



Friday, August 27, 2010

HERMISTON

Burrowmasters come to aid of depot owls

Habitat changes make nesting difficult for native bird species

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East Oregonian

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Jim Wenzl of the Umatilla Chemical Depot environmental office positions the end of a flexible pipe that will be the opening of an artificial owl burrow while Mike Green of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attaches the other end to half a juice barrel.

Staff photo by Dean Brickey



David Johnson holds the contents of owl pellets he found outside this natural burrow at the Umatilla Chemical Depot.

Staff photo by Dean Brickey

In a convoluted way, the antelope at the Umatilla Chemical Depot are helping the burrowing owls to have several dozen new homesites.

David Johnson of the Global Owl Project in Washington, D.C. led about 30 volunteers this week as they established artificial burrows for the depot's growing population of burrowing owls.

In the past several years, he said, biologists set traps for coyotes to protect the pronghorn. Unfortunately, he said, the traps caught several badgers, too. As the badger population declined, so did the numbers of nesting pairs of burrowing owls, which occupy vacated badger dens.

By 2008, Johnson said, biologists counted just four nesting pairs of burrowing owls at the depot. That's when the burrowmasters took action. It's a group of volunteers from all over the western United States and Canada who come to the depot to build artificial burrows.

This year's participants hailed from Oregon, Washington, Nevada, California, Colorado and British Columbia. Contributing to the effort are the U.S. Army, the Global Owl Project, Treetop Inc. and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Their efforts help observe National Public Lands Day, which this year is Sept. 25.

"We're doing it in August because some of the owls are still here," Johnson said. "The owls can orient on the new burrows and come back to them in the spring."

The work is paying off. By 2009, biologists counted nine pairs of burrowing owls at the depot, and this year, after last year's first "burrow blitz" they discovered 31 pairs. Johnson's goal is to have 50-60 nesting pairs at the depot. He intended to have the volunteers install about 60 burrows this week.

"The majority are nesting in artificial burrows," he said, "because there aren't any badgers to make the burrows."

Don Gillis, a civilian Army employee at the depot, said the owls take to their artificial homes quickly.

"The first one we put in," he said, referring to 2008, "the owls moved into it in 24 hours."

Johnson said some of the volunteers came this year to learn to build the artificial burrows for owls in their own regions.

Using plastic juice barrels donated by Treetop Inc., Gillis fashions the artificial owl homes during winter. He cuts each barrel in half vertically, then cuts a hole in the solid end to accommodate a plastic pail. He cuts the bottom from the pail, providing biologists access to the owls' nest.

He also cuts an opening in the barrel's side near where he cut it in half. That's where about 15 feet of corrugated plastic pipe will fit, providing the owls access to the inverted barrel.

With the assembled burrows piled into the beds of pickup trucks, the volunteers headed out onto the depot Tuesday afternoon to meet a backhoe operator. He dug holes about 3 feet deep for the barrel and a shallow trench from the base of the hole to the surface. Volunteers put the barrel, open side down, in the hole, attached the 8- to 10-inch diameter tube and covered both with the sandy soil.

All that remained visible was the top half or so of the end of the black corrugated pipe, which provides the doorway, and the rim of a white plastic pail filled with soil. Gillis said natural grasses would take root in the disturbed earth and in the bucket by next spring, making the artificial burrow difficult to find.

That's why James Redholz of the USFWS in Portland used a GPS locator to find the coordinates of each burrow entrance and log them, so biologists will be able to find them later.

By removing the bucket filled with earth, they can reach into the burrow to capture adults or babies and to tag them or otherwise conduct their studies. They have attached recording devices to some adults to help biologists learn where they go during winter. They hope to have their first results next spring.

The burrowing owl is not on the U.S. endangered species list.

"Our intent is to do what we can so it doesn't become listed," Johnson said.