

EMPLOYEE FIELD GUIDE

Guidelines for Maintenance and Construction in Environmentally Sensitive Areas

It is against the Department's Strategic Goals for our actions to threaten sensitive resources within our worksite. In order to fulfill our goals, every worker needs to adopt new approaches for construction and maintenance of facilities. These guidelines provide an environmentally sensitive approach which recognizes that often minor adjustments during planning, construction or maintenance activities can yield major benefits to the Department's goals.



photo by the Department staff

BURROWING OWLS

Athene cunicularia

Burrowing owls derive their name from their use of small mammal burrows for nest sites. Usually these are dug by ground squirrels or prairie dogs, but the owls may dig their own burrow in soft soil. Burrowing owls are found in prairies, deserts, uncultivated lands in agricultural areas, lightly used pasture lands and other open areas. There may be a small colony of these owls nesting together, as many as 10 to 12 pairs per two to three acres. Burrowing owls like to have good visibility from the burrow mound or a nearby fence post. In developed areas, burrowing owls are found in the warmer valleys associated with agriculture, many urban areas, along freeway banks, and many airports throughout the state. They are commonly found along irrigation canals particularly concrete-lined canals. They can also use miscellaneous items such as old cars, sewers and bridges.

This quail-sized owl is nine to eleven inches long, has a round head without "ear" tufts, a limited facial disc and yellow eyes. Burrowing owls are brown with buff and dull white spotting. A white bib is noticeable with brown barring on the breast. Newly hatched young are covered with gray-white down. The down is replaced with gray and tan juvenile feathers.

Burrowing owls are active during the day as well as at night. The burrowing

owl hovers while hunting, and after catching prey it returns to a perch on a fence post or the ground. When alarmed this small owl bobs up and down, something other owls do not do. It will also give a rapid, cackling call. When young owls are threatened in their burrow they produce a rattlesnake-like call. In the breeding season, pairs call to one another at night with a high pitched coo similar to, but more rapid than, the call of a mourning dove.

Status of Species of Concern

Birds-of-prey, including burrowing owls, are protected under policies adopted by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) Commission as "raptors". The section on raptors states that it is the intent of the Fish and Game Commission to, "insure that raptor populations and their habitat shall be maintained, restored and enhanced..." and that "indiscriminate take of raptors shall not be permitted" (p.598, Fish and Game Code 1994). In addition, birds-of-prey and their eggs are protected under Fish and Game Code 3503.5.

Many bird species, including burrowing owls, are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA; 16 U.S.C. 703 et seq., 50 CFR 10-26). The MBTA prohibits the incidental "take" of a migratory bird without a Special Purpose Permit which is subject to the discretion of the Department of Agriculture and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

For the MBTA, the definition of "take" includes killing, capturing or possessing any migratory bird, including nests and eggs. Nests and eggs of all birds are protected by Fish and Game Code 3503. In addition, non-game birds are protected under Fish and Game Code 3513 and 3800 (1994).

Violations

Any person responsible for violating these laws and regulations may be arrested by a representative of the Department of Interior or a California Department of Fish and Game warden, punishable by fine and/or prison.

How to Protect Owls

1. Stay away from the Burrow; cease adjacent work (a 25-50 meter radius is usually appropriate).
2. Do not collapse any burrows.
3. No construction activities including storage of machinery and materials is allowed in areas designated as environmentally sensitive areas (ESA).
4. If you encounter Burrowing Owls during construction, please call Chris White at (858) 616-6611.



photo by Jeff Kermode

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