

Protecting, aiding burrowing owls

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By Emily Charrier-Botts INDEX-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER |

While they're very rarely seen today, the burrowing owl has been a constant fixture in Sonoma for centuries, although their numbers are decreasing due to loss of habitat. A team of conservation organizations, including Sonoma Birding, are coming together on Saturday, Sept. 11, to discuss the status of the burrowing owl and what the average person can do to help protect the native species from extinction.

The Burrowing Owl Consortium takes place from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Viansa Winery in Sonoma, and will feature presentations from the Center for Biological Diversity, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Sonoma County Water Agency and the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network.

"We've got to do something before it's too late," said Tom Rusert, co-founder of Sonoma Birding. "What we are trying to do is educate the public."

In the late 19th and early 20th century, burrowing owls were a constant fixture in California, seen all over the state, including Sonoma. A

geological survey in 1870 referred to burrowing owls as "Probably one of the most common birds in California, and known to almost everybody ..." But for the past 25 years, the owls have not made colonies in the county, and the last time the owls were recorded in the Sonoma County Breeding Bird Atlas was in 1986.

"Back in the 1920s, the burrowing owl was this affectionate, roadside attraction that people really got attached to. The people in California bestowed it with the name Billy owl," Rusert said. "He was this roadside unique character who morphed into a species of concern because of so much habitat loss."

The burrowing owl is the only northern land bird to live in subterranean habitats, making its home in burrows created by land squirrels and other creatures in the grassy base of hills and mountains.

They spend much of their time in these burrows, hidden from predators such as hawks and feral cats, only coming out to hunt by running along the ground for small mammals and reptiles. As more and more land is developed, their habitat is wiped out, often by developers who don't even realize they're bulldozing or covering live owls.

"They quite literally get buried alive," said Scott Artis, founder of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network, who recounted a recent incident in Brentwood where a land developer covered a colony of breeding burrowing owls with an erosion control system. "That's why we see so many of them disappear in the Bay Area."

Although much of the research is out of date, the most current figures on the numbers of breeding burrowing owls in California showed a 60 percent decline from the number of owls recorded in the 1980s, included being completely eliminated from Napa, Marin, San Francisco, Santa Cruz and Ventura counties and being nearly extinct in Sonoma, San Mateo, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Orange counties. The California Department of Fish and Game has listed the birds as a "Species of Concern," but that provides the creatures with minimal protection.

"We thought that it carried some weight, but we found from Fish and Game that it's more of an administrative title," Artis said, adding that

the species is protected from "harassment" under the Migratory Bird Act. Artis is assisting the Center for Biological Diversity in having the burrowing owl listed as a threatened species, which would afford it more specific protections. The Department of Fish and Game is responsible for ensuring the birds are treated within the letter of the law, but the overtaxed agency is often unable to commit resources to protecting the owls.

"The burden is on state agencies to stick up for owls," Artis said. "California Fish and Game, they're understaffed and don't have the time to look out for all species. There's no one to monitor these things and make sure they're being done the way that they should."

Here in Sonoma Valley, owl conservationists are working with the Sonoma Land Trust, Tolay Lake Regional Park, the Sonoma County Water Agency, San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Viansa Winery and other private land owners to establish artificial habitats, which are basically plastic enclosures the birds can safely burrow in. Conservationists hope to release owls whose burrows are being developed into these protected artificial habitats, allowing the birds to regain territory and re-establish themselves.

"If we can find a safe, sustainable habitat then there's a chance they might establish colonies here," Rusert said.

Artis and Rusert agree there is a need for more facts and figures on the true numbers of burrowing owls before state agencies will be inclined to better protect the animals. Rusert reached out to Brian Sullivan, manager of Cornell University's eBird project, which was launched by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society to allow all citizens to report on the number and species of birds in their area online, creating a clearer demographic picture of birds in America.

Rusert inquired about whether Cornell would host a statewide bird survey in California on the burrowing owl.

"He (Sullivan) responded just the other week and said, 'It is highly likely that we will be doing our inaugural statewide burrowing owl survey this winter.' That is huge, and we in Sonoma Valley are the ones promoting this," Rusert said, adding that he's hopeful the survey will push Fish and Game to reevaluate the status of the owls. "When you get a species of concern like this, this is what you hope for. That you can get the help of the highest Ornithology lab, which is Cornell."

Artis added that citizens in the community can contribute to protecting the owls by simply informing his nonprofit organization about their whereabouts. By mapping out the existing habitat of the owls, the Conservation Network will better be able to protect the birds from future habitat loss. "It just requires being aware while you're living your daily life. Everyone can make a big difference just by letting us know where they are, that's a huge volunteer effort," Artis said, adding that events like the consortium on Saturday are critical to informing the public on how to help.

To report burrowing owl sightings, visit burrowingowlconservation.org.

The cost of participating in the Burrowing Owl Consortium is \$30, which includes coffee, lunch and a wine reception. Funds will be used to develop artificial habitats for the owls. Register by calling 939-8007 or visiting sonomabirding.org.

Viansa Winery is at 25200 Arnold Drive.

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