



# Canyon News

Black Mountain Park · Del Mar Mesa Preserve  
Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve  
Friends of Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve, Inc.

Mar/Apr 2007  
Volume 21, NO 2

## Burrowing Owl Spotted

Mike Kelly



**Burrowing Owls photographed in the Ramona grasslands by Wildlife Research Institute volunteer, Carolyn Dorroh.**

A long-absent former resident of our north city open spaces was recently spotted on the Del Mar Mesa extension of the Preserve. It was the Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*). It was spotted by John Martin of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Refuges Program. He was surveying parcels of land the Service owns on DMM. According to him and Dave Bittner of the Wildlife Research Institute (WRI) — a non-profit that studies and protects raptors such as the Burrowing Owl — it was probably an over wintering migrant.

These are little owls, about 9.5 inches, (the size of the more common Screech Owl), that live in burrows on the ground! They move into burrows created by rodents such as squirrels. Adults are brown, with bold light colored

spots while juveniles have a buff color on their breasts. With relatively long legs for an owl, they can be seen standing on the ground or on low fence posts. John saw “ours” on a fence post. Personally, the only burrowing owls I’ve seen have been in the Salton Sea area.

Burrowing owls are becoming quite rare throughout, not only in our area, but in all of San Diego County. They’re also becoming rare in many other places in the U.S. Did you know that we’re down to 25-30 breeding pairs in the entire county? They have declined about 90% in San Diego County over the last 30 years or so. According to the WRI there were between 250-300 pairs of

See **Owl** p. 6 for more

### Highlights Inside

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### Lopez Canyon Cleanup

Sunday, March 18, 9 a.m – 1 p.m.

Volunteers are needed to help pull trash out from wildlife habitat in Lopez Canyon. Community service credits apply. No experience needed! Pickups, especially 4x4s, welcome! Meet at Lopez Ridge Park in Mira Mesa at 7245 Calle Cristobal.

**Thomas Guide p. 1208**



***Branchinecta sandiegonensis***, one of the fairy shrimp you might see on Will Bowen’s walk. See our Events calendar on page 2. Photo by Diolinda Parsick and Marie Simovich.

## **Upcoming Hikes/Events**

Remember this time of year there may be days when the Preserve is closed due to rains, so plan accordingly. All hikes are free to the public. If you're bringing an organized group, please call (858) 484-3219 to make arrangements. Rain cancels hikes. Be sure to wear hiking boots and bring water, insect repellent, and sun protection. See you on the trail!

***For maps of Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve and Black Mountain Open Space Park, visit [www.penasquitos.org](http://www.penasquitos.org).***

### **Every Saturday & Sunday**

#### **Historic Adobe Ranch Tour**

San Diego County Park docents lead a free guided tour of San Diego's second oldest standing residence, Ranch Santa Maria de Los Peñasquitos at 11 a.m. on Saturdays and 1 p.m. on Sundays, lasting 45 minutes. See an historic Mexican era rancho with three foot thick adobe walls, settler and Indian artifacts and tour the grounds.

### **March**

#### **Beginner & Intermediate Tracking Walks**

Saturday, Mar 10, 8 – 10 a.m.  
Tracker/naturalists from the Friends' Tracking Team lead two walks, one suitable for beginners (children welcome!) and an intermediate. Learn how to track animals and discover the natural environment they live in. Wear shoes that are good in mud. Meet at the historic ranch house. Take Mercy Rd. exit off I-15 west to Black Mtn. Rd., right on Black Mtn. Rd. and first left into Canyonside Dr., proceed to white-fenced parking lot. Park, walk west on trail to ranch.  
**Thomas Guide p. 1189 C7.**

#### **Nature Walk with Les Braund**

Saturday, March 17, 9 a.m.  
Join Les Braund for a general nature walk. Learn about the big and small things of nature, from trees to lichens and the wildlife dependent on them. Meet in the Mercy Road staging-parking area, upper level.

