

# The Disappearing Owl

By Saraiya Ruano

"Do you want to see Burrowing Owls today?" were the docent's first words as I approached her. I was part of a volunteer program at Fountain Creek. My job was to count the birds in two areas, one where some Russian Olives had been cut, to compare them. Rise was the docent who guided me, helped me, or however you want to put it. On this particular day, June 30, I had the blues. At 11:30 that morning my dog had been put to sleep. The last time I had seen Tia (my Doberman) was early that morning. However, I realized that she had much pain in her back legs and I was so glad she was not suffering anymore. Anyway, I jumped at Rise's words. Of course I wanted to see Burrowing Owls; I had never seen them before! In fact, the only reason I knew about them in the first place was because I had read a fiction book called Hoot about them in the eighth grade. I knew they were endangered, small, nested in burrows, and were very special.

So I got in her car that morning and we birded area 7, where the river had flooded a little bit over the trail. I remember laughing at the items the flood had brought in: deodorant, shoes, a Leggos toy, and much more. I spotted numerous robins and House Wrens, heard the yellowthroat singing explosively, and on the way back picked up a beautiful male Blue Grosbeak with my binoculars. I was so excited to finish area 7, not because it was bad birding but because on the way to area 4 was when we'd stop to see the owls.

They were not in the Fountain Creek Nature Center vicinity but they weren't far away either. It was only a ten minute drive on a straight road surrounded by short-grass prairie. It was entertaining hearing Rise talk to the other cars as if they could hear her. She was slightly aggravated when a white truck pulled up and followed her tail until she pulled over. At first I thought she had pulled over to let the white truck by. Then, she pulled out her binoculars and started scanning an open area to the right. The land was pockmarked with prairie

dog holes with little fat prairie dogs standing at the entrance. I imitated her, pulling out my binoculars and anxiously scanning the prairie.

"Well, I don't see...there!" she shouted.

I jumped as she got out of the car, pulling her scope out from the back. She set up the tripod and positioned the scope on the birds. The whole time I was jumping up and down like my sister's dog, Dutchess a wiry and energetic Jack Russell Terrier. Once the lens was focused, I practically glued my eye to the scope. I could see it! The owl was small, no bigger than a soda can, standing on long stilt-like legs. Her eyebrows were white and fluffy, pulled down in an angry stare. She swiveled her round head backward then swiveled it back. She lifted her yellow leg to scratch her neck then stretched her spotted wings and gave a little yawn. I must have stared at her for a good ten minutes before I saw her mate, who was much lighter, standing over a prairie dog burrow not far from where she stood. They were so small and funny.

At the time I knew little about them, but after some research I realized how very special a sitting that was. Burrowing Owls, *Athene Cunicularia*, are 9 to 11 inches in length with a wingspan of 20 to 24 inches. They weigh in at a light 5 or 6 ounces. Other names for the owl include Ground Owl, Prairie Dog Owl, Rattlesnake Owl, Tunnel Owl, and Cuckoo Owl. Burrowing owls are crepuscular or active mostly at dawn and dusk. Unlike their bigger tree-loving brothers, they are often active in the day and prefer the ground. As their name suggests, they live and nest in burrows. Although they are capable of digging their own they prefer abandoned burrows from prairie dogs, badgers, armadillos, and other burrowing creatures. They can co-exist with cattle, occasionally using the cattle dung to line their burrows. Their calls include a rasp, chatter, chuck, scream, and a two-syllable "who-who" from the male. They eat insects, small mammals and birds, toads, and dead animals. In just one summer they can consume 1,500 mice and 10,000 insects! When threatened the young give a call that mimics the sound of a rattlesnake, scaring the predator away.

As sad as it is, the Burrowing Owl is also in trouble. They are either listed as endangered, threatened, or as a species of special concern. This is due to

human-caused habitat loss from cultivation and/or development. Sometimes they are killed accidentally by pesticides meant for insects or from the extermination of the prairie dog burrows. In Canadian prairie provinces alone the population has dropped by more than half in the last ten years. They are just about gone in North Dakota and western Montana. Although they have adapted to golf courses, airports, cemeteries, industrial parks, and vacant lots, they are obviously still in trouble. Surprisingly, the Endangered Species Act does not protect them because they are listed as a "candidate". On a much happier note, they do receive legal protection from the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which forbids the destruction of these little owls and active nests. Also, over 700 landowners effected by these little raptors have actually volunteered to keep the land for the owls rather than tear it up and convert it into crops.

I love the Burrowing Owl. It ranks up there with some of my favorite birds but it might not be in this world much longer unless people start paying attention. I yearn for the day when we will wake up and realize what is happening not only to the Burrowing Owls but also the other endangered species that bless this Earth with their footsteps. Close to my own house they are ripping up several areas of foothills. I just want to cry when I think of all the mice who lost a home, all the snakes who got squashed by bulldozers, all the birds who lost a favorite perch or even a nest, and all the plants uprooted from their soil. If humankind is to continue their life on planet Earth then they must learn to co-exist with their brothers, sisters, and animal friends first. Until then, I wait for the next day I see that little, round swiveling head.

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