

# Pellet Post



## Digging burrows – dusty work for a good cause



Patrick and Ben, the Brouwer boys with mom Tanya put their backs into it for the Burrowing Owls. — Dianne Bersea

Volunteers make short work of new burrow installation in Nature Conservancy Grasslands

**By Dianne Bersea**  
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“Awesome! Totally awesome!” This exclamation is accompanied by great big grins from the energetic Brouwer boys, Ben, aged 15, and Patrick, aged 12. Their mom suggests that it didn’t take much to get her sons out on this spectacular day. “Our family loves nature and conservation. It’s who we are!”

Who knew that digging burrows for our only ground-dwelling owl could generate

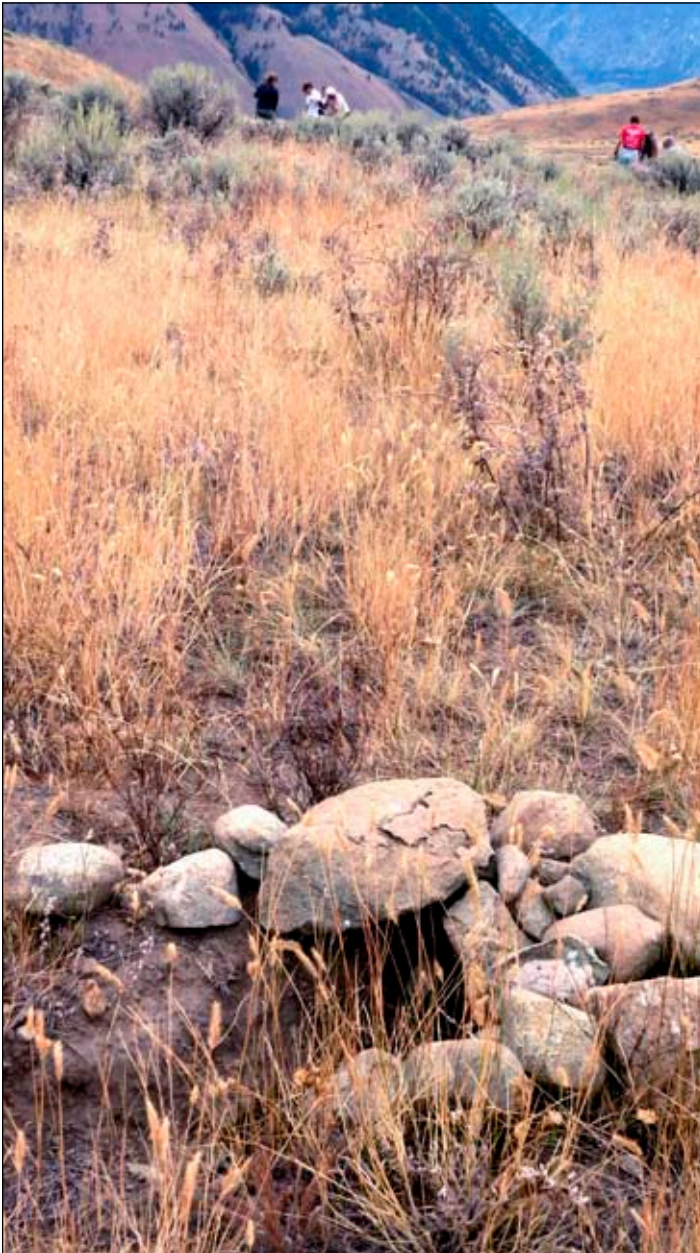
such enthusiasm? Typical of the day, everyone flashes big smiles as I catch a photo record. Each person had responded to a call-out from the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society or the Nature Conservancy of Canada. They put on their work gloves and dug in.

The task was to dig twelve new burrows to offer additional options for future Burrowing Owl releases and returning migrants. This involved some hefty work; excavate a hole deep and wide

enough to install the bin and bucket burrow assembly, attach the burrow entrance with twelve feet of 8” drain pipe, back-fill, disguise the burrow entrance with artfully placed large rocks for security and owl perches, and restore the disturbed area with a scatter of native grass seed.

Unfazed by the tough grasses and the dusty, rocky soil, an amazing twenty-five volunteers canted their shov-

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This existing burrow has been damaged by a bear. In the background, volunteers create new burrows. — Dianne Bersea



Tyler Brightman and Kristen Mancuso give Stephanie Winton room to break up a big rock at a new burrow site. — Dianne Bersea



Recent Toronto environmental science grads, Isabel Wirz, Leanne McDonald and Scott Tuck, jumped at the chance to join the dig and learn about Burrowing Owls. — Dianne Bersea



Against the dusty backdrop of the South Okanagan grasslands, a team of builders puts finishing touches on a burrow. — Dianne Bersea

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els and swung pick-axes on that glorious Saturday in early September. Transported to the unique Nature Conservancy Grasslands of the South Okanagan we reveled in the work. Within a remarkable four hours all the burrows had been roughed out and most taken to completion. A job well done!