**Thomas Guide p. 1189 (D7).**

#### **Fairy Shrimp Hike**

Sunday, March 18, 3-4:30 p.m.  
A hike to look for and learn about Fairy Shrimp—tiny freshwater shrimp that live on mesa tops in the ephemeral rain pools and puddles of early spring. Learn about their life cycle and behavior. See the male's humorous 1890s style handle bar mustache and the female's attached egg sac.

**Start: Carmel Mountain Trail Head,  
Thomas Guide p.1208 (C2).**

#### **Tracker / Naturalist Classes (See article Pg 7)**

##### **Two-day event**

**Thursday, March 22, 7 p.m.**

**Saturday, March 24, 8 a.m.**

**Beginner Tracker Naturalist Class. Two day event at the Peñasquitos Ranch House.  
Thomas Guide p.1189 (C7).**

#### **Canyon Favorites Hike**

Saturday, March 24, 5-7 p.m.  
Join Pat for a moderately paced hike to Walden Pond, Carson's Crossing, the waterfall, and back. Good chance of seeing wildlife. Meet at the end of Park Village Road in Rancho Peñasquitos. Bring water and wear hiking boots.  
**Thomas Guide p. 1189 (J7).**

### **April**

#### **Beginner & Intermediate Tracking Walks**

Saturday, Apr 7, 8 – 10 a.m.  
Tracker/naturalists from the Friends' Tracking Team lead two

walks, one suitable for beginners (children welcome!) and an intermediate. Learn how to track animals and discover the natural environment they live in. Wear shoes that are good in mud. Meet at the historic ranch house. Take Mercy Rd. exit off I-15 west to Black Mtn. Rd., right on Black Mtn. Rd. and first left into Canyonside Dr., proceed to white-fenced parking lot. Park, walk west on trail to ranch.  
**Thomas Guide p. 1189 C7.**

#### **Frog Hike**

Sunday, April 22, 4-5:30 p.m.  
A hike to look for frogs, toads, and tadpoles. On the way learn all about all the frogs and toads of San Diego County. Find out what is happening to them. Gain practice imitating their calls. Wear shoes that you can get wet!

**Start: Carmel Mountain Trail Head,  
Thomas Guide p.1208 (C2).**

#### **FREE Wildlife Survey Volunteer Training**

Saturday, April 21, 9:45 a.m.  
Wildlife survey volunteers are invited to attend a free one-day training conducted by the experienced tracker/naturalists of the San Diego Tracking Team. This training includes basic track, sign, and habitat recognition, as well as details on the implementation of the survey protocol. During the months following the training, volunteers are expected to accompany a transect leader on at least one survey transect. After completing this training or equivalent (including any of the LPTT's Tracker/Naturalist Classes), Volunteers are welcome to practice their skills by assisting with future surveys.

Pre-registration is not required for individuals but requested for groups. Please bring a sack lunch, water and be prepared to spend much of the day outdoors. Also, please bring your calendar so that you can sign up for tran-

sects. Visit [www.sdt.org](http://www.sdt.org) for details.

**Meet at the ranch house.**

**Canyon Favorites Hike**

Saturday, April 28, 5-7 p.m.

Join Pat for a moderately paced hike to Walden Pond, Carson's Crossing, the waterfall, and back. Good chance of seeing wildlife. Meet at the end of Park Village Road in Rancho Peñasquitos. Bring water and wear hiking boots.

Thomas Guide p. 1189 (J7).

## May

**Lopez Canyon Flower Walk with Mike Kelly**

Saturday, May 5, 9 a. m

Sponsored by the California Native Plant Society. Mike Kelly will lead a flower and plant identification walk in Lopez Canyon. Expect to see the endangered Willow monadella, Mountain mahogany, Holly-leaf cherry, hybrid oak tree, *Quercus X Acutidens*, and more. This will be a slow-paced walk with one steep dirt road on a hill to come up and down. Meet at Lopez Ridge Park at 7245 Calle Cristobal in Mira Mesa.

**Beginner & Intermediate Tracking Walks**

Saturday, May 12, 8 – 10 a.m.

