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Disappearing Owls

Development threatens to drive species from its Inland home, report says.



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By **DAVID DANELSKI**
The Press-Enterprise

Most burrowing owls will disappear from their Inland strongholds within 10 years unless vigorous efforts are made to protect them, according to scientists who track the birds.

The small, ground-dwelling owls are not on the endangered list in California, although their numbers have been declining for decades. Experts started observing 160 breeding pairs in western Riverside County in 2004; three years later, 41 pairs had vanished, and all but the 31 pairs that live in reserves are expected to succumb as their habitat is destroyed, according to a study published in October.

"Status of Burrowing Owls in Southern California," published by the nonprofit Institute for Bird Populations, found that the owl population in western Riverside County continues to drop despite a sweeping habitat-conservation plan that is supposed to protect the birds and 145 other species of animals and plants. Riverside County has one of the largest populations of the 9-inch-tall owls in Southern California.

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A burrowing owl takes flight in a field near Perris. A major preservation effort is needed to stop the species from disappearing from Riverside County, experts warn.

Officials with the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority, which oversees the habitat plan, said last week that they are working to save the birds with new strategies that include building artificial burrows to attract owls to land that is protected from development.

The study's authors found that one-fourth of the owl habitat in western Riverside County was destroyed in the first three years after the habitat plan went into effect.

"As long as we treat the mitigation efforts the same, it is very likely burrowing owls will become extinct from the local area," said the study's lead author, Jeff Kidd, a wildlife biologist who lives in the Lake Mathews area of Riverside County.

The birds have all but disappeared from most parts of Los Angeles and Orange counties, but western Riverside County still has many single pairs and small colonies, the report said.

Joe Richards, the conservation authority's executive director, said drought could be adding to the owls' troubles, but he doesn't dispute the study's findings.

"There has been a lot of the development," he said.

His agency is working with state wildlife officials to protect the owls. Besides artificial burrows, other measures could involve relocating owls to preserves, enhancing habitat in protected areas and acquiring more land where the owls could live undisturbed, Richards said.

In Development's Path

Burrowing owls, which have bright yellow eyes, often can be seen during the day standing near the entrances to the underground chambers where they live. Most often, they move into burrows dug by ground squirrels. They hunt for insects and small rodents, snakes and lizards.

They are vulnerable to development and farming because grading or plowing obliterates their burrows, making them easy prey for coyotes and other predators, Kidd said by telephone.

Canada has designated the species endangered; in Mexico, it is considered threatened. The study's authors said California should have added the owl to the threatened or endangered list 20 years ago, after the rapid population decline became apparent.

In 2003, the state Fish and Game Commission voted 4-0 against making the owl a "candidate species," a step toward listing. A Fish and Game Department staff report said that owl populations are strong in some areas, such as the Imperial and Palo Verde valleys in southeastern California.

The decision generated controversy because some state biologists believed the bird needed more protection.

"There was a disagreement among scientists," Steve Martarano, a California Department of Fish and Game spokesman.

The burrowing owl remains a "species of concern" in California. It is illegal to kill the owls.

The states recommends developers preserve 6.5 acres of habitat for every pair displaced or encourage the birds to relocate by blocking entrances to their burrows, or do both.

Leslie MacNair, an environmental scientist for Fish and Game, said that in western Riverside County, habitat is rarely acquired or preserved when birds are displaced by development. The state recommendations "have no teeth," she said, and final decisions are left to cities and counties.

Relocation Methods at Issue

Developers in Riverside County most often use "passive relocation" when owls stand in the way of development, MacNair said.

In passive relocation, one-way doors are installed at burrow entrances to keep the owls from re-entering and being killed when the land is graded, said Kidd, a licensed wildlife biologist.

Kidd said he calls the process "active eviction."

"They usually have no other home to go to, so they die. They get predated or they get hit by vehicles," he said.

Kidd said he was encouraged, however, by the regional conservation authority's effort in November to build artificial burrows at a wildlife reserve about a mile south of Lake Skinner, east of Temecula. With help from Boy Scouts and officials with the Riverside County Environmental Programs Department, the agency installed 13 artificial burrows made from pipes and plastic or wood boxes.

So far, one of the burrows is occupied, said Ken Graff, who oversees property management for the conservation authority. The agency plans to build more, in other wildlife reserves.

Kidd also supports trapping birds and moving them to wildlife preserves. He successfully moved a pair of owls

from a future airplane hangar site in French Valley to the San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

This technique involves trapping pairs of birds during their winter mating season and moving them to safe place. A mesh enclosure is placed over the new burrow so they can't fly away. The birds are fed, because they can't hunt.

Once the pair produces eggs, the birds will stay, so the pen can be removed, Kidd said.

The method shows promise but so far hasn't been endorsed by state wildlife officials, said ecologist Ginny Short, manager of the 28,000-acre Coachella Valley Preserve. Short has studied and observed burrowing owls extensively. She advocates protecting land where the birds live naturally.

The Institute for Bird Populations, based in Marin County, is "dedicated to fostering a global approach to research and the dissemination of information on changes in the abundance, distribution, and ecology of bird populations," according to its Web site. Kidd said something has to be done soon, or the birds will be gone.

"Our grandkids have a right to view them," he said. "We don't have the right to make this decision."

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