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Welcoming the burrowing owl

BY EMILY CHARRIER-BOTTS INDEX-TRIBUNE ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR



Burrowing owls are a mystery in the Sonoma Valley. While the creatures have a long history in the area, for some reason they ceased breeding in the Valley 25 years ago.

“They have been counted as breeding in Sonoma County since 1986, according to the ‘Breeding Bird Atlas,’” said Tom Rusert, co-founder of SonomaBirding.com, which is leading the effort to help the species return to the Valley. “Our long-term hope is that they see that they have a sustainable habitat here that they can come in and colonize like they used to.”

This Saturday, Oct. 22, SonomaBirding is working with the Sonoma Land Trust, the Burrowing Owl Conservation Network and the California Department of Fish and Game to host a workday in the Baylands near Sears Point to build artificial habitats for the burrowing owls, which are known to spend the winter months in the region. From 9 a.m. to noon, volunteers are needed to help dig the shelters, which basically consist of 55-gallon drums buried in the earth with flexi-pipe hoses attached as an entrance and exit.

“They need two entrances so if something follows them in, they have a way out. It’s a really low-tech process. We just need people to help us dig,” said Julian Meisler, Baylands program manager for Sonoma Land Trust (SLT).

Meisler said SLT partnered with SonomaBirding over the summer to build two burrowing owl habitats in the same area with school children. The process was grueling.

“It was the heat of summer and the ground was rock hard,” he said, adding that this time the Department of Fish and Game has drilled holes for the drums, meaning the digging will be much easier. Volunteers will be adding four more habitat drums on Saturday, creating an ideal environment for when the birds return to the Valley during their winter migration.

Exactly why the small, scurrying owls stopped breeding and colonizing the area is unknown. “With all of these environmental problems going on, there’s usually not one issue you can point to,” Meisler said, adding that there are several theories.

Burrowing owls live in the grasslands, where they make their homes in the holes that ground squirrels or badgers dig and later abandon. They need the grass to be high enough that it protects them from predators, but low enough that they can still hunt for mice and other prey.

“Largely in our grasslands today, we have non-native grasses,” Meisler said, explaining that the change in grass may have made the land less hospitable to the owls.

Rusert added that there was a concerted effort to decrease the ground squirrel population in the area, which effectively destroyed the animal that makes the holes that the owls use as shelter. By reestablishing that habitat on protected land owned by SLT, the environmental groups are hoping to woo the birds back to breeding here.

“It would be so great if we had little owlets running around out there,” Meisler said.

Rusert added that it would also help citizen scientists such as himself keep track of the burrowing owl population, which is a species on the Audubon Bird Watch-List, a list of birds in California whose numbers are declining due to loss of habitat or other environmental factors. “It provides a permanent, safe habitat that we can monitor,” he said.

Last year, Rusert hosted the Burrowing Owl Symposium to help spread awareness about the existence of the species in Sonoma and what can be done to improve their numbers. “Our promise from that was to do something about this issue,” he said.

Soon after, Rusert began making plans to build the artificial habitats around the Valley. He worked with one private landowner who has property where the birds had been spotted, and is hoping others will step forward.

“If people see the burrowing owl anywhere in the Sonoma Valley they should call and report it to us,” Rusert said. “My goal is to have at least six habitat locations by next spring.”

Rusert is already making plans with SLT to create owl habitats at several other places on their expansive properties, including Tolay Creek Ranch.

“We have several properties down by Highway 37 and those seem to be the best options,” Meisler said. “We, being large land owners, are able to offer a lot of area for habitats.”

To find out the exact location for Saturday’s workday or for more details, visit sonomabirding.com or email volunteer@sonomalandtrust.org.

To report a burrowing owl sighting, call SonomaBirding at 939-8007.