

City and local biologists begin burrowing owl banding project at Fairview Park

The Costa Mesa Parks and Community Services Department has partnered with local biologists to launch a Burrowing Owl banding project that follows state protocols and contributes to a larger study of this important and charming, but declining bird species found at Fairview Park.

Observations at the park over the last few years indicated there was just one bird passing through in their migratory route this time of year. However, earlier this season, reports came into the City indicating that there were sightings of more than one bird at a time, using different locations in the park.

Because this is a species of concern throughout the western hemisphere, Fairview Park Administrator, Cynthia D'Agosta and the City's contract biologist, Barry Nerhus, investigated the possibility of becoming part of the statewide banding program to understand the park's role in helping to preserve the Burrowing Owl.

"This is an exciting time to undertake this project and it's by no means complete," D'Agosta said. "We are getting daily reports from park users of more owl sightings. The goal of this is to understand the population we have that use Fairview Park and whether they come back year after year."

Conservation concerns for this species differ by region, and they are also of conservation concern in Canada and Mexico where they nest. The State of California lists the Burrowing Owl as a species of special concern which protects the birds and their nests by California Fish and Game Code and the U. S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Strong local, state, federal and international interest in this species has facilitated significant conservation efforts to maintain or revive populations, including reintroduction programs, the use of artificial nest burrows, habitat protection programs, protective legislation, and a banding program for tracking migration.

In California, Imperial County is known as a Burrowing Owl hot spot; it is estimated that 70 percent of the state's population (or about 4,000 breeding pairs).and 50 percent of the U.S. population breeds in that county. Visual tracking this year by trained eyes, have observed that from Santa Barbara south, only 20 nesting pairs have been seen on the coast. The last and closest sighting to Fairview Park, was a few years back when a banded owl was caught at Seal Beach Naval Weapons Station as it was migrating from Washington state.

The City reached out to Pete Bloom, principal of Bloom Biological, Inc, (BBI) known as the state expert on numerous biological assessments and avian research projects, (including the Burrowing Owl), to implement the program. (BBI holds permits or memoranda of understanding for participating in the conservation and recovery of more than a dozen endangered, threatened species, or special-status species, in California and the western United States).

Over the last two weeks, Bloom and Nerhus have captured and banded two Burrowing Owls within Fairview Park. Based on the feathers, both owls have been determined to be a "hatch year bird" (meaning it was born spring of 2018).

Due to the age, their sex cannot be identified yet. They are believed to be wintering at Fairview Park, traveling as part of the migratory bird route possibly between Canada and Southern / Central Americas where the owls winter.

After banding, each owl was released into their highly used

burrow where they could hide and gather their composure.

Each owl now has a silver metal United States Geological Survey (USGS) Band that goes into the Cornell Bird Banding Lab database. We will be able to see where these two critters go, and whether or not they return to Fairview Park next season. We will also keep an eye out for more owls.

The public is always asked to keep dogs on leash in our parks, but this is even more critical during this migratory time. If you happen to observe a Burrowing Owl, please keep your distance and do not disturb. We want them to feel welcomed and comfortable in their habitats.