Tracker/naturalists from the Friends' Tracking Team lead two walks, one suitable for beginners (children welcome!) and an intermediate. Learn how to track animals and discover the natural environment they live in. Wear shoes that are good in mud. Meet at the historic ranch house. Take Mercy Rd. exit off I-15 west to Black Mtn. Rd., right on Black Mtn. Rd. and first left into Canyon-side Dr., proceed to white-fenced parking lot. Park, walk west on trail to ranch.

Thomas Guide p. 1189 C7.

## Directions

**Carmel Mountain Trail Head**

From Carmel Valley take El Camino Real south. At intersection with Carmel Mountain Road, proceed straight on Carmel Mountain Road. Go up the hill to East Ocean Air Dr. Go left and park at Fairport and Shorepointe. Wear hiking boots. Bring water/sun protection. Moderate hill to climb.

Thomas Guide p.1208 (C2).

**Mercy Rd Parking-Staging Area**

In Mira Mesa. Take Mercy Exit off I-15 west to Black Mountain Rd. and straight across intersection into parking lot. Meet on upper level.

Thomas Guide p.1189 (D7).

**Northern Parking-Staging Area**

Located in Rancho Peñasquitos. From I-15 take the Mercy Road exit west to Black Mountain Road. Right on Black Mountain Road and up hill, left on Park Village Drive, about 1 mile to Camino del Sur. Left on Camino del Sur and park by the kiosk.

Thomas Guide p.1189 (A7-B7).

**Park Village Drive Meeting Area**

Located in Rancho Peñasquitos. From I-15 take the Mercy Road exit west to Black Mountain Road. Right on Black Mountain Road and up hill, left on Park Village Drive and take it all the way to the end at the white barricades and park entrance.

Thomas Guide p.1189-1188 (J7).

**Ranch House Walks/Tours**

Located in Rancho Peñasquitos. Take Mercy Exit off I-15 west to Black Mountain Road. Right on Black Mountain. Left at first light, Canyon-side Park Dr. Go past ball fields to the white-fenced parking lot. Left into the lot. Walk up path to the ranch house.

Thomas Guide p.1189 (C7).

**Sorrento Valley Meeting Area**

Meet in parking lot at 4206 Sor-

rento Valley Blvd. on the north side of Sorrento Valley Blvd in Sorrento Valley, 1/4 mile east of its intersection with Sorrento Valley Road.

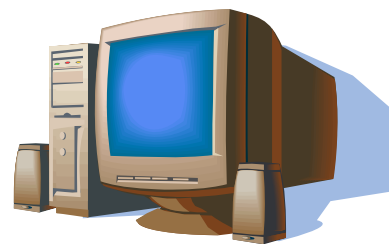
Thomas Guide p.1208 (D5).

**West-End Parking-Staging Area**

South side of Sorrento Valley Blvd. in Sorrento Valley, 1/2 mile east of intersection with Vista Sorrento Pky. From east take Mira Mesa Blvd. west to Camino Santa Fe. Right on Camino Santa Fe, then left on Sorrento Valley Blvd. to bottom of the hill. Entrance is on the left. From the west, Take I-5 or 805 to Sorrento Valley. Take Sorrento Valley Blvd. East, pass last building on the right. Preserve entrance is on right.

Thomas Guide p.1208 (D5).

Used PCs Needed!



If you have a Pentium level PC, laptop or desktop in good working order, that you aren't using or are about to discard, consider donating it to the Friends for our surveys. Contact Mike at (858) 566-6489.

This is just as deductible as a cash donation!

## California Conservation Corps Hard at Work

Autumn Acker, Park Ranger



If you are a regular trail user at Penasquitos Canyon, then you may have noticed some wonderful work being done by the California Conservation Corps (CCC), over the last year. County Parks partnered with the CCC's last summer for a few months through an NEG grant to restore the Ranch House Crossing Bridge, and to restore many sections of trail which had eroded due to water damage. Today, we have partnered with the CCC's once again to accomplish a number of projects in the can-

yon.

