



Golden Gate Audubon Society
Cesar Chavez Park Burrowing Owl Program,
Berkeley, California
2017-2018 Summary Report

Overview

The Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) was once a common resident of the San Francisco Bay Area. Today, it is a California Species of Special Concern, having been extirpated from much of its former habitat throughout the State, including the Bay Area. Currently, the only remaining breeding Burrowing Owls in the Bay Area reside in the Mountain View Shoreline Park in the South Bay.

For many years, Burrowing Owls have overwintered in the East Shore State Park and Cesar Chavez Park in Berkeley, CA.

In 2008, an off-leash dog dug up the den of one of the owls and the owl disappeared. Concerned that disturbances would result in the extirpation of the owls from Cesar Chavez Park, Golden Gate Audubon volunteers worked with the City of Berkeley to erect a temporary fence along the northeast portion of the park, which GGAS refers to as a Wildlife Protection Area (WPA). Subsequently, with input from GGAS volunteers, the City of Berkeley commissioned and constructed an art project that included a stylized fence that separates the WPA from the walkway. Volunteers also organized visits to the park to record observations of the owls and provide educational materials and other information to park visitors.

In the fall of 2016, the temporary fencing was vandalized twice at Cesar Chavez Park and there was increased human activity where the owls formerly overwintered. While the fence was down many people fished in the area formerly occupied by the overwintering owls. In November that same year, a dead burrowing owl was photographed at Cesar Chavez Park and reported anonymously to GGAS.

About a dozen years ago, the Albany Bulb mitigation area was established by the City of Berkeley as mitigation for the Tom Bates Sports Complex along the waterfront. It is managed by the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD). It should be noted that while the Albany Bulb mitigation site has been monitored since its inception, no owls were ever reportedly seen there until a first owl was observed in the fall of 2016. It is presumed that this owl then moved to Cesar Chavez Park as no further sightings were recorded at the Albany Bulb for that year.

During the 2017-18 over-wintering season, there were no Burrowing Owls reported at Cesar Chavez Park. However, three Burrowing Owls were reported at the Albany Bulb within the enclosed (fenced) mitigation area. It has been suggested that this may be due to the fact that the fencing at Cesar Chavez Park was inadvertently installed after the owls arrived in October 2017.

Additional Burrowing Owls have been reported overwintering at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline in Oakland, California. However, those owls are not documented by this group of Burrowing Owl Docents, thus that data is not included in this report.

Occasionally during the winter, people have reported Burrowing Owls in San Francisco, and photographers and the public have subsequently flushed these owls. To prevent further disturbances to the burrowing owls, the locations are not widely shared. Volunteers are monitoring these areas.

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Year	Number of Burrowing Owls Reported Along the Berkeley/Albany/Richmond Shoreline
2007	5
2008	4
2009	3
2010	4
2011	5
2012	6
2013	3
2014	2
2015	2
2016	5
2017	3

2017-2018 Program

For the tenth year in a row, Golden Gate Audubon coordinated with the City of Berkeley's Shorebird Nature Center at the Berkeley Marina to recruit more volunteers and arrange a workday and docent training seminar. New and returning volunteers attending a full day training on the natural history of the site and this species of owl, interacting with the public and recording data, data forms, and online resources for data entry, communication and scheduling. Docents set their own schedule for visiting the park. Visits generally lasted one hour.

The Golden Gate Audubon Society's Burrowing Owl Docent Program would not exist without the dedicated work of its volunteer coordinator, Della Dash, and the many volunteers that monitor the owls, record their observations, and interact with the public.

The 2017-2018 Docents:

Doug Donaldson	Pat Olney
Mary Malec	Karen Rosenbaum
Ben Mc Clinton	Joyce Stanek

For the 2016-2017 Burrowing Owl overwintering season, there were four observation locations: Cesar Chavez Park, Albany Plateau and two locations in San Francisco. In 2017-2018 while docents monitored the Albany Bulb, Cesar Chavez Park and San Francisco sites, owls were only observed at the Albany Plateau.

Results to Date

During the 2017-2018 Burrowing Owl over-wintering season, owls were observed at the Tom Bates Sports Complex mitigation area also known as the Albany Plateau. **Six docents visited the park on at least 56 days from the months of October 2017 to March 2018, conducting observations for a total of approximately 64 observation hours.** Since the owls were not observed at the Cesar Chavez Park, the

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docents did not monitor as often as prior years. There were no reports at either of the San Francisco locations. During these visits, docents recorded the location of up to three **Burrowing Owls** in the mitigation area at the same time. At the Albany Plateau, the first sighting was on October 4, 2017 and the last recorded observation occurred on March 6, 2018. The first observation of the second sighting at the Albany location was on October 19, 2017 and the last sighting of the second owl was on March 24, 2018. There were no Burrowing Owls observed at the Cesar Chavez Park locations during the course of this winter season. Docents also counted park visitors, dogs (both on- and off-leash), and persons that stopped to express an interest in the owls.

