl Conservation Network advocates for the protection and restoration of the Western Burrowing Owl and promotes the preservation and careful management of habitat to prevent loss, foster healthy populations, and maintain intact natural communities for an ecologically sound future.



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Conversations

*Birdseye view, awake the stars 'cause they're all around you,
Wide eyes will always brighten the blue,
Chase your dreams, and remember me, speak bravery,
'cause after all those wings will take you, up so high,
So bid the forest floor goodbye, as you brace the wind and,
Take to the sky... you take to the sky*



To the Sky: Lyrics by Owl City

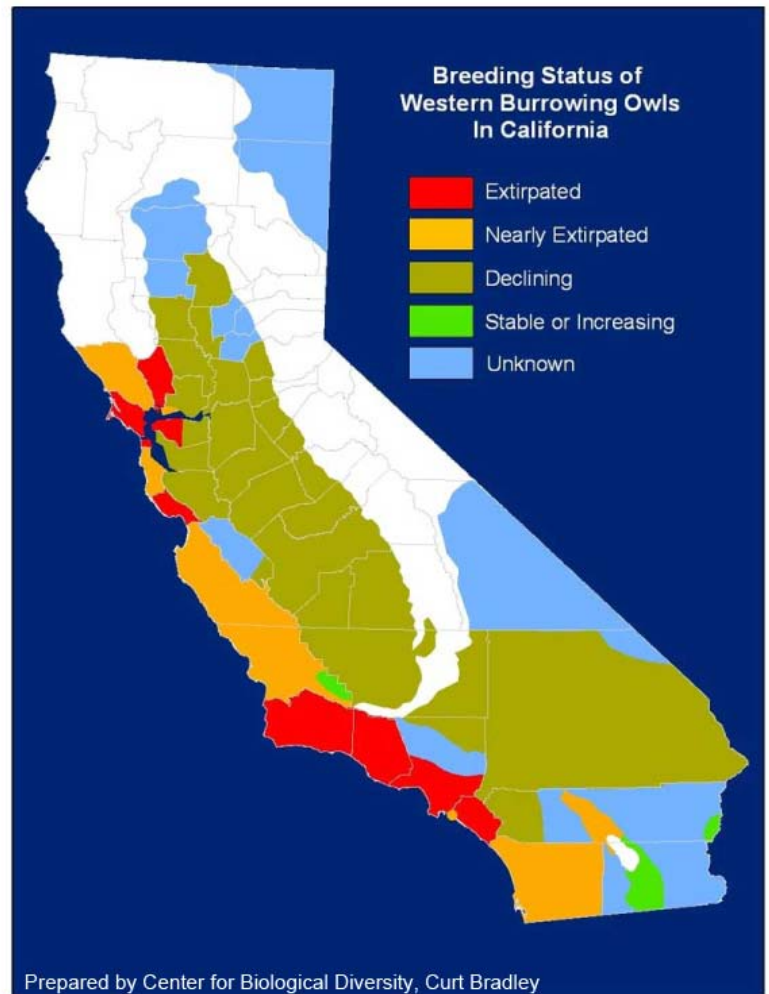
Conservation Plan - continued

development. "You can deduce from the map that it does not look good for the Western Burrowing Owl. The Imperial Valley (represented by the lime green area at the bottom of the map, below the Salton Sea shown in white) was thought to be the last stronghold for this small, charismatic owl.

Unfortunately, a recent survey by the Imperial Irrigation District that monitors the largest population of California's Burrowing Owls, shows a stunning 27% decline, providing some of the most striking evidence yet that the species is badly in need of state protections. So what is causing such huge declines in this "Species of Special Concern?" As is the case with most threatened and endangered species, loss of habitat is a large part of the problem, but the fact that this raptor lives in burrows dug primarily by fossorial mammals, compounds the problem. The California Ground Squirrel (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*) is the primary species offering up burrows for the owls in California and they have been systematically eradicated in the west for years (badgers, skunks, marmots, armadillos and fox holes are also used by the owls in North America).

The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) is still working from a script developed in 1995 when they released a staff report to aid developers and consultants involved with projects and developments that "may affect burrowing owl habitat." That was over fifteen years ago! These unwise practices fly in the face of their own suppressed report, Guidance for Burrowing Owl Conservation, dated April 14, 2008, that was leaked by us but never released to the public.

