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Scott Artis: Burrowing owls find refuge at Brentwood KinderCare

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For the Contra Costa Times

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The ever-expanding footprint of suburbia often puts wildlife in a position of hunting for new territory and habitat. It's an age-old competition that continues to drive an increase in human/wildlife interactions.

For one local species, it is typically a losing battle. Burrowing owls, a California species of special concern, continue to feel the pressure of a swelling human population as developments continue to rise from once open spaces in Brentwood, Antioch and Oakley.

But sometimes, nature catches a break. What appears to be an inhospitable parking lot, has become a wildlife refuge full of hospitality. In a very small section of landscaping that separates the entrance from a parking space at Brentwood KinderCare, a pair of burrowing owls has nested in a burrow excavated by ground squirrels.

Asphalt is not the ideal location for raising young, and where there are streets and businesses, there are cars and potential dangers. However, the staff at KinderCare has come to the owls' aid and is taking measures to ensure the soon-to-be family has a successful breeding season.

Carrie Murphy, center director, has checked and double-checked with the landscaping company to guarantee that the occupied burrow is not closed, has integrated the owls into their educational activities, and has reached out to the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network for advice. By working together, a plan can be implemented that is

not only amenable to maintaining business as usual, but will strive to give the offspring a healthy start to life as they emerge from their parking lot burrow.

With the center's location and proximity to a ravine, nature intertwines with the facility pretty frequently. Learning about animals and natural habitats has always been part of the center's curriculum with the children.

"In fact, our prekindergarten classrooms have really embraced learning about the burrowing owls," Murphy said. "From taking a walking field trip outside and making observations about what the owls eat, to art projects involving drawings of owls and their anticipated hatchlings, the children are learning firsthand the importance of nature, our environment and the impact humans can have.

"Our teachers focus on talking about how to respect their environment and how we've actually taken over their habitat. They've had a lot of fun and love watching the owls, who they've named Mr. and Mrs. Owl."

The center has also distributed information about this particular species to all center families to ensure they are mindful and aware of the owls.

Under Murphy's direction, KinderCare is setting a

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great conservation example for local businesses and residents by showcasing compassion for our native, local wildlife. In a world where competition for space is on the rise, learning to work together and make human/wildlife interactions a positive experience is the only way to protect our natural resources.

Scott Artis is founding director of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network.

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