



Golden Gate Audubon Society Cesar Chavez Park Burrowing Owl Program, Berkeley, California 2016-2017 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. On Sunday, November 28, 2017 (Thanksgiving weekend), an anonymous tipster contacted Golden Gate Audubon with photographs of a dead Burrowing Owl on a Cesar Chavez park bench. This owl had blood and ruffled feathers on the neck which appeared to be the result of an attack. CA Fish and Wildlife and East Bay Regional Parks Department were notified but by Monday when staff returned, the owl had been removed.

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

2016-2017 Program

For the ninth 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 in September on the natural history of the site, this species of owl, interacting with the public, recording data, data forms, online resources for data entry, communication and scheduling. Docents set their own schedule for visiting the park. Visits generally lasted 1 hour. Data not submitted on the monitoring forms provided is not reflected in this report.

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 2016-2017 Docents were:

Rubi Abrams	Miya Lucas	Peggy Loper
Eve Conner	Mary Malec	
Della Dash	Ben McClinton	
Doug Donaldson	Kim Picone	
Daryl Goldman	Riesha Riemer	
Jane Hart	Karen Rosenbaum	
Leslie Jacoby	Rachel Silverstein	

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During the 2016-2017 Burrowing Owl overwintering season, there were four observation locations: Cesar Chavez Park, Albany Bulb and 2 locations in San Francisco.

Results to Date

During the 2016-2017 Burrowing Owl overwintering season at Cesar Chavez Park and at 2 San Francisco locations, **15 docents visited the park on at least 48 days from the months of October 2016 to March 2017, conducting observations for a total of approximately 35 observation-hours.** During those visits, docents recorded the location of up to **4 Burrowing Owls** in Cesar Chavez Park at the same time. The docent at the San Francisco locations recorded the location of 1 burrowing owl at one location during the course of the wintering season. At Cesar Chavez Park, the first sighting was on October 6, 2017 and the last recorded observation occurred on March 2, 2017. The first observation of the second sighting at the Berkeley location was on February 11, 2017 and the last sighting of the second owl was on February 12, 2017. The SF docent observed one owl at one San Francisco location during the course of the winter season: The details on the owl sighting in 2016- 2017 were described in a report format. The docent was unable to access the site 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 2016-2017 wintering 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:

Cesar Chavez Park:

- 10/6/2016 – first sighting of an owl at CCP for the season (last year: 10/1/15)
- 2/11/2017– first sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP in 2016-2017 (last year: None)
- No sightings of three burrowing owls at CCP in 2016-2017 (last year: None)
- 3/2/2017 last sighting of a burrowing owl at CCP for the season (last year: 3/19/16)
- 2/12/2017 last sighting of two burrowing owls at CCP for the season (last year: 3/13/16)

Albany Bulb

- 11/12/16 – first sighting of an owl at the Albany Bulb mitigation site
- 12/18/2016 – last report of an owl at the Albany Bulb site

San Francisco Location # 1:

- 2016 first sighting of an owl at San Francisco location #1 for the season (last year: 11/3/15)
- 2017 last sighting of a burrowing owl at San Francisco location #1 (last year: 2/21/16)

San Francisco Location # 2 (New in 2015-2016):

- 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 950 people or an average of approximately 30.6 people per survey hours.** The East Bay locations had an average of 16.2 people per hour (a decrease from 17.2 people per hour from last season). The visitor declines could be due possibly to the heavy rains and storms during this wintering season. Popular activities at the park include walking, jogging, and dog walking, but observers were not asked to distinguish between different activities.

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Interactions with Park Visitors

During the park visits, the docents interacted with at least 248, approximately 8 people per survey hour. Observers recorded an average of 8 people interactions per survey hour (19 interactions per survey hour last year). Visitors stopped to express an interest in the owls. In the East Bay, observers talked to 26% of park visitors on average. According to notes recorded by the docents, several 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 and other notes

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 195 dogs on leash during all surveys, an average of approximately 6.2 dogs on leash per survey hours (3.1 on leash in 2015-2016). More than 63% of dogs at Cesar Chavez Park were on leash (down from 83% last year).

Observers recorded a total of 111 dogs that were off-leash during all of the surveys, an average of approximately 2 off-leash dogs per hour compared with 0.7 off-leash dogs in 2015-2016 overall. 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 and gentle encouragement was mostly effective.

This year 11/12/2016 a Burrowing Owl was reported and observed in the mitigation area near the Albany Bulb

As mentioned earlier in this report, a dead burrowing owl was photographed and reported over the Thanksgiving weekend. The lack of dog leash enforcement has led to several docents leaving the program.

Other observations included people fishing from the rip-rap, jumping over the fence

Next Steps

The Burrowing Owl docent program will continue during the 2017-2018 season at Cesar Chavez Park, the adjacent Berkeley Meadows, and the area near the Tom Bates Sports Complex Fields. Additional volunteers are needed to remove debris along the beach and to monitor the locations in San Francisco. Other GGAS volunteers are monitoring 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. 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, Conservation Project Manager, at (510) 301-0570 or nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org