

# Pellet Post



## Baby boom!



By Lauren Meads

2011 has been a banner year for the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society's Reintroduction Programme. Not only has this year seen the largest number of owls produced in the field, but the programme continues to expand in many positive ways.

The first piece of exciting news was the continued increase in the number of returns to BC. The first owl to return this season arrived at the new release site in the South Okanagan.

Soon after, more owls returned with six sighted at Lac Du Bois and twelve in other parts of the Nicola-Thompson area. In total 19 owls returned from their long hard migration.

More great news is that even though only 89 Burrowing Owls were released in the programme this year, those owls along with the returns produced 39 nests filled with 259 offspring, the most offspring produced in the field since the start of the programme!

With such great accomplishments in the field a great thank you must go to the field team and volunteers who made this possible.

Thanks must go also to the breeding facility volunteers and staff in Kamloops and Port Kells who raised great owls this year that produced such a large number of offspring.

And there is more great news. The society is preparing to expand its operations in the South Okanagan. The goal is continue the growth of the programme by offering more burrows in the owls' historical habitats.

New Burrowing Owl release sites have been explored and by the spring of next year some of those sites should be secured and burrows installed.

### Birds by the numbers

Returns by site	2011	2010
Elkink	1	n/a
Lac du Bois	6	
Nicola/Thompson	12	
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>23</b>

  

Releases and hatches	2011	2010
Owls released	89	99
Nests	39	24
Juveniles produced	259	168
Average juveniles per nest	6.6	7.0

One of this year's 259 wild-born juveniles poses for the camera. — Ania Radziszewski photo



# New home on the range?

By Mike Mackintosh

The Mission of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society is to try to re-establish self sustaining populations of owls in areas of BC where they have historically lived.

This is a tall order, especially since many of these places are now no longer suitable. The world is a very different place from when the historical records were first entered, dating back to the early 1900's.

The core of our work continues to be in the Nicola Valley. These sprawling ranchlands are some of the most open and suitable habitats for the owls anywhere in the province.

Thanks to the many ranchers and landowners our successes with the owls have grown with each year. But we also need to grow. If our dream of seeing the birds return in sufficient numbers is to be realized, then more places will be needed. There are other areas in the Interior that the owls may go, particularly to the south.

Starting in 2009, a small group of burrowing owl directors and volunteers began searching out new sites for the birds in the south Okanagan. After investigation, the first network of burrows was established on a private ranch that fall.

Success came quickly. In only the second year, 3 pairs of owls settled in, producing 18 banded young — and all this from a network of 24 burrows in one tiny spot near the Canada-US border!

Buoyed by this success, (and with a new breeding facility now completed and active near Oliver), we are now looking actively for



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Dawn Brodie, Mike Mackintosh, Mollie and Lauren Meads explore a possible release site in the East Chopaka area of the South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area. — BOCSSBC photo



Jim Wyse (LEFT) and Lauren Meads (RIGHT) discuss the possible release of Burrowing Owls on Osoyoos Indian Band land with Conservation Technician, Ron Hall (CENTRE). — BOCSSBC photo

new places in the south Okanagan.

In mid September a small group of Burrowing Owl Conservation Society directors and volunteers met in Osoyoos. The purpose? Look for new sites where our Burrowing Owls could be released — places with good habitat and an abundant food supply.

South Okanagan coordinator Lauren Meads had previously made arrangements to examine four

different lands for potential opportunities. Field Director Dawn Brodie, volunteer Nick Murphy and I headed out to survey parklands near the border. Over the next two days we examined and roughly assessed the locations to see if they would be suitable for owl occupation.

What makes a good owl subdivision? Many things.

Is there evidence of rodents, is there adequate moisture?

How tall is the grass? Are there trees nearby where other birds of prey may ambush them?

In total, four locations were surveyed. Each is administered differently. One is within BC Parks, one a property of the Nature Trust, another is held by a private rancher and one owned by the Osoyoos Indian Band (OIB). All these locations appeared very suitable, especially the OIB land which was large and sits at a lower elevation (which is important).

Our next step is to submit proposals to those owners to gain permission for the use of their land. Lauren and Mike are currently finalizing the requests. If all goes well, we may try to dig a set of burrows at one of these locations before the snow flies.

We came away feeling very encouraged that future burrowing nesting sites are just around the corner.



