

Burrowing Owl Consortium Meeting
September 8, 2005

Attendees: See two sign-in sheets.

Several participants were delayed, including meeting chair person Rebecca Cull, because of traffic. Jack Barclay chaired the meeting on Rebecca's behalf.

JB: Penelope Delevoryas– could not attend. She is a long time attendee – since 1990. She provided the treasurer's report: There was \$316 as of last meeting. \$187 in contributions received since then for a total of \$512.

Proceedings update: Going slowly. Commitments from authors for 24 manuscripts. Have received 14 drafts so far. Four final drafts – one is a reprint of a FWS status report. Jack had asked the Dept of Fish and Game to contact the authors and encourage them to get their papers submitted. This was done a few weeks ago. The deadline is 2006. Must be published in first half of 2006 otherwise funding evaporates. Institute for Bird Populations is possibly doing a stand alone volume. Pete Bloom paper on active relocation – hope to have it – he's working on his Ph.D. Prefer not to include combining it with Arizona results since that was not actually discussed at the symposium. Want to keep the proceedings to just what was discussed at the symposium. Jack mentioned Esther Burkett from CDF&G would be interested in this. Someone said CDFG does not allow relocations but relocations are occurring.

Jack presented a summary of a relocation in San Diego County. Both adults from a nesting pair and 5 eggs were placed in an artificial burrow without any enclosure 15-20 miles from the original site. Was a last ditch effort to save these birds. Female laid 2 more eggs. Some hatched. Lost track of what has happened since then.

Sounds like it worked and that it was endorsed by CDFG. Very different approach in Northern California. Relocation tried long ago. Other relocations have held owls in enclosures and released several months later. Four pairs stayed in the relocation area.

Caroline Kennedy – Update on development of model relocation plan:

Defenders of Wildlife is working with Wild At Heart on developing a model relocation plan for the state of California. The need arose out of many calls from California members contacting Defenders asking for our help in protecting owls from development. This is a grant funded project. We discussed this at the last meeting and to date we have hired an intern to work with Wild At Heart in Arizona documenting their process. Unfortunately he didn't work out and we ended up having to write the plan. But WAH had good drafts to work from. Two chapters are near complete. One is on artificial burrow construction and the other on release tent construction. The WAH methods have been very successful in Arizona and the Arizona Game and Fish now direct all calls regarding burrowing owls to WAH. The grant requires that we test the plan in three locations. The first test of this method will be at Catherine Portman's property in

Woodland. Greg Clark from WAH was to attend this meeting but he is prepping Catherine's site and couldn't make it. Four owls that were covered over at a development site were rescued and will be held at this site for 30 days and released. Catherine will be monitoring them. We would like the continued support of the Consortium for the plan and will begin talking to CDFG about getting their input support as well.

Catherine Portman – Literature review regarding relocations:

See handout summarizing 5 relocation efforts and power point presentation. The handout summarized the known relocations including those outside the state of California.

Cannot compare results because they didn't provide enough info or did not collect the same information. Catherine would like to reach out to researchers so that there is standardization in the protocol so that relocations can be better evaluated. Another issue was whether we should consider results outside California. Her position is that we should consider data outside CA but have a different standard of success. For example, in CA success may be determined to be 3 years of a successful fledging. In MN successful data may be if the owls remained on the site until winter and returned one spring.

There is inconsistency on CDF&G's part regarding permitting for relocations. Catherine wants the Department to recognize conservation of the owl may depend on relocation. Some conservation plans already developed. See FWS status assessment. Also Raptor Research Foundation report regarding Canada's efforts. Canadian recovery plan addresses. Peter Bloom PowerPoint presentation discusses 5 relocations. There is value in looking at non-CA studies.

Catherine asked about the consortium's mission and objectives. Jack asked Catherine and Rebecca to work with him to prepare draft mission statements for the next meeting.

Jack Barclay: All should email Pete Bloom and ask him to prepare a paper summarizing his relocations for publication in the Burrowing Owl Symposium Proceedings.

Pbloom@aol.com.

Additional folks arrived and were introduced: Rebecca Cull, Kent Reeves, Rob Gillman, Doug Bell, Esther Burkett, Janice Gan.

Kent Reeves; Jones Tract Flood Update: Kent is a wildlife biologist with the East Bay Utilities in San Joaquin County. In 2003 started monitoring a burrowing owl population along a 4 mile tract through the delta. May have the largest burrowing owl colony in the county. 28 nest burrows with 2 adults at each. 2-6 young observed. 121 young. On June 4th, levy broke and water inundated the sites. Two weeks later, one owl left. This year, two nest burrows and 8 young, 4 of 8 fledged, 3 more adults there – came in late July. There is a large crayfish population. Owls may be using some of their burrows. Levy break blamed on beavers and rodents not lack of funding to maintain. He's working with the Dept and to let them know that owls can be compatible. East Bay MUD doesn't view owls as a problem. Harder to get them to tolerate ground squirrels. Will continue to monitor to document presence of owls/colony recovery. Seem to have resident and influx of adults at breeding season. Working with Dan Gifford at CDF&G.

