

photo by Jim Dublinski



A Happy New Year for Some Burrowing Owls Thanks to Dedicated Volunteers!



Volunteers erect tent frame – photo by Mark Coryell

In December, Sierra Club volunteers joined Wild at Heart in the San Tan Valley and in Pearce to help erect release tents for burrowing owls. Volunteers from various organizations, including Sierra Club, had previously constructed artificial burrows for the owls, who must rely on other animals or people to construct their burrows. Prairie dogs used to do the lion’s share of the burrow construction for burrowing owls, but with eradication of and subsequent decline in prairie dog numbers, the owls need a little more help from us.

In the San Tan Valley, about 40 volunteers helped erect six tents on property owned by the Bureau of Reclamation. Erecting the tents is the second step in the process. The final step is releasing the owls from the tents with the hope that they will make these burrows their homes. They are frequently released near agricultural fields as they have a lot of owl food – insects, rodents, etc.

For the work on December 29th, five intrepid volunteers constructed three tents on a very very cold day in Pearce. We even got snow and drove through a bit of a snow storm on the way back. The bonus for the day was hearing the musical calls of the Sandhill cranes and watching them fly overhead. They will be in the



Volunteers seal the bottom of the tent – photo by Jim Dublinski

area for another month or so and then start making their way back north.

These volunteer service projects start with a brief overview from Greg Clark, who is with Wild at Heart. He speaks about the natural history of burrowing owls and why their numbers are declining. Next there is a safety talk and step-by-step training on how to erect the tents. This is important to make sure the owls are secure, but also so they are not injured by sharp edges or cracks where their banded legs can get stuck. For our work in December, we used a different technique than had been used previously,



Owl and tent briefing on a cold day in Pearce – photo by Sandy Bahr



An owl about to be released – photo by Sandy

building smaller tents for only two owls per tent. These changes came from recent research to try and increase the success rate of the relocations and better keep the owls in the area.

After constructing the frame and pulling the screening over, we pile dirt nearly all around the bottom of the tent and then anchor each of the corners.

Last comes the most rewarding aspect of the day, watching as the owls are documented and then released into the tents. In Pearce, Farmer Ed and his son Michael joined us for the release.



Documenting band numbers – photo by Sandy Bahr

Thank you the farmer, Wild at Heart, and to all who helped with these projects and who help the owls and other wildlife.



A burrowing owl by its new home – photo courtesy of Wild at Heart