

Avocet Research Associates, LLC

wildlife biology

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Memorandum

Date: January 17, 2011

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 the 2010 coverage of the constructed Burrowing Owl nest sites at Albany Bulb by Avocet Research biologists.

Coverage

We conducted five 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 2010, on the following dates: 3/15 (dawn); 4/07 (evening); 4/22 (evening); 5/05 (dawn); 5/20 (evening). Surveys were conducted from two hours before sunset to one-half hour after or from sunrise to two hours after sunrise. Surveys were conducted only during weather that was conducive to observing owls outside their burrows, that is, 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.

Findings

No evidence of owl occupancy was found, i.e. no individual birds, no pellets, and no owl feathers. Mammalian bone fragments, fur and scat of California ground

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

squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) were found on the mounds near the entrances of two burrows. The only evidence of bird use was the partial carcass of an immature Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*), carrion probably brought to the site by ravens or other scavengers.

Passerines recorded on the site included Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*), Says Phoebe (*Sayornis saya*), American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*), Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*), Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*), Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), and Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). Several aerial insectivores (Barn, Tree, Violet-green, Cliff and Northern Rough-winged swallows) were noted foraging over the site. Avian predators observed in the vicinity include: White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and Common Raven (*Corvus corax*). One feral cat was seen on site, but undoubtedly they are a continuing presence.

Comments

The condition of the burrows during the second 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. The continuing presence of ground squirrels is a good sign, as owls and ground squirrels always occur together in coastal California.

The only additional recommendation we would make is to mow all the vegetation within the enclosure more regularly, in the early spring to maintain as low a coverage of weeds as possible. The shorter the grass and weeds, the more likely that owls will use the site.

Two or more Burrowing Owls were present at Caesar Chavez Park (1.7 kms SSW) during the winter of 2008-09 and again in 2009-10. These birds apparently do not nest there, rather arrive in the fall (August) and depart in the

spring (March-April). 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 pairs² 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 precipitous³, 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 increases the possibility of reestablishing the burrowing owl as a viable member of the East Bay wildlife community.



² <http://www2.ucsc.edu/scpbrg/sfbay.htm>

³ <http://www.fws.gov/desfbay/Archives/Owl/owl.htm>