The current CDFG practices allow, and commonly use, exclusion of owls from their burrows during the non-breeding season, supposedly as a method to avoid "take." The definition of "take" includes to harass, harm, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or attempt to engage in



any such conduct. A notable component of this definition is the definition of "harm." "Harm" in the definition of "take" means an act that actually kills or injures protected wildlife. Such acts may include significant habitat modification or degradation where it actually kills or injures wildlife by significantly impairing essential behavior patterns, including breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

The 2008, unreleased report states "exclusion of owls from



Petition to Save California's Burrowing Owls

On December 9, 2010 the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network launched a petition designed to increase protections for California's declining burrowing owls and highlight the state's need for a species specific conservation strategy & legal protections. The need for a plan had been discussed as far back as 1995 in the Department of Fish and Game Staff Report on Burrowing Owls, and was supposed to prevent the need for listing under California Endangered Species Act.

Unfortunately, burrowing owls have continued to witness steep declines and a conservation strategy is a now well-overdue precursor to the legal protections that are truthfully needed to ultimately preserve this species across the Golden State.

Because California supports wintering burrowing owls from other states and Canada, we are encouraging everyone to sign our letter in support. Loss of breeding habitat is not the only culprit as it is just as important to protect wintering habitat and wildlife corridors across the continent. Thus, California's burrowing owl dilemma is actually a problem that requires the support and cooperation of everyone in North America.

We are making it easy for you, your friends, family and colleagues to sign. Please take a moment to visit us online and sign electronically through Facebook Causes, via our website online form, or with our print and mail form included in this newsletter.

An official letter with all signatures will be hand delivered to state officials in Sacramento, CA. If your group would like to sign on to the letter at the organizational level please contact us for details.

VISIT BurrowingOwlConservation.org for all the details

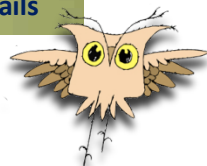
Conservation Plan - continued

burrows during the non-breeding season, usually by installation of one-way doors, has been used to avoid take...[but] because owls are dependent on burrows for survival and reproduction, excluding them from nesting, roosting, and satellite burrows on a project site may actually lead to direct or indirect take."These one-way doors exclude the owls from their burrows, forcing them to move to another location. One wildlife "biologist" hired by a developer told us "they are sure to find happy homes elsewhere." Yeah, right. They are most likely sure to perish from exposure without a burrow to escape predation.

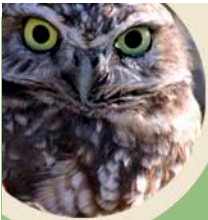


This is the plan (eviction) most often used by CDFG when dealing with developers that find Burrowing Owls on the property they wish to develop. Most are not even required to contribute to a mitigation bank to offset the destruction of their habitat, as described by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Again, quoting from the Guidance for Burrowing Owl Conservation, "existing practices for excluding owls usually employ only portions of the methods described above (passive relocation or eviction), or employ the methods inadequately, and therefore have a higher likelihood of resulting in take. For example, "passive relocation" efforts typically provide alternative (i.e. artificial) nearby burrows for the owls that will be displaced, but do not confirm before burrow destruction that new burrows are being used. "Eviction" is exclusion from the burrow without providing alternate burrows that the displaced owls can find."

This approach to Burrowing Owl conservation, considering the statistics I have sited here, obviously doesn't work. Burrowing Owls have been in decline for sixty years. We need a Burrowing Owl Conservation Plan and we need it now!



Visit us online to see our animated short
"Burrowing Owl Fights for Life"



Benefits of Joining!

Besides the benefits of supporting our hands-on conservation efforts, advocacy, outreach and research activities, we have a few gifts that we are happy to offer with your tax-deductible donation.

Receive a free one-year subscription to the award winning Earth Island Journal with your \$40 or more donation.



Or with your \$100 or more contribution you can choose a Burrowing Owl Conservation Network T-Shirt.



Online Owl Community Continues to Grow - Supporters Recruit Friends to Cause

In September 2010 we extended our online presence and started the "Save Burrowing Owls" Facebook Cause. If you're not familiar with Causes.com, it is an application that works in conjunction with Facebook and provides an opportunity for people, groups and organizations to gather support, share information, solicit donations, and, in general, further social change. With the tagline "Anyone can change the world" we just had to join!

"Causes was founded on the belief that in a healthy society, anyone can participate in change by informing and inspiring others. The most successful movements have always been born out of and held together by the bonds of real world relationships, and online social networks present never before seen opportunities for organizing."

As of January 12, 2011 our "Save Burrowing Owls" cause has reached 787 members and our Facebook fan page for JournOwl.com has reached 607. However, we definitely need to give credit to all of you for doing the majority of the work and telling your friends about burrowing owls, our organization, and our online community. Without your assistance we would never have expanded our network this quickly.

