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Owls to be evicted from Antioch land

By Hilary Costa
Contra Costa Times

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The company that owns semi-developed land in Antioch where burrowing owls have recently made their homes is evicting the raptors in a move that has some animal advocates worried the owls will be left homeless, despite the California Department of Fish and Game's approval of the plan.

Kiper Homes, the developer of the future Blue Ridge neighborhood, has hired wildlife biologists to passively remove the burrowing owls from 20-plus acres near Canada Valley Road. Construction there halted in May 2008 after the land was graded as residential lots, with sewer lines, streets, curbs and sidewalks installed. The land will eventually host 127 homes.

To evict the owls before nesting season starts in February, environmental consultants Monk & Associates are installing one-way doors on the owls' burrows that will let them out, but prevent them from returning. Once the owls are out, the biologists will destroy the burrows and fumigate for ground squirrels.

"We do it in a systematic manner until all the burrows are collapsed and the owls are moved out," said Geoff Monk, a certified wildlife biologist who has been working with nesting birds of prey for 30 years.

Monk said the concern among some wildlife advocates that the owls will become vulnerable to predators or unable to find new homes is unfounded. Burrowing owls are adapted to frequent relocation, he said.

"If these owls, every time their burrows became unsuitable for use, died, they wouldn't be here at all," Monk said.

But activists aren't satisfied, and on Sunday a group called the Friends of East Bay Owls plans to protest the evictions.

Fish and Game is "participating in the very thing they're supposed to be protecting the owls from," said Catherine Portman, director of the Burrowing Owl Preservation Society.

Fish and Game considers burrowing owls a "species of special concern," but they are not an endangered species. They are protected from hunting, and their burrows are off-limits during nesting season.

Portman said evicting the owls from the burrows is tantamount to hunting, because it will leave them exposed to the elements and to predators. She said the biologists should band the evicted owls so they can monitor their progress.

"Just simply kicking them out without a plan of action just doesn't seem like a complete process," said owl advocate and nearby resident Scott Artis.

But banding owls is a long and costly process — and not required by Fish and Game, Monk said. He pointed out that the majority of the burrows on the Kiper property have been dug around the pipes and curbs installed by the developer.

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"We wouldn't want to hurt them in any way, and I am not concerned about evicting them at all," Monk said. "They will all find happy homes."

Reach Hilary Costa at 925-779-7166. Follow her at [Twitter.com/hilaryccosta](https://twitter.com/hilaryccosta).

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