Burrowing Owl Observations

Highlights of the Burrowing Owl observations by location include:

Albany Plateau:

- 10/4/17 first sighting of an owl at Albany Bulb for the season (last year: 10/6/16)
- 10/17/17 first sighting of two burrowing owls at Albany Bulb in 2017-2018
- 11/7/17 first sighting of three burrowing owls at Albany Bulb in 2017-2018

Cesar Chavez Park:

- No sighting of an owl at CCP for the season (last year: 10/6/16)
- No sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP in 2016-2017 (prior year: None)
- No sightings of three burrowing owls at CCP in 2016-2017 (last year: None)
 - last sighting of a burrowing owl at CCP for the season (last year: 3/19/16)
 - last sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP for the season (last year: 3/13/16)

San Francisco Location # 1:

- – first sighting of an owl at San Francisco location #1 for the season (last year: 11/3/15)
- sightings of two burrowing owls at San Francisco location #1 in 2015-2016
- sightings of three burrowing owls at San Francisco location #1 in 2015-2016
- – last sighting of a burrowing owl at San Francisco location #1 for the season (last year: 2/21/16)

San Francisco Location # 2 (New in 2015-2016. Note: One session recorded at this new location):

- 2/23/16 – first sighting of an owl at San Francisco location #2 for the season
- No sightings of two burrowing owls at San Francisco location #2 in 2015-2016
- No sightings of three burrowing owls at San Francisco location #2 in 2015-2016
- 2/23/16 – last sighting of a burrowing owl at San Francisco location #2 for the season

Park Visitors

The monitoring protocol asked observers to record all park visitors that pass by the observation area during the survey. **During the survey, observers recorded 524 people or an average of approximately 8 people per survey hours.** The Berkeley location had an average of 12.7 people per hour, the Albany location had an average of 7.3 people per hour and the SF locations were not recorded. Popular activities at the park include walking, biking, and dog walking, but observers were not asked to distinguish between different activities. Almost 85% of the observation hours were spent at Albany Plateau and 15% at Cesar Chavez Park.

Interactions with Park Visitors

During the park visits, the docents interacted with at least 187, approximately 2.9 people per survey hour. Observers at Albany Plateau recorded an average of 7.3 people interactions per survey hour and Cesar Chavez Park recorded an average of 12.7 people interactions per survey hour. Visitors stopped to express an interest in the owls. In Berkeley, observers talked to 31.4% of park visitors on average while observers at Albany Plateau talked to 37% of park visitors. Observers at the San Francisco locations did

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not talk with the park visitors. According to notes recorded by the docents, many of the visitors asked questions about the owls and the art installation/fence. Many used the spotting scope or binoculars provided by the docents to get a better view of the owls.

Dog Activities in Cesar Chavez Park and two San Francisco locations

The monitoring protocol asked observers to count all dogs observed during the survey period and to record whether the dog was leashed or unleashed and whether it was outside or within the Wildlife Protection Area. Observers recorded 151 dogs on leash during all surveys, an average of approximately 2.3 dogs on leash per survey hours (6.2 on leash in 2016-2017). More than 74.5% of dogs at Cesar Chavez Park were on leash (up from 63% last year) while 26.6% of dogs at Albany Plateau were on leash and no data was collected regarding the two San Francisco locations.

Observers recorded 325 dogs off-leash during all of the surveys, an average of approximately 5 off-leash dog per hour compared with 2 dogs off-leash in 2017-2018 overall. In Berkeley, an average of 4 dogs off leash per hour this year. In Albany, an average of 5.7 dog was off leash per hour this year. At the Albany Plateau which is fenced-in, off leash dogs entered the area where the owls were present. Dog walkers were throwing balls to dogs over the fence for the dogs to go under and retrieve the ball 11/2017. GGAS reported this disturbance to the EBRPD. The EBRPD secured the fence with wood to prevent access by dogs. Monitoring data was not submitted from San Francisco. Observers took notes and recorded disturbances to the owls because of off-leash dogs and actions of owners (if any). Observers also often asked people to leash their dogs.

Next Steps

The Burrowing Owl docent program will continue during the 2018-2019 season at Cesar Chavez Park, the adjacent Berkeley Meadows, and the Albany Plateau area.

Golden Gate Audubon will continue to advocate for cats indoors and enforcement of leash laws to protect Burrowing Owls and other native birds and wildlife.

For more information, please contact Noreen Weeden, Volunteer Programs Director, at (510) 301-0570 or nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org