Starting in December of 2006, the CCC's began a new phase of restoration projects. Some of these include: installing split-rail fencing at the staging area; removing barb wire fencing; invasive plant removal; spreading fill-30

built in 1913 at the Ranch House.

The work performed here has been absolutely invaluable for all of us who share the love of this canyon, its trails, and its wildlife. After a rain, the Ranch House Crossing bridge no longer floats



sand in low areas on the trail; building culverts to drain water off some of our single-track trails; and restoring the historic Mohnike barn

away, and our trails are dryer thanks to proper sloping techniques, installed culverts, and fill-sand spread to reduce water buildup. Exotic plants, such as artichoke thistle, have been systematically removed, along with Eucalyptus seedlings at the staging area. Also, approximately ¼ mile of barb wire fencing has been taken out. The barn restoration is under way with cracks being filled, plaster re-applied, and a new coat of paint to come. This will ensure the preservation of the barn for future generations to enjoy.

The crew will remain here through the month of February, and we, the County Parks Staff, encourage you to say "thanks" to this crew should you see them hard at work in the canyon.



## Botta's Pocket Gopher

Barry Martin



*Thomomys bottae* or Botta's Pocket Gopher is a highly variable species in both size and color since its color tends to match the soil. The skull will be found in owl pellets and has a distinctive shape and molars that angle back. A medium-sized rodent with external, fur-lined cheek pouches; the outer face of the upper incisors lacks conspicuous grooves; claws on front feet relatively small (less than 10 mm long). This animal prefers light soils but is occasionally found in clay. It occurs all over the state of California except the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges. Its range extends into Oregon, Colorado and south to northern Mexico including Baja. Perhaps one reason why they can tolerate such environmental extremes is that they spend fully 90% of their lives in underground burrows, secure from the elements.

Botta's Pocket Gopher is attracted to continuously growing root systems; it eats roots, bulbs, and the tender bases of growing plants. Breeding takes place from late winter to summer but can be prolonged if in irrigated land. They will produce from one to four litters of 2 to 12 young. Their burrow systems are often complicated structures consisting of two or

more main galleries and several side chambers. A partly excavated burrow extended more than 30 m in length, had four main forks, and averaged 6 cm beneath the surface, although the tunnel leading to the nest descended to a depth of more than 60 cm. Tunnel systems more than 150 m in length is not rare. These ramified travelways probably help the occupants to avoid predators that try to search them out; they are equally important in permitting the gopher to forage over a considerable area

without exposing itself unduly to danger. Special side branches serve as storehouses for food, others as repositories for refuse and fecal pellets.

Although pocket gophers are active the year round, they store food to carry them over periods of scarcity, especially periods of drought when food is scarce and burrowing a difficult task. Usually, only one adult animal occupies each burrow system except for a short time in the breeding period. Associated with this solitary habit is a ferocious and seemingly fearless disposition. When two gophers encounter each other, they either fight or meticulously avoid each other. Desire for companionship seems to be completely lacking in their makeup.

The nest is a compact, hollow ball of dry, shredded vegetation placed in a special chamber off the main gallery, about 30-70 cm beneath the surface of the ground. Both sexes build nests as sleeping quarters.



Botta's Pocket Gopher (*Thomomys bottae*).  
Photo by John L. Tveten. *Thomomys bottae*

### **(Owl cont'd from pg 1)**

these cuties in San Diego County in the late 70s. Loss of habitat seems to be the common denominator in their declining numbers.

Locally, WRI developed a Comprehensive Burrowing Owl Management program (CBOMP). The rest of this article is taken from their web site ([www.wildlife-research.org](http://www.wildlife-research.org)).

This program provides a multifaceted plan, which includes: regular science-based monitoring; the rescue and relocation of owls that are in the way (refugees) of development; a Captive Breeding Facility and the hacking of captive-bred owls; research aimed at better understanding the causes for the owl's decline; demonstrations of the most productive breeding and hacking techniques; and the identification, modification, and management of the best remaining habitat for these little owls. Because of development, the demise of fossorial (i.e. burrowing) mammals, and other causes, there are few places in San Diego County where Burrowing Owls can successfully nest. The objective of CBOMP is to create and demonstrate a workable, multi-faceted conservation approach that can be exported to other locations that are experiencing the same Burrowing Owl decline. Several aspects of this plan are already underway (see below) and we'll be keeping you posted with regular updates in future newsletters.

