

Avocet Research Associates
wildlife biology

Memorandum

Date: February 16, 2010
To: Anne Chaney, City of Albany
From: Jules Evens, ARA
Re: Albany Plateau Burrowing Owl Project (Contract #C08-2, Feb. 4, 2008)

This memorandum summarizes ARA's 2009 coverage of the constructed Burrowing Owl nest sites at Albany Bulb.

Coverage

We conducted four protocol-level surveys of the site to determine presence or absence of owls, the condition of the habitat and burrows, and to evaluate the status of the project. The coverage followed protocols developed by the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group.¹ As prescribed by those protocols, surveys were conducted at approximate three-week intervals from mid-March through early May, 2009, on the following dates: March 17, April 2, April 20, May 8. We added an additional site visit in mid-summer (July 17, 2009) to check for post-fledging dispersal. Surveys were conducted from two hours before sunset to one hour after or from one hour before to two hours after sunrise. Surveys were conducted only during weather that was conducive to observing owls outside their burrows. No surveys were done during heavy rain, high winds (> 20 mph), or dense fog.

On each site visit we canvassed the fenced-off area and examined each burrow for evidence of occupancy by owls or other animals.

¹ <http://www2.ucsc.edu/scpbrg/section1.htm>

Findings

No evidence of owl occupancy was found, i.e. no individual birds, no pellets, and no owl feathers. Mammalian and avian bone fragments, as well as fur and feathers, were found on the mounds near the entrances. Those remains that could be identified to species included fur of California ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) and striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). Feathers included those of Western Meadowlark (*Sternella neglecta*), Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia*), and Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*). Scat found near the burrow entrances indicated use of the site by both ground squirrels and skunks.

Comments

The condition of the burrows during the first year following construction appeared to provide the appropriate habitat characteristics to attract owls. Grasses and ruderal vegetation within the enclosure was mowed periodically to keep the vegetation low, there is some bare-ground on the plateau, and there was no evidence that nest mounds were disturbed by people or dogs. (We encountered only one unauthorized person within the fenced-off area, a person retrieving a Frisbee.) The presence of ground squirrels was a positive development, as owls and ground squirrels are commensals, always occurring together in coastal California. Although a skunk may have “usurped” one nest site, skunk sign was limited to only one burrow (the south nest box in the western-most mound system).

The bird remains suggest that an avian predator, perhaps a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) or a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) was sporadically present in the area. Both predators occur locally, although none was noted during our site visits. We did note Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*), and Cooper’s Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*).

As in past years, two or more Burrowing Owls were present at Caesar Chavez Park (1.7 kms SSW) during the winter of 2008-09.² These birds apparently do not nest there, rather arrive in the fall (August) and depart in the spring (March). This is a regular pattern of dispersal around the shoreline of San Francisco Bay (SFB). Burrowing owls once bred in larger numbers along the SFB shoreline, but have been extirpated from Marin and western Contra Costa counties over the last three decades. Recent estimates report 167 pairs³ remaining in the nine Bay Area counties, with small populations persisting in the vicinity of the Oakland Airport, in Southern Alameda County, and at Moffett Field Santa Clara County. Although the downward population trend in the central and south bay counties has been precipitous⁴, the fact that individuals still winter locally provides the potential for a prospecting pair (or pairs) to occupy the Albany Bulb nest sites in the future.

As the City of Albany is doing, other municipalities in Santa Clara and Alameda Counties (Berkeley, San Jose, Palo Alto) have recently adapted land-management practices designed to encourage owl nesting. The recovery of the local population may be beyond reach, but concerted efforts by these various agencies does have the possibility of reestablishing the burrowing owl as a viable member of the East Bay wildlife community.

² http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/uploadedFiles/City_Manager/Level_3_-_Civic_Arts/Audubon_Society_Paper_June_2009.pdf

³ <http://www2.ucsc.edu/scpbrg/sfbay.htm>

⁴ <http://www.fws.gov/desfbay/Archives/Owl/owl.htm>