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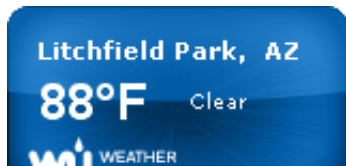
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EMCC relocates burrowing owls into their new homes

Submitted by Jeannette Cruz on Tue, 03/17/2015 - 12:00am



BURROWING OWL COORDINATOR GREG CLARK releases a burrowing owl March 9 at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale. Clark works for Wild at Heart, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation and preservation of Arizona's native birds of prey.

It's been almost two years since Estrella Mountain Community College created a new home for a couple of burrowing owls found during pre-construction of the school's Performing Arts Center. Now that the couple have successfully adapted to their artificial home, they welcomed two new owl families of six into their territory Monday afternoon.

EMCC students from Biology classes and the Sustainability Club joined by faculty and staff, gathered at a drainage area north of the PAC building at the Avondale campus to build two large tents over two burrows.

The students built the tents with piping and once the foundation was completed,

they draped a black cape over it. Dirt and heavy rocks were placed around the tents to prevent the owls from getting out and to prevent any potential predators from entering.

Once the tents were secured, two families of burrowing owls were released into their new home by experts of Wild at Heart, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and preservation of Arizona's native birds of prey.

One by one, the burrowing owls were placed inside the tent by Greg Clark, the burrowing owl habitat coordinator at Wild at Heart.

“Inside our perches there are eight burrows, free food everyday, an ice machine, Animal Planet – all the things you would want as an owl,” he said.

The burrowing owls are accepting of other owls as long as there is enough food, Clark said.

“They're very buffle owls, they have communication about predators, and also about whose girlfriend is whose. Overall, that keeps them safer,” he said.

The sex of the owls were not able to be fully determined. Of the known genders, four were females and three were males. The others were unknown.

“Sometimes you can't tell,” Clark said.

The tents will sit there for 30 days before they are taken down so that the owls can adapt to their new home and potentially stay.

“I knew about the owls but I never knew what they were or that they could actually live underground. I always thought they lived in trees,” Kevin Edwards, a biology student at EMCC, said.

Although the project at EMCC is fairly new, the relocation of burrowing owls is not. Wild at Heart has installed about 5,000 artificial burrows in Arizona and has relocated a little over 1,500 burrowing owls, according to Clark.

“Wild at Heart has an aviary with hundreds of owls who need housing,” Rachel Smith, who teaches environmental biology at EMCC said. “That's what Estrella is doing. We are building homes for these owls.”

Burrowing owls are unique because they are ground-dwelling species and small in height, about 10 inches with long, thin legs. They burrow nests as long as 10 feet.

Because the community college did not have a permit, it partnered with Wild at Heart to built an underground trench about six-to-eight-feet deep where the owls could nest. The artificial habitats contain eight buckets that are placed upside down and linked together so that the owls can transfer from one bucket to

another.

Smith said the drainage area is a good location for the habitats because it is land will never get built on.

“Wild at heart won't come to do burrows unless they can be sure they're not going to get dug up in ten years. These things last from 40 to 60 years,” she said.

“It's good for them here,” Smith said. “They hunt from perches like this, not from high up, and they do long flights when they catch insects so they need large open areas without walls and trees.”

Smith said she hopes the owls stay there forever, with the exception that they migrate to Mexico during the winter.

“Long-term support of the owls is really, really important to long-term stability,” Clark said. “Over time we should have more burrows. There's lots of room here.”

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