Days before the physical on-site work even began, Burrowing Owl Conservation Society site Manager, Lauren Meads, and Field Biologist Lea McKinnon sourced and

assembled the burrow components.

At their construction area at the Oliver Burrowing Owl breeding facility, towering piles of large black plastic planter pots, soon to be burrows, and an equal number of similar smaller pots for the burrow viewing ports dominated the scene. Add in silicon caulk, a selection of drills, a saber saw, a whopper wide-diameter drill attachment, extension cords, toolboxes and the ever-present water bottles, all at the ready to put the pieces together.

The viewing port pot had



Volunteers Peter Maser and Sherry Linn demonstrate good burrow building form. — Dianne Bersea



Returned migrant keeps an eye on the burrow-building volunteers. — Dianne Bersea



Volunteers Elizabeth & Tom Landecker enjoy a picturesque Burrowing Owl lunch break. — Dianne Bersea

been up-ended and cemented over a hole cut in the bottom of the large pot. In the field the burrow pipe would be added to a hole cut in the bottom rim.

This fall, Lauren is planning larger burrows, hence bigger pots, following on experiments with larger burrows at US Burrowing Owl projects. It's all part of an ongoing effort to support and encourage owl survival and successful migration.

The larger burrow bins and viewing ports add an extra twelve inches to the diameter of the on-site excavation and an extra six inches more verti-

cal depth.

Despite the added earth moving required, at the actual dig site everyone is up for the challenge. After instructions and precautions, "Watch out for rattlers and black widow spiders!" the crew shouldered digging implements and headed out to the designated new burrow locations.

Keeping an eye on my feet in the rough grass, I'm also scanning the sagebrush slopes, the thickets of fall-turning aspens in the draws and the blue hills beyond.



A returned migrant Burrowing Owl watches the new burrow-building action from a secure distance. — Dianne Bersea

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A Burrowing Owl scans its territory from a typical burrow installation. — Lauren Meads



There's no easy way to carry burrow pipe but volunteer Robin Digby has a good idea. — Dianne Bersea



Surrounded by construction materials, Field Biologist Lia McKinnon assembles burrows for grassland installation. — Dianne Bersea

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What a glorious day in a magnificent location! That's the word from everyone ... with thumbs up, big grins and remarkably energized digging. They appreciate the excellent company, beautiful landscape and the knowledge they're contributing to the recovery of Burrowing Owls in BC. That's what it's all about.

But it is hard work. There's even some rock breaking required and where that doesn't do the job, acceptance of starting over a few feet fur-

ther away.

Before the day is done, we've all moved a lot of earth and I've helped rough out the channel for a burrow pipe. It feels good to see the physical evidence of a day's work, a rarity in our tech world.

Suddenly there's flurry of activity in front of me. I've accidentally flushed one of the owls from the existing burrows. There's a flash of buff colour against the golden grass. A Burrowing Owl wheels in low flight, lands on a nearby post ... and poses for a photo.

"Awesome!"

# BC Burrowing Owls are all about continued success!

New sites.  
New flight pen.  
New burrows.  
New cameras.

**Dianne Bersea**

Lots of action in the Burrowing Owl world over the summer and fall this year.

The new flight pen at the Oliver breeding facility has been completed. This facilitates the separation of pre-release male and female owls to ensure breeding will only take place in the field.

Pluto, one of the education owls has his own special area in the new pen.

In the field, Burrowing Owls arrived back from migration this year in good numbers with a general upward trend since the program began in 2000. To put that in real numbers, we're talking about fifty returning owls in 2015 with slightly less this year at forty returns.

Owls released this year numbered fifty-three. It's exciting to note that from these owls, one hundred and sixty young wild-born owls were banded. That's a remarkable three owlets produced per owl released, the best results to date.

To assist in identifying wild-born owls from captive bred owls, a new banding technique on returning owls will be implemented next year. In addition, field observations have notably improved with the installation of several wildlife cameras.

New sites! Work with the Upper Nicola Band and the development of a new burrow site in the Merritt area got lots of media attention this year. The first site was dug in the fall of 2015 with three owl pairs released. The positive outcome ... nine wild-born owls and a returning female have been accounted for. Work continues in 2017.

A great relationship has been also established with the Penticton Indian Band Natural Resources Department. A burrow site went in on PIB land this fall, with a planned



Jordan Schellenberg and Jalisa Kruger install a burrow at the Penticton Indian Band site.

— Lauren Meads

## New sites!

Work with the Upper Nicola Band and the development of a new burrow site in the Merritt area got lots of media attention this year. Dawn Brodie has been overseeing this site and works hard with the band to establish owls. The first site was dug in the fall of 2015 with three owl pairs released. The positive outcome ... nine wild-born owls and a returning female have been accounted for. Work continues in 2017



A still from one of the new field cameras. Lots of activity as young wild-born owls begin exploring. — BOCsBC Field Staff

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David Johnson from the US Global Owl program helping band Canadian owls. — Lauren Meads

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release there in 2017. Another site is proposed for next year.