#### **"Build it and they will come"**

Over the last 18 months, WRI's "Volunteers for Burrowing Owls" have constructed and installed a total of 52 artificial burrows (26 breeding chambers; two burrows per breeding one has two entrances to allow for owls to escape from snakes and mammalian predators. Most of these are also constructed in a way that will ex-

clude, and allow the owls to avoid, many predators. They have a funnel-like entrance, which allows the owls to quickly rush into the burrow (vs. filing in single file) and a necked-down (6"-4") reduction in the diameter of the two burrows that will exclude the larger potential predators from even reaching the breeding chambers.

The really big news is that at least one pair of wild Burrowing Owls has taken up residence at one of these artificial burrows. They have chosen a burrow that is close to one of our breeding cages, which may have attracted them in the first place. This raises the potential value of captive birds (or decoys?) to play a role in the initial stages of Burrowing Owl reintroduction and management. We'll be monitoring this pair to see if they are just wintering birds or part of the potential breeding population, but at the time of this writing, the wild pair was still on site, interacting with the owls we released in February (see article below).

We also have a nearby wintering bird that shows up every year in the Ramona Grasslands, right across the street from our WRI Headquarters (an area proposed for development). Perhaps it too will stick around one of these springs to breed.

#### **Successful captive breeding and release of burrowing owls**

In 2004, we were asked by the California Department of Fish and Game, under a special Memorandum of Understanding, to remove several Burrowing Owls from the path of development. We did that and, in the absence of a safe place to relocate them, we paired these owls up in three breeding facilities at WRI. We are pleased to report that two of the three pairs produced 12 eggs and nine nestlings! On February 28, 2005 we banded and released all nine nes-

tlings, plus seven adults, into several of the 52 artificial burrows that our Volunteers had constructed around the WRI property, looking out over the Ramona Grasslands and other open areas. Staff Biologists and Volunteers are monitoring these owls several times per week. Thus far, two have been killed by vehicles, but we are delighted to report that seven owls (plus two wild owls) are regularly observed. This is encouraging since (under best case scenario) another seven individuals could be in the burrows, out of sight and, hopefully, preparing to lay eggs.

#### **Artificial burrows installed at the city's lower Otay Lake**

The Burrowing Owl breeding population in San Diego County has decreased 90 percent in the last 25-30 years and managing this species is a critical component of San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP). The "MSCP Biological Monitoring Plan" identified this owl as one of the grassland raptor species to be monitored under the MSCP. In a pro-active mode, the City of San Diego would like to have a number of sites prepared/managed to attract and support Burrowing Owls and they have asked WRI to help them. These "Receiver Sites" would also be available for owls that needed to be actively translocated out of harm's way. Based on WRI's surveys for Burrowing Owls and other raptors, approximately a dozen city-owned parcels were identified as having some potential for attracting and/or supporting Burrowing Owls, many of which were within the geographical limits of the MSCP. Lower Otay Lake was identified as the best of the potential Receiver Sites. To start the habitat management process, WRI installed 22 burrows (11 nest

chambers) on this site and created rock piles to attract the owls and provide habitat for their prey

A Management and Monitoring Plan for the Lower Otay Lake Burrowing Owl Management Area is being created for the city, to provide recommendations and guidelines on how to improve and maintain the habitat and monitor it for Burrowing Owls. This was a really

big step forward for the city, who should be congratulated for taking this important pro-active step in the implementation of a comprehensive approach to managing these owls that are in need of assistance before they disappear completely from San Diego County.

**Maps** of Peñasquitos Canyon and Black Mountain Open Space Parks are available at [www.penasquitos.org](http://www.penasquitos.org).