But there are a few special thanks



in order as we want to recognize the top recruiters to the cause. Over a 3 month period that ended on December 27th, the following people recruited a total of 153 people to our cause via Facebook:

1st place: Bob Bushell with 65 recruits

Bob will be receiving an 8x10 (matted to 11x14) burrowing owl photograph.

2nd place: Lauren Meads & Dawn Simmons Fine each with 30 recruits

Lauren and Dawn will be receiving a 5x7 (matted to 8x10) burrowing owl photograph

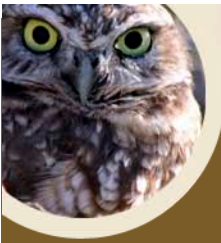
3rd place: Bird Watcher with 28 recruits

We want to THANK everyone for all their help thus far and we are looking forward to working together to save burrowing owls across North America.

To join the "Save Burrowing Owls" cause visit us at causes.com/causes/529014

In the Movies - Thanks to Gina Farr, BOCN's Scott Artis visited Southern California to appear on camera for a wildlife training documentary that was filming in the western tip of the Mohave Desert in November. Let's hope the audience is just as excited about burrowing owls as we are!





Owlets have a remarkable defense mechanism. When threatened, they emit a noise that sounds just like a rattlesnake.

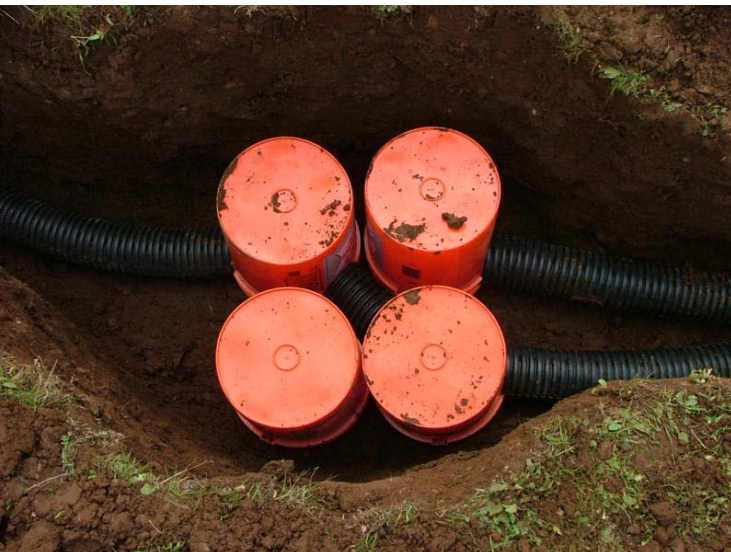
Just the facts!

BOCN's Habitat Manager Spearheads Restoration Project - Installs 44 artificial burrows with Audubon grant

Got owls? Well, the answer is usually dependent upon meeting a few important biological needs. And one of those requirements, habitat, has become more and more of a limiting factor during the last 60 years. As available habitat declines, the number of human-owl conflicts increases and burrowing owls are forced to contend with a constantly evolving landscape. Unfortunately, this evolution is typically in favor of urbanization.

However, Larry Jordan, Habitat Manager of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network and Board Member of the Wintu Audubon Society, is working to reverse the trend as much as possible. On October 10, 2010, Larry completed an intensive, yearlong burrowing owl restoration project in Northern California that was made possible with a grant from California Audubon, volunteers, and conservation-minded landowners.

Over a 10 month period that began in January of last year,



forty-four artificial burrows were ultimately installed on three separate locations in the Chico area. According to Larry:

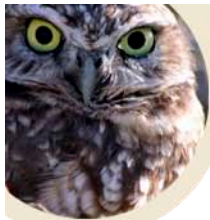
"Sixteen artificial burrows were installed on private property owned by Sandy Dubose, a long time Audubon member and conservation advocate. Sandy's property is now in the process of being put into conservation easement with Shasta Land Trust. The Burrowing Owl site will be protected in perpetuity."



"The second location was a piece of land owned by Howard Wurlitzer of Chico that was already designated as conservation easement in perpetuity for the conservation of vernal pools. Burrowing Owls had been observed on this site and on February 20th, eight artificial burrows were dug by hand with ten volunteers from Wintu Audubon of Redding and AltaCal Audubon of Chico. A week later a Burrowing Owl was seen at the entrance of the newly installed artificial burrows and persists at that location."

