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Owls at Antioch subdivision may have new home

By Paul Burgarino
Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH — Local activists have built what they hope becomes a new home for burrowing owls recently evicted from a halted residential development.

Earlier this month, a group of Antioch residents and environmental group Friends of Marsh Creek Watershed constructed six artificial burrows at a designated burrowing owl habitat preserve in the hills north of Prewett Water Park.

"Hopefully, it helps a little bit; it's better than nothing," said Scott Artis, a resident who has taken an interest in protecting the owls.

Burrowing owls have lived in East Contra Costa County's grassy hills for years, only recently catching Antioch's eye as residents pushed for protections. In 2008, Antioch set up 24 acres of protected land for owls displaced by the community center at Prewett Park, which is currently being built.

The artificial burrows — made of corrugated black pipe — are designed to give the owls a place to nest and protect them from predators. Perches were installed and the grass around the burrows was mowed to attract the raptors.

Burrowing owls spot open, shallow holes and swoop in to make nests, favoring areas where they can view predators.

Valve boxes were placed in the middle of each tunnel and can be opened for documenting and banding young owls, Artis said.

The fake burrows were sought after the raptors were successfully shooed from shallow tunnels at the Blue Ridge neighborhood off Canada Valley Road. The planned 127-home development by Kiper Homes was graded as residential lots before work stalled in May 2008.

During regular walks the past two years, Artis has monitored the owl population. In November, he tallied 11 owls in the area, including four pairs.

In December, the state Department of Fish and Game gave Kiper and environmental consultants Monk & Associates the go-ahead on a plan to passively evict the doll-sized birds. The owls had to be out by Feb. 1 — the date for the beginning of nesting season.

To displace the owls, one-way doors were placed on burrows that let the owls leave but prevent them from returning, explained Geoff Monk, a certified wildlife biologist who has worked with nesting birds of prey for 30 years.

Artis and other owl activists argue that this approach leaves burrowing owls vulnerable to predators or unable to find new homes.

"They don't want (the burrowing owl) listed on the endangered species list, but they're contributing to the decline by allowing evictions," said Catherine Portman, director of the Burrowing Owl Preservation

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Society. Portman and others say artificial burrows or other inhabitable areas should be ready for the owls before eviction to limit death in the wild.

Monk, however, points out that burrowing owls frequently adapt and relocate quickly when burrows become unsuitable in the wild.

Fish and Game considers burrowing owls a "species of special concern," but they are not an endangered species. The distinction protects them from hunting, and their burrows are off-limits during nesting season.

During a recent site visit at the Blue Ridge development, Monk explained that fumigants and decoys of large-horned owls were placed on the property to keep squirrels from digging tunnels. The developer also grew out some of the lot's vegetation to deter the birds, as the well-kept grounds of the site were ideal for owls, Monk said.

Once it was determined there were no dwelling owls, the tunnels were collapsed by hand and filled.

Throughout the process, Artis questioned practices he thought violated the plan and required additional approval. The use of natural tumbleweeds is a behavior-modification management practice, while rocks were added over buried burrows so they can't be easily reopened, Monk said.

As long as the birds are not nesting, the eviction plan need not be amended by Fish and Game, he said. A Fish and Game official said Kiper adhered to the plan.

Activists say current Fish and Game plans fall short of keeping the number of burrowing owls from declining, and are calling on the agency to move

ahead with a comprehensive conservation plan it spoke of creating in 2003.

Artis sent a letter to the state Attorney's General Office seeking an investigation into the current policy and delays in the creation of the conservation plan. That office sent a response Feb. 23, saying it couldn't investigate because it represents Fish and Game in litigation.

The hope, activists say, is the recent attention at Blue Ridge raises more community awareness about the owls. Resident Dee Vieira, who spearheaded creation of the protected owl habitat, hopes to add solar cameras inside the nesting boxes and signs around the preserve to educate the public.

Contact Paul Burgarino at 925-779-7164.

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An owl burrow on a hillside of an owl preserve at the end of Mustang Ct. in Antioch Calif. that was put in place by thirty volunteers Sunday is photographed in Antioch Calif. Friday March 12, 2010 (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)



Burrowing owl advocate Scott Artis walks up a hillside in an owl preserve at the end of Mustang Ct. in Antioch Calif. Friday March 12, 2010, and checks out one of six owl burrows that were put in place by thirty volunteers Sunday. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)