

Meeting raises awareness for threatened native owls

By Lamar James, associate editor

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Awareness was brought to the Center for Science Excellence on Friday, increasing attention to the decreasing numbers in the population of burrowing owls in the Bay Area.

The lecture was facilitated by the founder and director of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network Scott Artis in PS-113, and illustrated the dangers the burrowing owl population of the Bay Area are up against due to land development and other man-made dangers the small animals face.

"This issue came to me from watching and observing the burrowing owl," Artis said. "So many owls are being displaced from their homes and are literally suffering to death because their ecosystem is being disputed due to new land development throughout the Bay Area."

Artis said there is a large burrowing owl population in Antioch and, because large corporations are buying the land and building on it, the burrowing owls are forced to find other homes and means of food. This is only the beginning, and developers know they are destroying ecosystems and are going far to cover up the damage they have caused, Artis said.



Lamar James / The Advocate

Giving a hoot — Scott Artis, founder and director of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network, speaks to students about what they can do to help the local burrowing owl population during a Center for Science Excellence seminar in PS-132 on Friday.

He said, "They are hiding the burrows so that the owls will not come back to the same area."

For many people, these small animals have come to be known as pests, but like any other thing in society, they serve a purpose and are very peaceful in observation, Artis said.

"They are taking extreme measures to make sure that the owls will not come back, and in many places they have not even started work, but the owls are still being pushed away from their homes," Artis said.

Artis said the owl population declined by 50 percent from the 1980s to 1993, and since 1993, the owl population has declined another 23 percent.

He said with those numbers, it will not be long before the burrowing owl will be placed on the endangered species list.

"If we continue to let this go on, our great-grandchildren may not get the chance to experience the burrowing owl," Artis said.

Artis said he has contacted the Department of Fish and Game, but has gotten little feedback from the organization that was created to fight for causes identical to the one he is advocating for.

Artis said since the burrowing owls are being displaced, they will find other places to gather shelter and food.

"We are seeing that since the burrowing owls no longer have fields to live in, they are moving closer to residential areas, and we can see why some would say they are becoming somewhat of a pest."

Artis said scientists are studying the effects the displacing has had on the owls' behavior.

"There is no drastic change in behavior. The only thing we are seeing is when the owls go to migrate, a large number (of them are) not returning," he said.

He said he has noticed the burrowing owls that are in more rural habitats are less human-friendly, but the owls that are in residential areas will be more accepting to human interaction.

Artis said, "A human can get within 30 feet to the owls that are in a more natural habitat, but you can come within 5 feet of a burrowing owl in a residential area before it flies away."

"This is all volunteer work for (Artis). He has a regular job in addition to this," Burrowing Owl Conservation Network member Nancy Thorn said.

Thorn said we all have to do our part to keep the animals alive for generations to come.

She said, "We have to get more people interested in the sciences so that people will know how to deal with problems such as this one."

Thorn said the information that was shared in the presentation might be the information needed to spark an idea to help preserve the habitat and the lives of the burrowing owls who call the Bay Area their home.

Student Kristen Bunting said she has seen burrowing owls and would like "a better sense" of what they are facing, along with solutions to the suffering that they have endured throughout the process of land development.

"This sheds a new light on the burrowing owls and the things they face on a day-to-day basis," Bunting said.

Contact Lamar James at ljames.advocate@gmail.com.

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