"The third location was another property owned by Howard where Burrowing Owls had recently been seen. The morning of the installation, a Burrowing Owl was seen within a mile of the installation site and whitewash was noted on a large rock adjacent to that installation. This third site had five volunteers and a backhoe operator doing the hard work digging three separate groups of artificial burrows totaling 20 nest sites."

Although the installation portion of the project has been completed, there is still a great deal of monitoring work to be done. During the last round of burrow installations, observation tubes were incorporated into the design to facilitate behavioral studies and nest box surveillance.



Photos from the field

We love to get messages and owl photos from our supporters. Send us your pictures today!

Citizen Science - I've got a bone to pick!

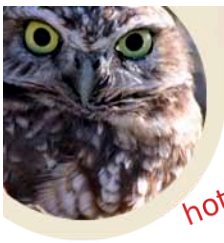
Here's to Gail Juels for inspiring others to become citizen scientists and burrowing owl conservationists. BOCN sparked up a conversation with Gail after she reported a sighting to us out of Sacramento last July. KEEP UP THE GREAT WORK and THANKS for sharing your excellent pellet and mealtime photos!



Urban Exploration - Owls in the City

Thanks to the keen observations of employees at Mig, Inc. and KyotoUSA in Berkeley, BOCN received a sighting report and a couple of great photos of a burrowing owl visiting the city's sites. Perhaps it was a burrowing owl overwintering at Caesar Chavez Park? Cheers to Jane Kelly, Tom Kelly and the photographer Larry Wight!





hot off the blog

Burrowing Owls Embark on Cross-Continent Migration by Scott Artis

I've definitely been neglecting my journal reading over the last few months, and if I want to be honest it's probably more like a 6 month hiatus. As I returned from a field visit in Winters, California, I got the itch to see what's up with the latest in raptor research. And the little voice in my head must have sensed something in the air as I came across a couple of papers discussing burrowing owls.

Migration. I find it an interesting topic in regards to burrowing owls especially since I live in California. Unlike places such as eastern Oregon where burrowing owls may just show up during breeding season, the Golden State has a shifting population as year-round residents comingle with those popping in for the winter. It can be a dynamic situation as some move south after young have fledged, some return to breeding grounds in other states or countries, some stay put, and it may even involve an instinctual drive that splits a pair; only to be reunited the following season. But where they go is an interesting question, especially for those places where populations have warranted endangered status and they are actively involved in breeding programs (check out our Canadian friends The Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC).

It's not hard to understand why Canada's burrowing owls are listed as endangered and why I take population declines, as in California, so seriously. In fact, it is a troubling and sad story marked by 20% per year declines during the 90s, a remaining population of only 900 pairs in 2004, and a species left occupying only 40% of their former/historic range. And with such declines, it becomes imperative to determine where burrowing owls go to understand why they fail to return.

"Burrowing Owls in the Canadian Great Plains are at the northern limits of their range and are migratory, spending about half the year away from the breeding grounds. The wintering grounds of these owls were unknown because of the low rate of band returns."

Thus, the authors of "Winter Destinations and Habitats of Canadian Burrowing Owls" in the latest edition of the *Journal of Raptor Research* decided to answer some of these lingering questions. Researchers set out from the north to find Canadian burrowing owls in southern Texas and Mexico using aerial telemetry.



Well, over a three year period the researchers searched, captured, recorded, and located burrowing owls fitted with transmitters. According to the results, nine of 125 transmitters were detected during the 3 year period; 6 owls located in Texas and 3 in Mexico. However, after the study was concluded a few more bands were returned from Texas and Mexico.

"Our study provided the first documentation of wintering locations for Canadian Burrowing Owls, confirming migration from the northern Great Plains to southern Texas and Mexico, as was suggested by the southeastern pattern of spring and fall band returns from Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The distribution of winter records indicated that owls banded in Canada were found in both Texas and Mexico."

There are a few other findings that were interesting involving use of burrows and variable habitat types, but I'll save that for another post or two. However, like the authors, I think this study highlights the need for cooperative conservation. **After breaking down the data, it becomes clear, as I have been saying for quite some time now, that the unfolding burrowing owl crisis is not just a state, province, US, Mexico or Canadian problem, but a North American problem.** Loss of breeding habitat is not the only culprit as it is just as important to protect wintering habitat and wildlife corridors across the continent.

Ref: Holroyd, G., Trefry, H., & Duxbury, J. (2010). Winter Destinations and Habitats of Canadian Burrowing Owls *Journal of Raptor Research*, 44 (4), 294-299



Events

January 29, 2011 (9am to 1pm)

Western Burrowing Owls Workshop & Field Trip

Larry Jordan, BOCN's Burrowing Owl Habitat Manager, will be hosting this event at the 12th Annual Snow Goose Festival in Butte County. Learn the history of this California Species of Special Concern, see how artificial habitat and nesting sites are created and be taken on a field trip to actual installations in Chico, CA.

