



Golden Gate Audubon Society Cesar Chavez Park Burrowing Owl Program, Berkeley, California 2015-2016 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 several years, Burrowing Owls have overwintered in the East Shore State Park and Cesar Chavez Park in Berkeley, CA. In 2008, the den of one of the owls was dug up by an off-leash dog 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.

Burrowing owls are observed occasionally in San Francisco some have been flushed by photographers and the public. To prevent further disturbances to the burrowing owls the locations are not widely shared. Volunteers are monitoring these areas.

2015-2016 Program

For the eighth year in a row, Golden Gate Audubon volunteers met at the City of Berkeley's Shorebird Nature Center at the Berkeley Marina for the docent training seminar. The volunteers were provided with training for 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 approximately 1 hour.

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

The 2015-2016 Docents were:

Rubi Abrams
Doug Donaldson
Jane Hart

Peggy Loper
Miya Lucas
Mary Malec

Ben McClinton
Riesha Riemer
Karen Rosenbaum

For the 2015-2016 Burrowing Owl overwintering season there were three observation locations: Cesar Chavez Park and two locations in San Francisco. The second location in San Francisco was added in 2015-2016 after a local San Francisco neighborhood resident observed the burrowing owl, called GGAS and reported the sighting. GGAS contacted Jane Hart who then contacted the local citizen to obtain further details. On February 23, 2016 Jane Hart went to the reported location and observed the burrowing owl. Rubi Abrams wrote a blog "Burrowing Owl Docenting: What a Hoot!" for Golden Gate Audubon about her experience as a Burrowing Owl Docent.

GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

2530 San Pablo Avenue, Suite G Berkeley, California 94702

phone 510.843.2222 fax 510.843.5351 web www.goldengateaudubon.org

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Results to Date

During the 2015-2016 Burrowing Owl overwintering season at Cesar Chavez Park and at two San Francisco locations, nine **docents visited the park on at least 46 days from the months of October 2015 to March 2016, conducting observations for a total of approximately 65 observation-hours.** During those visits, docents recorded the location of up to **two Burrowing Owls** in Cesar Chavez Park at the same time. The docent at the San Francisco locations recorded the location of **one** burrowing owl at each location over the winter. At Cesar Chavez Park, the first sighting was on October 1, 2015 and the last recorded observation occurred on March 19, 2016. The first observation of the second sighting at the Berkeley location was on Dec 1, 2015 and the last sighting of the second owl was on March 13, 2016. The SF docent observed one owl at two San Francisco locations during the course of the winter season: The first sighting at the 1st SF location was on November 3, 2015 and last sighting on Feb 21, 2016. The docent was unable to access the 1st SF location after February 15, 2016 due to a sand transfer project initiated by the SFPUC to impede erosion along the bluffs that were battered by the wind and rainstorms of the 2015-2016 wintering season. The first and only burrowing owl sighting at the 2nd SF location was on February 23, 2016. 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:

Cesar Chavez Park:

- 10/1/15 – first sighting of an owl at CCP for the season (last year: 10/13/14)
- 12/1/15 – first sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP in 2015-2016 (last year: None)
- No sightings of three burrowing owls at CCP in 2015-2016 (last year: None)
- 3/19/16 – last sighting of a burrowing owl at CCP for the season (last year: 2/21/15)
- 3/13/16 – last sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP for the season (last year: None)

San Francisco Location # 1:

- 11/3/15 – first sighting of an owl at San Francisco location #1 for the season (last year: 10/19/14)
- No sightings of two burrowing owls at San Francisco location #1 in 2015-2016
- No sightings of three burrowing owls at San Francisco location #1 in 2015-2016
- 2/21/16 – last sighting of a burrowing owl at San Francisco location #1 for the season (last year: 2/21/15)

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 a total of 982 people or an average of approximately 17.2 people per survey hours.** The Berkeley location had an average of 19.0 people per hour and the SF locations combined for an average of 2.3 people per hour. (a decrease from 34.9 people per hour (@CCP) and 8.2 people per hour (@ SF location #1) last season. The significant visitor declines may have been due to the El Nino rains during this wintering season. Popular activities at the park include walking, biking, and dog-walking, but observers were not asked to distinguish between different activities. Almost 92% of the observation hours were spent at Cesar Chavez Park (up from 60% in 2014-2015) and the remaining 8% of observer's hours occurred at the San Francisco locations (down from 40% in 2014-2015).

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Interactions with Park Visitors

During the park visits, the docents interacted with at least 417, approximately 7.3 people per survey hour. Observers at Cesar Chavez Park recorded an average of 8.1 people interactions per survey hour (7.7 interactions per survey hour in Berkeley last year) and the observer at the SF locations had 1 interaction per survey hour which was unchanged from last year. Visitors stopped to express an interest in the owls. In Berkeley, observers talked to 43% of park visitors on average while observers at the San Francisco locations talked to 29% of 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 WPA. Observers recorded a total of 177 dogs on leash during all surveys, an average of approximately 3.1 dogs on leash per survey hours (3.4 on leash in 2014-2015). More than 83% of dogs at Cesar Chavez Park were on leash (up from 80% last year) and no dogs were observed on leash at the two San Francisco locations (down from 7% last year).

Observers recorded a total of 42 dogs off-leash during all of the surveys, an average of approximately .7 off-leash dog per hour compared with 3.5 dogs off-leash in 2014-2015 overall. In Berkeley, an average of .7 dog was off leash per hour this year compared with an average of 1.2 off leash dog last year. In San Francisco an average of 1 dog per hour was recorded off leash compared with 7 dogs per hour off leash in 2014-2015. Observers took notes and recorded disturbances to the owls as a result 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 2016-2017 season at Cesar Chavez Park and the adjacent Berkeley Meadows at the area near the Tom Bates Sports Complex Fields and in San Francisco. Other GGAS volunteers are monitoring for owls wintering at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Regional Shoreline in Oakland, California and are checking for possible owls at the Albany Plateau and along the Richmond Shoreline.

For more information, please contact Noreen Weeden, Conservation Project Manager, at (510) 301-0570 or nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org