

Signs to educate public about owl species in Antioch

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ANTIOCH -- A suburban burrowing owl habitat here will get four interpretive signs to teach visitors about the declining species and its threatened habitat.

The California Department Fish and Game considers burrowing owls a "species of special concern," a distinction that warrants several special protections, though not as many as endangered species.

"A lot of people don't even know about burrowing owls," said Scott Artis, executive director of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network, which is based in Antioch and got the grant for the signs. "The signs will be a great way to help spread the word. People will be able to learn about this species that is worthy of protection."

The 24-acre Prewett Family Park Burrowing Owl Habitat Preserve was created in 2008 for owls displaced by the community center at Prewett Park, which was being built at the time. The preserve has pedestrian trails from which people can observe the owls and other wildlife.

The burrowing owl population has declined in the Bay Area for several reasons, Artis said.

"It boils down to habitat loss; not just the loss of grassland that they live in ... due to development, but invasive species such as weeds that are growing taller," Artis said. "It makes it more difficult for an owl that lives on the ground to find a burrow and hunt. Animals such as cats and dogs will hunt for them."

Artis said that approved killings of animals such as ground squirrels is also

partly to blame, because the owls depend on small mammals to dig their burrows.

The \$3,300 grant for the signs is from the Contra Costa County Fish and Wildlife Committee, which collects money from violations of the state's Fish and Game Code.

"We've been hearing a lot about the owl project and the need to preserve that (habitat)," said committee member Susan Heckly, who is also the director of wildlife rehabilitation for the Lindsay Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek.

Heckly said she hopes the signs educate Antioch residents about the wildlife in their backyards.

Artis hopes to have the signs up by the end of November.

Last year, activists built six artificial burrows at the preserve to attract owls evicted from shallow tunnels at the Blue Ridge neighborhood off Canada Valley Road. The planned 127-home development was graded as residential lots before work stalled in May 2008.

The artificial burrows were designed to give the owls a place to nest and protect them from predators.

Resident Dee Vieira, who spearheaded the creation of the owl habitat, said she also hopes to create a large diorama of an owl burrow, add solar cameras inside the nesting boxes, and create an education program for the community.



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"We'd like to invite guest speakers to be a part of our educational process and get schools to take part in field trips here," she said. "We'd like the community to take some ownership in this and get involved."

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ONLINE

www.burrowingowlconservation.org



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