Rebecca: Received letter from Alameda County regarding Altamont. Basically said thank you for your interest. In July the Sacramento Bee article stated County officials agreed to limit activity to prevent mortality. Wind operators, reg agencies and environmental groups were working together to come up with something. Board of Supervisors met in August and their recommendation was very watered down and eliminated the opt out clause. Now has no teeth. Rebecca's asked whether we should continue our letter writing efforts. It was agreed that we should continue with at least the letters. Rebecca has a possible conflict of interest and doesn't have time to draft.

Any other old business? None.

New business:

Esther Burkett: This is her first consortium meeting. Headquartered in Sacramento. Reorganization underway so titles may change. Has worked for 20 years for CDFG primarily on birds but also fishers and seabirds. Since 2003 petition received and the symposium, CDFG has committed to doing a conservation strategy for the state. Is like a recovery plan. Limited amount of money is coming from a state wildlife grant. 25% match required – can come from private or state funds. Bob Wilkerson will talk about next year's status survey plan. State has very little money for wildlife, especially for non-listed species. Handout distributed calling for help with the conservation strategy. Circulated copy of the strategy for the Southwest willow flycatcher. Burrowing owl will be tough since it's so wide ranging. Some areas we don't know much about. Need to know specific for each geographic region. Trying to enter nesting sites into a database. Need to know current breeding locations. Usually do an assessment before the strategy. Did one in response to petition. California Birds of Conservation Concern being updated and undergoing peer review. Recovery plan is not a legal document – only provides guidance but better than nothing. Once strategy is done start implementing, monitoring, adaptive management, etc. Basic tenets cover identifying and targeting overall population size and recovery zones. They are demographically driven so need to know number of breeding pairs, etc. Please submit anything you have as we're just beginning to compile files. Specific requests: Need photos of burrows and birds. Need to define what constitutes fledging.

Handout with list of questions. Ideally will use published literature.

Legal problem for CDFG: No mechanism to allow for take for the purpose of capturing and moving. But many people have been doing it. No permit has yet been developed to cover this. Definitely willing to consider active relocation – often birds are moved to adjacent lands. CEQA will come into play. There is a whole chapter on relocations – see the website. Asks a number of questions, e.g., Are there rare or sensitive species where the animal will be relocated. Technically there should be a CEQA analysis. Questions asked about take – could relocating be considered take because of high mortality? CDFG trying to develop a nest policy – is it a nest even when they're not nesting. Example cited of how timber companies destroy nests when logging. What is a successful relocation?

Breeding success is not enough. Need a productivity target. Once is not enough so long term monitoring is important. Example of brown pelican – productivity target has never been reached but they are trying to delist. Questions asked of how often do strategies result in development of regulations or regulation changes? They have to go through commission and a public comment process. But this is a new process for nongame species. Disturbance factor – CDFG's definition is different from the consortium's definition.

Ideally want an ecosystem management approach – larger parcels, move to where the whole guild of grassland species are present, least amount of disturbance. Not relying just on artificial burrow. Ideally not creating artificial burrows.

See IUCN guidelines.

How to live with owls: someone needs to adopt and monitor.

Long term management – how to raise flag early on before crisis mode.

Mitigated negative decs.

What is CDFG's recourse for these types of examples:
\$5,000 fine for develop, were' in the process of trying to mitigate. ADFG can sue – has to get DA to do it.

Need more info on historical occurrences.

Also see Canada document.

A summary of CNDDDB records will be included in the proceedings.

Timeline – develop components of the strategy but have enough info now for a draft. State wildlife strategy – not sure what was included in the strategy. Didn't get a chance to review it.

Have not distributed handout to other groups.

No statewide survey of badgers. Ideally put owls where badgers are. Stick to same habitat types.

Break

JB: Guidelines are guidelines not absolutes. If anyone is interested in talking about buffers, exclusionary techniques, etc. see Raptor Research : Impacts and Mitigation Techniques by Postovit and Postovit. Discussion of nuances of avoiding disturbances for raptors. Discussed why buffer zones should be flexible.

Bob Wilkerson: IBP – Survey Plans:

Working with Rodger ? and Dave DeSante. Pending funding will do a statewide survey in spring 2006 through 2007 (will include two summer field seasons). Will replicate early 90s work. Major difference is that surveying new areas statewide and regional population estimates including desert and Great Basin. After completed will compare to 90s results to see any regional and statewide population trends, identify important population centers, and identify restoration and reintroduction areas. Same survey methods – 5x5 km grid over entire state and random sample blocks. 960 sites. Will survey themselves and volunteers and possibly consortium members. Will contact Audubon Chapters. Plots not sampled by Audubon will be sampled by their field biologists the second year. Doesn't include desert areas where not enough volunteers. Will be contacting consortium members for volunteers. Will be visiting every known site in 960 grids. Will be using scopes and scanning techniques. The paid staff where volunteers are not available will visit each site twice; one in the morning and once in evening. The volunteer sites will be visited once. Will start on May 15 in northern areas and earlier in south. If any questions about the methodology, please contact the Institute for Bird Populations, see www.birdpop.org. Esther asked if the decision to do one visit a funding concern. Want to be able to connect this to the 90s survey. Need a third visit. Response was that once an owl is detected the site is not revisited.

