Group hatches first captive-bred cactus pygmy owls

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A nonprofit group that rescues birds of prey in Arizona has hatched four cactus ferruginous pygmy owls, the first ones bred in captivity, a researcher for the Arizona Game & Fish Department said.

"We have four chicks so far with the possibility of more," said Ray Schweinsburg, a Game & Fish research supervisor involved in the pilot project.

The chicks - the offspring of two breeding pairs kept at Wild at Heart in Cave Creek - are doing well, and other eggs at the sanctuary could also hatch, Schweinsburg said.

Though the new owls will remain in captivity, the long-term goal is to replenish the dwindling population of the birds in the Sonoran desert, said sanctuary director Bob Fox.

"The plan will be to get the birds released to the wild at some point," said Fox, who cares for about 150 owls and hawks at Wild at Heart.

The 7-inch-tall owl rose to Tucson's awareness in the late 1990s, when a local environmental group petitioned to have it put on the endangered species list. The bird was listed as endangered in 1997, then removed from the list in 2006.

In 1997, the Center for Biological Diversity sued Amphitheater Public Schools to block a high school planned in the owl's habitat. The school was eventually built.

Last year, the center petitioned the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to relist the owl, claiming new scientific reports showed the listing of the Arizona population is warranted. Late last month, Fish & Wildlife announced it will re-examine the owl's need for protection.

Noah Greenwald, a biologist for the center and lead author of the petition to relist the pygmy owl, was cautiously supportive. The center does not oppose captive breeding, but it should not be the sole solution, Greenwald said.

"One thing that's key to this is that you've got to have habitat for them to be released into. The best hope is in protecting the population in the wild," he said.

That is among the ultimate goals of the breeding program, Schweinsburg said.

"If we can learn to propagate the animal, we can probably learn to restore it," he said.

The parent owls were captured as juveniles in spring 2006. They produced eggs last year, Fox said, but those eggs did not hatch.