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Upgrade may be on horizon for Antioch owl habitat

By Sam Sutton
For the Contra Costa Times

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ANTIOCH -- Life is not easy when you are 10 inches tall, weigh less than a pound and live in a hole in the ground.

Fortunately for the burrowing owls at Prewett Park, their homes and habitat may be receiving an upgrade.

The Burrowing Owl Conservation Network is raising money to improve the 24-acre burrowing owl preserve in the hills north of Prewett Water Park, as well as develop educational videos and a diorama for the community center next to the preserve.

"It's sort of a multifaceted approach," conservation network director Scott Artis said. "There's a lot of people interested. We're excited about the support we're getting."

The city established the preserve in 2008 for burrowing owl habitat disrupted by the construction of the community center at Prewett Park. Last year, conservationists added six artificial burrows to the habitat for raptors displaced by a planned residential development in the Blue Ridge neighborhood.

"What we'd like to see is consistent breeding from

the pairs that do live on that site," Artis said. "If we create a successful ecosystem, it can become a sort of population hub for areas that have lost owls or have been losing owls."

Although not endangered, burrowing owls are at risk of becoming increasingly rare.

"They're really just covered as a rare species of concern," state Department of Fish and Game biologist John Krause said. "They were proposed for (endangered) listing, so they're

not doing great."

Money raised for the project will go toward building and repairing burrows, creating signs within the park with information about the raptors, and construction of an educational diorama in the community center.

The diorama will be designed to replicate burrowing owls' natural environment, complete with stuffed owls and ground squirrels.

"It's going to be pretty costly for the enclosure," said Dee Vieiria, East County program manager for the conservation network. "And the taxidermy is going to be pretty costly as well."

The group hopes to raise about \$10,000 for the Prewett Park project, Artis said. He estimates that the diorama and taxidermy will cost \$5,000 to \$6,000, with four graffiti-proof signs costing \$3,000. Burrow repairs and construction are relatively inexpensive, he said.

In addition to making improvements to the preserve, the group is trying to position itself as a financial resource for the city in the event that the preserve's endowment falls short of covering management costs. These include twice-annual mowings and

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general upkeep of the preserve.

The city established the preserve's endowment in 2008.

"The problem we may run into is that endowment costs may get too high," community center project manager Lonnie Karste said. "We're trying to keep it from getting to that."

The endowment, valued at \$100,000, is not in danger of being depleted, he added. "The issue is really to try to develop the habitat."

The conservation network is supported by Earth Island Institute, a nonprofit umbrella organization for grass-roots environmental campaigns and projects.

How to help

For more information and to donate, go to <http://earthisland.org/BOCN> and indicate that you would like your donation to go toward the Antioch Prewett Park Burrowing Owl Preserve. Donations are tax-deductible.

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