### Tracker/Naturalist Classes

The following classes, presented by the Los Peñasquitos Tracking Team, are scheduled throughout the year and are open to all (high-school and older, please). Classes involve one weekday evening and one Saturday. Our goal is to provide you with information and tools that will be helpful in wildlife track and sign identification and the appreciation of our rapidly disappearing native habitat, as well as in improving your powers of observation and awareness

#### Beginning Tracker/Naturalist Program

This class is structured to give the prospective tracker a solid base of tracking skills and strategies for developing a sharp eye for detail. We concentrate on basic mammal track and sign recognition, key gait patterns, basic wildlife physiology and taxonomy, Southern California habitat recognition and the relationship between those habitats and animal species. You will be introduced to several methods and exercises that have proven to be effective in implanting the knowledge you need to become a proficient tracker such as journaling and visual patterning.



Photo: Lee Kirchhevel



Photo: Lee Kirchhevel

#### Intermediate Tracker/Naturalist Program

This phase of instruction will broaden your experience giving you a chance to develop personal strategies for confident recognition and interpretation of tracks and sign on a variety of surfaces. We will help you get beyond the track identification phase and into the interpretation phase; with exercises in speculative tracking, aging, soil dynamics, debris interaction, trailing, mammal skull and dental identification, and tracking on various substrates. Gait interpretation learned in the beginning class will be expanded upon.

#### Advanced Tracker/Naturalist Program

The culmination of the three part series, this class concentrates on fine detail and further development of your proficiency as a tracker. Trailing animals through various difficult surfaces will allow opportunities for us to share strategies and exercises that will enable you to stay on the right track. We provide drills and exercises that will help you expand

your knowledge base, point out areas you need to work on and give you a taste for what it would be like to go through a tracker evaluation.

Those who have completed the Tracker/Naturalist series, or equivalent, are eligible to join the SDTT's **apprentice program**.

**San Diego Tracking announces the following schedule of its Tracker/Naturalist Classes:**  
**Beginning Tracker Naturalist Class. Two-day event at the Peñasquitos Ranch House.**  
**Thursday March 22 at 7 p.m. and Saturday, March 24 from 8 a.m.**



**Friends of Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve, Inc.**

P.O. Box 26523, San Diego, CA 92196  
858-484-3219 www.penasquitos.org

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**Check Your Label** →

Take a moment to examine the address label on this newsletter. Check to see if your expiration date has come and gone. If so, please take the time now to send in a renewal check for your membership dues. This will enable you to keep receiving our newsletter, recognized as one of the best conservation newsletters in San Diego. That way you'll keep learning about the family walks; the plants and animals that inhabit the Preserve, and the many conservation projects open to you and your family or friends.

**Friends' Directory**

**Officers**

President: Brian Swanson 760.739-5451  
Vice President: Don Albright 619.443-5937  
Treasurer: Pat Watkins 858.538-2527  
Secretary: Rick Botta 858.672-0584

**Other Members of the Board of Directors**

Edward DiBella, Ann Harvey, Mike Kelly

**Walk Leaders**

Brian Swanson, Don Albright, Will Bowen,  
Mike Kelly, Pat Watkins, Linda King, and  
Barbara Moore

**Committees**

Hike Scheduler: Gaye Dingeman  
Newsletter: Carol Cooper  
Tracking Team Coordinator: Rick Botta,  
858.672-0584  
Conservation Chair: Mike Kelly,  
858.566-6489  
Webmaster: Beth Williams  
Wildlife Surveys: Patrick Campbell,  
760.471-9197

**Membership Application**

Membership category? Circle below:

Senior (62) or Student \$10 Individual \$15  
Family \$20 Sponsor \$30 Patron \$100  
Corporate \$250 Life \$1000  
Contribution \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I / We are interested in the following:

- Volunteer** to help the committee (call to discuss)
- Hikes
- Indian Culture
- Educational Workshops
- School, Family, Youth Programs
- Environment (Plants, birds, mammals, geology)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City State Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to:

Friends of Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve, Inc.  
P.O. Box 26523, San Diego, CA 92196

Thank you for your support! Your donation is tax deductible.  
Call 858.484.3219 or 858.566.6489 for more information.