

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Wildlife returns to abandoned Contra Costa County subdivisions

By Hilary Costa  
Contra Costa Times

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Just like any residential street in Antioch, Gateway Drive has sidewalks, a paved road, retaining walls separating yards and sewer pipes. What it doesn't have is residents.

Not human ones, anyway.

Instead, it's burrowing owls, coyotes, jackrabbits and kestrels that have moved in.

This tract of land on the edge of development in Southeast Antioch has stood primed for new houses for more than two years, since the housing market collapsed and construction halted.

Now, native species have reclaimed the land — a reminder that until recently this part of Contra Costa County, now blanketed with development, was habitat for wildlife.

"Just little by little they started turning up," said Scott Artis, a nearby resident who has taken an interest in protecting the burrowing owls.

This abandoned construction site is not the only one in the East Bay that has been repopulated by wild species since the building boom went bust.

Seth Adams, director of land programs for Save Mount Diablo, said wildlife has returned to land once trod by bulldozers in sidelined subdivisions in Clayton and Pittsburg. A visit to the Delta Coves subdivision in Bethel Island found shorebirds by the dozens perched on the boat launches that were supposed to back up to more than 400 homes.

And at Trilogy in Brentwood, Shea Homes' Dan O'Brien said his engineers check for critters every time they start construction on a parcel where building has been delayed.

"It's happening all over the place," Adams said. "You can point to just about anywhere on the edge of cities."

In Antioch, Artis has made sure local conservation groups know about the presence of burrowing owls in the abandoned subdivision, so they're not harmed when development there eventually resumes.

Shea Family, a division of Shea Homes, developed the first phase of the neighborhood but sold the parcel to Kiper Homes when the housing market turned, according to a Shea representative. Officials at Kiper did not return calls seeking a comment.

Artis has monitored the owl population in the stalled subdivision for two years during regular walks. Last week, he tallied 11 owls in the area, including four pairs. That doesn't count the fledglings that hatched last spring and since have left their nests.

Burrowing owls are on the California Department of Fish and Game's list of Species of Special Concern, meaning their numbers are shrinking.

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"As we build out toward agricultural lands, their habitat is sort of becoming our habitat more and more," said Mike Lynes, conservation director for Golden Gate Audubon. "We sort of have to pay more attention to them now."

Burrowing owls are abundant in East Contra Costa's grassy hills and have been on Antioch's radar for years, since residents pushed for protections for those displaced by the community center at Prewett Park. In response, the city set up designated habitat for the birds protected by deed.

"Antioch is the first (city) in the East Bay that has done something like this," said resident Dee Vieira, who spearheaded the effort.

For his part, Artis says he'll continue to watch over, and raise awareness of, his nonhuman neighbors.

"A lot of people see the owls, but they don't necessarily know about the owls," he said.

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Trash is spread across a trail in southeast Antioch, Calif. on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2009. Although illegal dumping on undeveloped land still persists fences put up by the city have curbed the problem a bit and burrowing owls (an endangered species), coyotes, jackrabbits and bird species have again made homes on empty lots abandoned by developers. (Sherry LaVars/Staff)

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A burrowing owl peeks out in an area where animals are reclaiming the land once leveled to make way for new homes Antioch, Calif. on Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009. Scott Artis has made it his hobby to document this phenomenon in his southeast Antioch neighborhood, where burrowing owls (an endangered species), coyotes, jackrabbits and bird species have again made homes on empty lots abandoned by developers. (Sherry LaVars/Staff)



Scott Artis looks over an undeveloped patch of land near his home where animals are reclaiming the land once leveled to make way for new homes in Antioch, Calif. on Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009. Artis has made it his hobby to document this phenomenon in his southeast Antioch neighborhood, where burrowing owls (an endangered species), coyotes, jackrabbits and bird species have again made homes on empty lots abandoned by developers. (Sherry LaVars/Staff)