White Lake Basin Ranch is a biodiversity ranch owned by The Nature Trust of British Columbia. — BOCSSBC photo

## Field Photos



Clutch of eleven. — Dawn Brodie photo



A month old Burrowing Owl gets its bands in the Nicola Valley. — Dawn Brodie photo



Burrowing Owl chicks only one or two days old. — Dawn Brodie photo



(LEFT TO RIGHT) Bob McKay, Donna Heard and Charles and Judy Gurr with a handful of the juveniles hatched this season at the release site at Elkink Ranch. — Lauren Meads photo



Burrowing Owl on the wing in the South Okanagan. — Lauren Meads photo



An adult owl perches atop a rock near its burrow. — Ania Radziszewski photo



## Hats off to the ranchers

The society's re-introduction programme would not be possible if not for the participation of the landowners in the Nicola Valley and South Okanagan who generously allow the Burrowing Owls to be released on

their property.

Hats off to the kind folks at Deleeuw Ranch, Houghton Ranch, Guichon Ranch, Chutter Ranch, Frolek Cattle Co., Quilchena Cattle Co., Shannon Ranch and Elkink Ranch.



# A range of plant life

Field Director, Dawn Brodie takes a close look at some of the flora found on the Nicola Valley grasslands.

## BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*)

Once very common on the low-elevation grasslands of BC this grass is under threat from over-grazing, development and recreation activities. As the name suggests it grows in dense clumps and has a slightly blue tinge. Bunchgrass is very susceptible to disturbance and a single vehicle driving on grasslands can leave visible tracks for decades. Bunchgrass provides valuable forage for wildlife and livestock and its loss results in an increase of invasive and introduced plant species. The First Nations people used bunchgrass as a medicinal treatment for arthritis.



— Dawn Brodie photo

— Wikimedia



— Franz Xaver, Wikimedia

— Kispál Zoltán, Wikimedia

## CRESTED WHEATGRASS (*Agropyron cristatum*)

This grass was introduced from Russia during the 1930's to help preserve the thousands of acres of prairie farmland. It is very drought tolerant and exhibits early spring growth. Crested wheatgrass is now very abundant and a dominant grassland species that thrives in the Interior of BC.



— Dawn Brodie photo



— Matthew P. Del Buono, Wikimedia

## ARROWLEAF BALSAMROOT (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*)

The bright splash of colour seen in the hills of the Interior of BC is the arrowleaf balsamroot (a member of the Sunflower family) in bloom. All parts of this plant are edible.

### VOLUNTEER PROFILE:

# Paula Pick

Paula Pick comes from a family of naturalists. Her parents were keen birders and conservationists. Paula says, "A love of wildlife and wild lands is such a gift to give your kids."

"My first job was with Pollution Probe in Toronto. My sister is a professor of biology at the University of Ottawa."

Before Paula moved to the Nicola Valley, she lived on a wetland property in Ontario where she became very interested in the multitude of frogs, toads, snakes, turtles, birdlife and insects that the ponds attracted.

For over 10 years, she did frog and toad counts every night in the spring and summer for Environment Canada from her deck. "It was a small way to contribute to the science. I learnt so much by focusing."

**Q**How did you become a volunteer for the Burrowing Owl Society?

**A**"I was visiting Donna Frolek and noticed she had a metal Burrowing Owl sign at the entrance to her property. As she explained that her family had some artificial burrows on their properties, she must have realized my instant interest and said, 'You must meet Dawn Brodie.' A week or so later at the Knutsford Fair, she pulled me over to introduce me to Dawn.

Listening to and seeing Dawn's enthusiasm was contagious. I was hooked. I attended a meeting in Merritt and met Pilot.

At first, I began participating



BOCSBC volunteer, Paula Pick's first face-to-face encounter with a burrowing owl was this meeting with Pilot, one of the society's education owls in October 2009. — Lauren Meads photo



A pair of Burrowing owl chicks Paula fostered in her bathroom for four days. — Paula Pick photo

with the large groups digging burrows. Often the conditions are less than ideal but what a band of spirited owl lovers!

The last 2 years I have felt so privileged to go out with Dawn, Lauren and Ania to check, count, weigh, feed and band the owls and clean out their burrows. At my home, we even fostered a couple of babies over 4 days in my bathroom. What a responsibility!

And when I found out how expensive the mice are that are fed to the captive owls, I

started keeping and freezing the mice we trapped in our house and the voles and moles the cats brought home instead of leaving them out for the ravens, to give to Dawn. I've even got another Nicola valley family freezing mice from their traps. Much tastier than day-old chicks!

