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Burrowing owl rescue effort near Temecula appears to be working

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By **DAVID DANELSKI**
The Press-Enterprise

Jared Bond leaned over a plastic pipe sticking out of the ground at a French Valley wildlife preserve and picked up a moist pellet that had been regurgitated by a burrowing owl.

The bean-sized mass of ground-up bug parts found in a field east of Murrieta is evidence that an effort to save the increasingly rare birds is working, said Bond, a Riverside County biologist.

The pipe led to one of 13 underground boxes that Boy Scouts installed last November on former pasture land known as El Sol in an effort to provide something the owls have lost: homes.

Story continues below



Frank Bellino / The Press-Enterprise

A burrowing owl takes flight in a field by Lake Skinner last week near Temecula. Conservation agencies' efforts to rebuild the burrowing owl population by creating artificial burrows in areas of southwestern Riverside County appear to be working.

These are artificial burrows. They are an important tool in efforts to rebuild burrowing owl colonies on land safe from the farmer's plow and the developer's bulldozer.

"If they don't have a burrow, they can't set up shop," Bond said.

The presence of owl pellets and droppings shows that the 9-inch birds of prey have used three of the artificial burrows as temporary shelters, perhaps to protect themselves from predators, he said.

"You can see an owl has been using this," Bond said.

Bond paused to pull apart an owl pellet, revealing that the bird had dined on beetles and expelled the indigestible parts.

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Jared Bond, a biologist with the Riverside County Environmental Programs Department, looks into a man-made burrow with a thermal imaging camera. He has found two burrowing owl families with baby chicks in their nests.

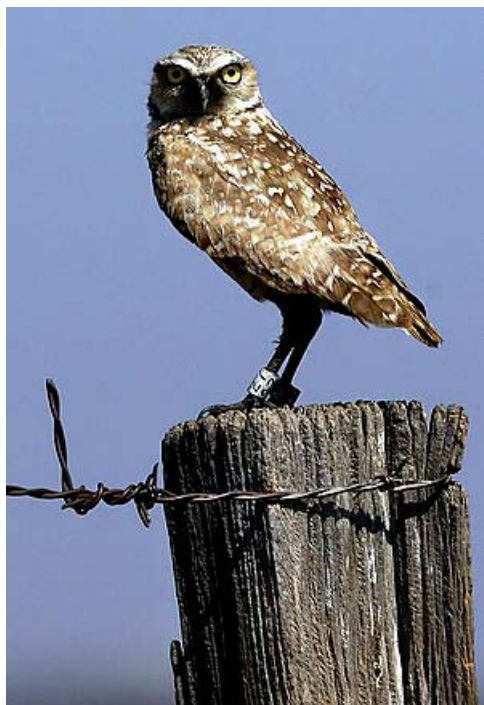
The 407-acre reserve has at least five pairs of owls living in natural burrows.

Using an infrared lens attached to a flexible tube, Bond has found two families with baby chicks. When it's time for the chicks to leave their parents' burrow, the artificial burrows will be waiting for them to move into, he said.

The pint-size owls normally rely on burrows dug and abandoned by California ground squirrels. But farming and development has made squirrel holes in short supply in areas that still have plenty of insects, small mammals and frogs -- the favored foods of burrowing owls.

The bird's population has been declining in California since the 1980s as their habitat has been lost to development. The owls are listed as a state "species of concern."

Story continues below



A burrowing owl stands on a fence post in a field near Lake Skinner.

A study published last year by the nonprofit Institute for Bird Populations found that about one-fourth of 160 breeding pairs observed in western Riverside County in 2004 had disappeared.

Bond said conservation officials in Riverside County hope to rebuild the population by enhancing protected land with man-made burrows, but it will take a few years to learn whether the next generations will thrive in such burrows.

The Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority acquired the El Sol land in 2006, said Ken Graff, director of land acquisition and management for the agency. Gentle, grassy slopes are crisscrossed with dry creek beds.

The conservation agency was created by the county and 14 cities in 2004 to acquire a network of habitat for 146 species of imperiled animals and plants, including the burrowing owl.

So far, 37,030 acres have been protected through land acquisitions and habitat set-aside agreements with developers. The agency's goal is to acquire 153,000 acres within 25 years, using developer fees, grants and other money.

Artificial burrows also have been installed near Lake Perris and Lake Skinner, Graff said

Bond monitors the owls through an agreement between the county's Environmental Programs Department and the conservation agency.

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