February 11-12, 2011

15th Annual 2011 Flyway Festival

Scott Artis will be presenting on the plight of burrowing owls in California and the BOCN will host an educational table display/exhibit booth. Stop by to get your "I Love Burrowing Owls" bracelet.

February 24, 2011 (8:45am to 4pm)

Meeting – Burrowing Owl Consortium

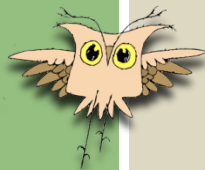
Scott Artis - guest speaker and panel-discussion participant at the meeting of the Burrowing Owl Consortium. The winter meeting is sponsored by the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District and will be held onsite in Elk Grove at the Bufferlands.

March 21, 2011 (6:30pm)

Meeting – Altacal Audubon Meeting

Larry Jordan - Guest Speaker, Altacal Audubon (Chico, CA). Larry will be presenting information on burrowing owls and discussing conservation in California.

For more details, directions and a list of the most current events visit our website:
BurrowingOwlConservation.org



LEARN MORE & CONNECT WITH US ONLINE

- Learn about our conservation projects, research, advocacy efforts and community outreach at <http://BurrowingOwlConservation.org>
- Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
- Join "Save Burrowing Owls" at Causes.com
- Keep up with the latest information and check out our blogs
 - <http://journowl.com>
 - <http://thebirdersreport.com>

Getting Involved

Report a sighting

Have you seen a burrowing owl or two or more?

If so, then the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network is looking forward to hearing from you. The information you provide not only aids in our conservation, research and tracking efforts, but it offers burrowing owls a chance for survival in an ever dynamic world full of urbanization. Additionally, it allows us to direct conservation activities to areas or communities that require assistance.

Send your observations to: sightings@burrowing-owl.org

Burrowing Owl Conservation Network's Volunteer Staff

Scott Artis – Founding Director

Larry Jordan – Habitat Manager

Dee Vieira – East County Program Manager

Heather Artis – Conservation Manager

Advisory Board

Pamela Flick - Defenders of Wildlife

Lynne Trulio, Ph.D. - San Jose State University

Bob & Samantha Fox - Wild At Heart

Greg Clark - Wild At Heart & the Arizona Bird Conservation Initiative



GET THE WORD OUT

Tell your friends about the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network and join our conservation efforts TODAY!

Burrowing Owl Conservation Network is a project of Earth Island Institute, a 501(c)3 non-profit, public interest, membership organization.

PETITION

CALIFORNIA BURROWING OWL COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

To: Governor Jerry Brown, California Secretary for Natural Resources, Department of Fish and Game Director, California Wildlife Conservation Board Executive Director, Chair of the Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee, and Chair of the Natural Resources and Water Committee

We petition that... **You immediately develop, release for public comment and implement a Comprehensive Conservation Strategy for Burrowing Owls that will facilitate the maintenance of viable burrowing owl populations in California, help prevent the further elimination of breeding pairs and population declines across the state, and form a solid foundation by which regional and statewide population recovery and habitat protection can be achieved.**

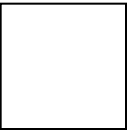
Your immediate action is needed to prevent further declines of this unique and protected species.

Sincerely,

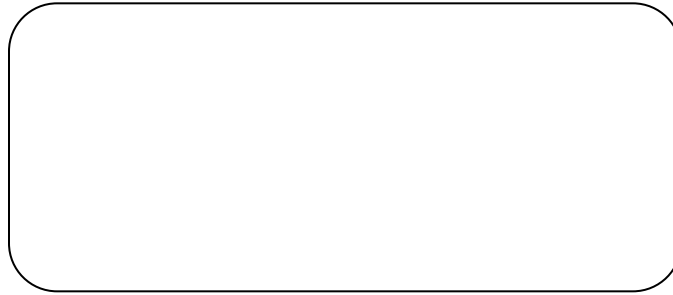
The Undersigned

Signature:	Print Name:	
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When fully or partially completed, promptly mail the signed petitions to:
BURROWING OWL CONSERVATION NETWORK, PO BOX 128, BRENTWOOD, CA 95134.
Information and copies of this petition are available at <http://burrowingowlconservation.org>
Email: info@burrowing-owl.org



Burrowing Owl Conservation Network
P.O. Box 128
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