I find it amazing that so much good work goes on such a shoestring budget with great staff and volunteers."

**Q**Why do you think the Burrowing Owl is an in-

teresting animal to work with/for?

**A**"The Burrowing Owl is a perfect species to illustrate the vital importance of protecting grassland habitat. I love our native grasslands and am interested in birding. And the burrowing owl is so cute. I know that's not very scientific but the little owl does have a lot of appeal and personality. I am also intrigued that it lives in the ground unlike other owls. There's so much more to learn about them."

## New digs for Rocky and Pilot

BOCSBC staff

BOCSBC Field Director, Dawn Brodie, is moving house. That means that education owls Rocky and Pilot have lost their well appointed home in Knutsford. While the pair wait for a new permanent home they have temporarily taken up residence in a pen at the Oliver breeding facility.

Rocky (RIGHT) and Pilot (FAR RIGHT) in their temporary Oliver home. — BOCSBC photo





**L.O.T.H.**  
 ■ **Pronunciation:** /lɒθ/  
 (rhymes with moth)  
 ■ **Definition:** acronym for Last Of The Hatch  
 ■ A neologism courtesy of Jim Wyse (instigated by Elaine Humphrey). Given T.L.C., a L.O.T.H. will grow to be as large as it's siblings while a runt will not.

# L.O.T.H. in transition

By Nick Murphy

On May 28, during a regular Saturday housekeeping visit to the BOCSSBC site in Port Kells I uncovered a L.O.T.H.

When I say 'uncovered' I mean that the poor L.O.T.H. was literally covered in a pile of five much larger siblings.

After cleaning the burrow, I returned the five bullying brothers and sisters to their accommodations but kept the bedraggled L.O.T.H. under a towel, in my bucket.

I showed the little owl to co-cleaner and Membership Director, Rosemarie Tirshman, who suggested I ask for Monika's expert advice.

The BOCSSBC Port Kells facility is situated on the property belonging to Frank and Monika Tolksdorf where she runs Monika's Wildlife Shelter.

Monika agreed that the little L.O.T.H. looked like it needed some assistance so it was transferred to her clinic.

It took up residence in a small acrylic box where it was nurtured on a diet of chopped mice (minus tails and some of the fur).

The L.O.T.H. was eating as many as six mice each day, and at the end of the first week of care was much fitter, so fit that it was able to climb out of its box and had to be

transferred to a taller one.

By the end of the second week the L.O.T.H. was able to escape its taller box and was moved to a cage in the clinic. Monika claims, "He knew that I was his temporary mum because he called out as soon as he saw me."

After three weeks the owl was attempting to fly and its diet was changed to whole mice. "He wasn't happy about that," according to Monika, "He liked mealworms and chopped up mice."

For the last week of its care the little owl had a cage mate. One of its siblings was brought in from the breeding pen to get it reacquainted with owls.

**May 28th:** During housekeeping at the Port Kells facility the L.O.T.H. (LEFT) is uncovered under the feet of it's more developed siblings (ABOVE).



'Temporary mum', Monika.

In the fourth week of June, both birds were released into their breeding pen.

"He never imprinted on humans since his eyes were open when he was brought in," says Monika. "He was tame for a while but has reverted to the wild."

It took some time to locate the L.O.T.H. after the breeding pens were opened and the owls were free to mingle. I finally spotted the identifying green band on September 24.

The little owl seems to match the other juveniles in size and, happily, is just as uncomfortable with people as they are, showing no sign of being domesticated.



**June 4th:** After only a week in Monika's care our little L.O.T.H. is looking much improved.



**June 11th:** Two weeks into it's recovery programme and the L.O.T.H. is standing tall.



**June 18th:** After three weeks of care the L.O.T.H. is looking fit as a fiddle.



**June 25th:** Sporting a temporary green band, the L.O.T.H. is returned to the breeding pen.



**Sept. 24th:** The L.O.T.H. is holding it's own in the general owl population. — Nick Murphy photos



# BurrowBriefs

## Coo-cooo means courtship

By Dawn Brodie

Burrowing Owls produce a range of vocalizations.

The 'coo-cooo' made by the male to attract a female and during courtship can be heard a long distance across the grasslands. The female's 'rasp' encourages the male to forage. Both male and female use over 12 calls of 'eeps', 'smack', 'hiss' and 'warble' during breeding and nest defense. The very convincing 'rattlesnake rasp' is given by juveniles and adult females during time of severe stress.



