

Safe haven, for now

Written by

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11:28 AM, Feb. 15, 2011|

As squirrels, coyotes and jackrabbits run freely through undeveloped Coachella Valley areas, huddled somewhere in a nook is a bird that may pop out of the ground and go “coo.”

And unlike their nocturnal cousins, burrowing owls will hunt prey — and occasionally attract onlookers — under the Coachella Valley sun.

“They're one of the few owls people see out at the middle of the day,” said Peter Siminski, director of conversation and education at The Living Desert in Palm Desert.

But there's no guarantee you'll see them, and it's not because they're shy.

Burrowing owls are among the animals protected by the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, as their population has been declining across the country.

Although much of their habitat was spared by the recent housing market crash, their overall numbers across the country still need a boost.

“They're considered a very sensitive species in California because they lost so much habitat to development,” said Cameron Barrows, an ecologist with the University of California, Riverside's Palm Desert Graduate Center.

UCR's Center for Conservation Biology conducted a survey two years ago and found 40 to 50 pairs of burrowing owls across the Coachella Valley.

But even though the species is capable of living in the desert all year, some of them may have been visiting for the winter from as far north as Canada.

Burrowing owls prefer open areas, where there are dens made by other

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animals, such as prairie dogs, although they're capable of making homes themselves out of dirt and manmade structures.

Many owls live in the Imperial Valley and its agricultural lands, since they make homes out of irrigation structures, like pipes.

"It's the site most commonly referenced as most abundant," Siminski said.

Indio resident Brett Daniels occasionally sees burrowing owls outside his home and noticed they've nested in a nearby drainage system.

Occasionally, they'll fly right up to his property, while other times they'll be as still as a rock if he walks by.

"It's entertaining as well; I can sit here and watch them do their thing," Daniels said.

A pair was recently spotted at Dennis Keat Soccer Park in Cathedral City after they nested during the summer off-season when the field was vacant.

The owls have since relocated to an adjacent open area, where Cathedral City resident Diane Hines sometimes takes walk.

She's come across burrowing owls in the field, including one that emerged from its nest and stood its ground as if it were protecting its home.

"They were adorable; they were definitely secure in their area," Hines said.

The largest concentrations are in Desert Hot Springs, experts say, and City Councilman Karl Baker occasionally sees them outside his home.

"They're cute, and it's fun to see them," he said. "I thought they had a season, because there's a time I just don't see them."

It's not exactly clear when burrowing owls came to the Coachella Valley, but they may have been around at least in 1986, Barrows said.

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“Based on anecdotal reports, there were high-density areas,” he said. “We do find them pretty commonly, which is not to say they’re abundant or not at risk.”

In addition to human development, burrowing owls are threatened by predators that include cooper hawks, great horned owls and red-tailed hawks.

Burrowing owls have defense mechanisms that involve more than hiding in their holes.

Young burrowing owls make rattling sounds to simulate a rattling snake to scare off predators.

Otherwise, they'll just let out a few coos or chatters.

“These guys have a broad diversity of calls, but none of them are hoots,” Barrows said. “They don’t like to be approached. If you see one, enjoy the site but don't get too close to it.”



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Burrowing owls are among animals protected by the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. / Photo Courtesy of Brett Daniels

About burrowing owls

Height: About 10 inches

Weight: Average of 6 ounces

Food: Insects, small rodents, amphibians and other birds

Population: Fewer than 10,000 breeding pairs

Mating season: Early spring

Legal status: Endangered in Canada, threatened in Mexico and a species of special concern in Florida and most of the western United States. It is a state endangered species in Colorado.

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