

GUEST COLUMN: Burrowing owls stand small in den of iniquity

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THE HOUSING BUBBLE cataclysm was not completely fraught with foreclosures as one local community continued to fill prime real estate and thrive. Once poised to complete a burgeoning Antioch neighborhood, the land had undergone an urban makeover. It was meticulously prepped to deliver water and electricity to future houses, and dressed with streets, sidewalks and lamp posts. But with building at a standstill and a protective chain link fence border, the semi-undeveloped acreage was a perfect opportunity for burrowing owls, a California Species of Special Concern, to reclaim what had been considered habitat surely lost.

The streetlights and signs were transformed into lookout posts, sidewalks and retaining blocks served as unbreakable burrow walls, and the paved roads were free and clear of all traffic; perfect for an evening feathered stroll. And the lack of development and an unusual bout of urban privacy over the last two years signaled a wildlife resurgence as the burrowing owls were joined by coyotes, rabbits, ground squirrels, hawks, kestrels, etc.

In a rather dreary economic mess, a bright light had emerged in the form of a pseudo-wildlife refuge with a handful of owls taking center stage. That was until the fence, so often the culprit in habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss, vanished. As the property exchanged hands from one builder to another, the once-protected habitat was now open to the public and the burrowing owls that stood watch in the middle of the streets were now dodging cars, off-roading vehicles and piles of garbage.

Unfortunately, the wildlife was not the only one attracted to the paved unoccupied land. Apparently the partially darkened streets and neighborless lots are drawing an assortment of illicit activities. Drug deals, illegal dumping, graffiti, alcohol, sex, fireworks, street racing, off-roading and all the other usual suspects are infiltrating this area because of its remoteness and protection from prying eyes. The word has obviously gotten out that the partially functioning streetlights provide the perfect opportunity to conduct oneself inappropriately under the shadows of the night in an otherwise new and clean neighborhood.

In addition, the removal of the fence has caused a sharp decline in the wildlife activity. But among the gang signs, discarded refrigerators, broken water heaters, shattered glass and squealing tires, the 2009 burrowing owl breeding season was a success. Perhaps committed to already prepared nests, the multiple pairs of owls managed to rear as many as eight owlets each and lend support to

an ailing California population. And as the weeks of August pass into history, the owls appear to be doing the same. This once-impressive parliament of burrowing owls is thinning and with tire tracks adjacent to once-occupied dens, burrows filled in with dirt and rock, and a constant flow of questionable traffic, who's to blame them for moving away.

Ultimately, the presence of the owls will not be decided by the dealers, the taggers or the dumpers; it will be decided by the developer. Only time will tell if the owls decide to stay, and only time will tell how long they have before their burrows are permanently replaced by homes.

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