✦ **LISTEN ON THE WEB**  
[www.burrowingowlbc.org/burrowing\\_owl\\_basics\\_vocalization.htm](http://www.burrowingowlbc.org/burrowing_owl_basics_vocalization.htm)

## Hoo knew?

The first written record of Burrowing Owls was made in 1782 by Abbate Giovanni Iganzio Molina (June 24, 1740 — September 12, 1829), a Chilean Jesuit priest who was also a professor of natural sciences.



Abbate Molina — Wikipedia image

— SOURCES: owlpages.com; wikipedia.com



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## Teach us pet

On September 19, 2011, this new education owl made it's debut at the Kamloops office of Golder Associates during a presentation by Dawn Brodie and Ania Radziszewski. Later this month this Burrowing Owl moved to Edmonton. — Ania Radziszewski photo



## GIVE A HOOT!

If you would like to contribute to the Pellet Post, please contact Lauren Meads (lmeads81@gmail.com) or Nick Murphy (nickmurphy@shaw.ca)

# Owls return to Umatilla

Samantha Tipler of *The East Oregonian* reports that Burrowing Owls are making a comeback at the Umatilla Chemical Depot. In 2008, there were only three or four pairs of owls at the depot, this year, there are 61 pairs. About 35 percent of those pairs are birds that were banded there — meaning they're native — and 65 percent came from somewhere else.

✦ **READ MORE ON THE WEB**  
[www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/09/12/1637928/burrowing-owls-make-return-in.html](http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/09/12/1637928/burrowing-owls-make-return-in.html)



## With a little help from their friends

The San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research has released more than 350 squirrels to the wild as part of a plan to improve the numbers and habitat of the Burrowing Owl.

Releasing California ground squirrels is helpful to the owls in a number of unique ways. Each squirrel will burrow its own area, which when vacated serve as homes to Burrowing Owls.

✦ **READ MORE ON THE WEB**  
[www.sandiego.com/articles/2011-08-29/san-diego-zoo-conservation-project-uses-squirrels-help-owls](http://www.sandiego.com/articles/2011-08-29/san-diego-zoo-conservation-project-uses-squirrels-help-owls)



California ground squirrel — Wikimedia





# Raven rescue

By Dawn Brodie

Ania and Dawn were monitoring owl nests checking for egg laying and food caches. We didn't expect to find a live raven inside.

The raven was dehydrated, weak and covered in dirt and mud. Treatment consisted of electrolytes, cleaning, nutritional support and rest.

It was successfully released the following day. Ravens often follow us as we walk burrow to burrow. They are looking for easy food (chicks). That is why the owl food is placed far up the burrow entrance as possible. This feeding practice discourages ravens and other predators but the odd raven attempts to walk up the pipe to the nest chamber then is unable to retreat.



(TOP LEFT) Raven spied in burrow. (TOP RIGHT) The raven is successfully removed from burrow. (ABOVE) Dawn Brodie examines the condition of the distressed raven. — Ania Radziszewski photos

## Meet the BOCSSBC board of directors

Here is the list of Directors and their roles. If you want to volunteer more please contact the appropriate director.

- **Mike Mackintosh**, Vancouver, BC, Chair of the Board and Public Relations and Media Director  
*groundowl@yahoo.ca*
- **Jim Wyse**, Oliver, BC, Finance and Fundraising Director, *jwyse@burrowingowlwine.ca*
- **Dawn Brodie**, Kamloops, BC, Field Director  
*dawnbrodie@telus.net*
- **Paul Williams**, Kamloops, BC, Captive Director  
*paulwilliams@bczoo.org*
- **Aimee Mitchell**, Vancouver, BC, Science Director  
*athene.aimee@gmail.com*
- **Elaine Humphrey**, Victoria, BC, Education Director  
*ech@uvic.ca*
- **Rosemarie Tirshman**, Vancouver, BC, Volunteer and Membership Director
- **Dave Low**, Kamloops, BC, Director of Lac Du Bois  
*helga-dave@shaw.ca*

### How YOU can support the Burrowing Owl Reintroduction Program

The Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC thanks you for your support and welcomes ANY donation amount.



CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF BC  
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[bocsbc@gmail.com](mailto:bocsbc@gmail.com)



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- Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk
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- Wildlife Preservation Canada – Elaine Williams
- Canadian Wildlife Service of Alberta
- Special acknowledgment to Toni Hess, for her continued commitment and support of the program for over 6 years
- Mike and Maureen Lipkewich
- Private Donations