Jack Barclay: Summarize the occurrence of burrowing owls in abandoned irrigations structures in the Mohave desert

Burrowing owl mortality at a site in Freemont., There were 3 owls last November. Owls here were using burrows under the irrigation canal sidewalls. He wrote a plan for what to do. Opened up edge of lip, examined to ensure no owls were present and then backfilled with gravel. Contractor used small gravel. He informed the contractor this would not work because the owls could dig new holes in the gravel. Four days later owls dug new holes. A week later only 2 of 3 owls were present after re-opened holes had been backfilled. They looked for the owls. Three weeks later found one dead owl in burrow under canal sidewall. He notified FWS and CDFG and sent the carcasses to FWS. Necropsy results were inconclusive about the cause of death. Recontacted FWS and they said there would be no legal action. Dept. plans to take some legal action. This was a case where the contractor did not do what he recommended. They redid it properly and the owls moved to the opposite side of the fence and the owls raised 4 young. The building got built. Lack of enforcement sends bad message to developers. There is no citizen suit provision under the MBTA or state law. Under state law, have to get DA to prosecute.

Phil Leitner:

Observed owls in disturbed habitat. Mostly in the western part. Casual observations made during his ground squirrel work. His impression is that they are widely but sparsely distributed in natural desert habitat. Edwards AFB has done a lot of monitoring. In 1994 did a sensitive species survey. Observed owls on 11% of base. Good sample for western Mohave. Reports of owls on agricultural lands along river between Hesperia and

Barstow. Appear in disturbed areas in larger colonies. In natural habitat less dense. Agricultural areas have ground squirrel holes and artificial pipes. Natural areas they use fox burrows. May be some ecological differences between coastal grasslands and desert. Multispecies plan for Mohave underway for 12 or 14 years. Now have a final and decision on it is pending. Combination HCP and amendment to CA Desert Act. Burrowing owl is one of species covered. A couple of pages are dedicated to the owls. Quotes from plan reference “urban fringe” and “grasslands”. It was asked if there could be different subspecies. Have diet studies been done or burrow type looked at. There appear to be differences. Question asked about owls on Edwards AFB. There they are found mostly on natural habitat. No livestock or ORV use. At Fort Irwin there is a lot of disturbance. Mohave ground squirrel burrow too small but owls can excavate. Ground squirrels do occur in desert but in disturbed areas but overall owls can’t count on them. Badgers are very scarce. In 30 years seen one paid. Prey base not sufficient for them. ROD of decision will be published any day now. But HCP in question. For CDFG to sign they have to have full mitigation and they’re not yet convinced. May end being a BLM only plan. One third is private, one third is military and one third is BLM. Plan is take minimizing. Remove and/or relocate so not heavy on conservation. There is a recommendation for habitat purchase – but for grasslands and state parklands. Will depend on public pressure to change.

Jack – Mohave North of Lancaster abandoned ag lands. Used to be irrigated. Being purchased for distribution of treated wastewater. Converting back to desert. Irrigation structures – irrigation box – housed a pair of owls. Used a pipe inside which ran to a nearby structure. Birds using them to nest. But birds are also dying in them. Depending on the bird species and the diameter and height of the pipe, they can fly into but can’t fly out. These structures are common so remember to inspect them when you are surveying. Try to retrofit so birds don’t get trapped. Irrigation district is planning on knocking them down. Should try to mitigate (replace) the loss of nesting habitat.

San Jose International Airport. 16th year of burrowing owl population monitoring on the airport. Started at 7 productive pairs. Peak of 40 pairs in 2002. Now in low 20s. This year very delayed breeding season. Banded a group of nestlings on August 1. It appeared, because of late spring rains, that there were a lot of initial nesting failures and renesting.

Completed 9th year on burrowing owl monitoring at Sharpe Depot. Military installation near Stockton. Thanks to Lindsey. 2006: 18 pairs, 15 productive. 51 nestlings.

Rebecca: Rumor about changing guidelines for survey protocol. Jack said some folks are critical of Consortium Survey Protocol. It fails when used to try and do something it is not intended to do. It is not peer reviewed but was published. Some folks wrote a new protocol and want it peer reviewed and agencies to use it. First draft he reviewed was confusing. Has not moved ahead. He’ll keep us posted. Consortium’s Protocol is on Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group website and CDFG’s. Experience requirements – must have a lot but this means fewer people are capable.

Rebecca will compile attendance list and create spreadsheet. Need a chair for next meeting and to schedule next meeting. Jack nominated Christine Gaber. Please get notice out early. Next meeting Saturday February 4th.

Can we post mission on website? Yes if we had one. Usually we operate by committee. Can we have a mission committee? Jack, Catherine and Rebecca. Tried to develop a mission early on but cautious about putting it on paper. Originally a lot of agencies participated. A draft mission will be drafted for consideration at next meeting.

Should we have another symposium? Good time would be after proceeding, strategy and survey done. Last one cost more than \$20k. Discussed joining with another meeting.