Lauren is pleased. “Both the Upper Nicola and Penticton bands are excited to be working with us.”

The possibility of access to more sites for owl releases is part of the Douglas Lake Ranch custodianship of an existing site in the Nicola Valley. Thanks Douglas Lake Ranch!

Building relationships like this is a big plus for the Burrowing Owl program. That means burrow digs this fall at the Nature Conservancy of Canada’s South Okanagan Sage and Sparrow location, and at another NCC site in the Nicola Valley at Napier Lake, will also add important connectivity. More connectivity among sites is anticipated to boost recovery success.

The burrow count at the NCC Nicola Valley site significantly increased in mid-October when fifty volunteers fanned out to install twenty-two new burrows. These burrows will accommodate owls to be released in 2017.



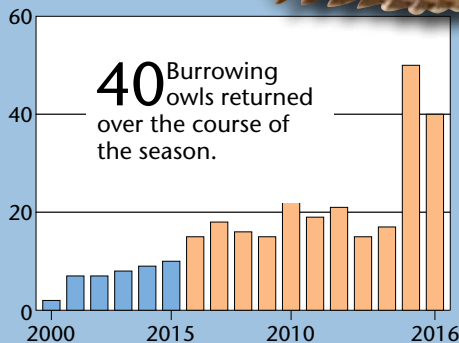
Global Owl crew with our Field Staff at Beresford site in the Nicola Valley. — Lauren Meads



Pluto, the Oliver education owl at home. — Lauren Meads

### 2016 Burrowing Owls by the numbers

**53** Burrowing Owls released from our three breeding facilities.



**160** wild-born owlets banded or an average of **3** owlets hatched for each owl released.



**50** volunteers installed a total of **22** new burrows at the NCC Nicola Valley release site.

It will be interesting to see if the owls prefer the old-style smaller nest chambers or the larger ones that are being introduced at recent burrow digs. A larger nest chamber, rodent-proofed with wire mesh underneath, is being tested at both Nature Conservancy locations.

Cross border owl migration studies equal road trip! Lauren and Field Biologist, Lia McKinnon visited Umatilla, Oregon where burrows have been built for wild owls. They also helped trap, band and monitor these owls for the Global Owl Project that includes GPS monitoring.

Global Owl Project's, David Johnson, also came up to BC to see the work we're doing on Burrowing Owl recovery. It's hoped that this cross border collaboration can help solve the mystery of what happens to the owls on migration.

Biggest thrill from the Umatilla trip? Here's the word from Lauren. "One of our 2014 South Okanagan born owls has been breeding with Umatilla males both in 2015 and 2016. We're so happy about that!"

These positive results suggest a good Burrowing Owl recovery story for 2017!



Enthusiastic volunteer turn-out at October burrow dig at Napier Lake Ranch NCC. — Cliff Lemire



Upper Nicola Band field monitor, Loretta Holmes, with three of the banded Nicola Valley wild-born owls. — BOCSBC Field Staff



Douglas Lake Ranch manager, Joe Gardner, helps band wild-born owls on the ranch burrow site. — Lia McKinnon



Volunteers use inventive techniques to carry burrow pipe to dig site in the Nicola Valley's Napier Lake Ranch NCC area. — Cliff Lemire



Youthful volunteers enjoy burrow installation in the grassland owl habitat, NCC Napier Lake Ranch area. — Cliff Lemire



The crew on a cool day at the Napier Ranch, Nicola Valley NCC site. — Cliff Lemire

# Why Burrowing Owl volunteers give a hoot



The spectacular grasslands of the South Okanagan provide a colourful backdrop for volunteer burrow diggers.  
— Dianne Bersea

By Dianne Bersea

“Why don’t you join me next time I’m feeding the Burrowing Owls?” friend and regular Burrowing Owl Conservation Society volunteer, Doreen Olson, offers a tempting invitation.

A few short days later I’m at the Oliver, BC Burrowing Owl breeding facility surrounded by dozens of undeniably cute, diminutive buff coloured owls with round yellow eyes that watch my every move.

“Here, take these buckets and follow me,” Doreen instructs. In minutes I am down on my knees, bum in the air, checking and cleaning the below-ground burrows. I pull the two buckets along to retrieve and sort remnant meals into what is beyond re-feeding, and what can be added to today’s menu.

During this phase of their new lives, the owls are overfed to assure good health, hence the sometimes rather unpleasant remains.

Despite that, I enjoy being close to the owls, in the fresh air, contributing to this unique wildlife restoration project.

A few weeks later

**Burrowing Owl equivalent of ‘the thousand yard stare’.**

— Dianne Bersea

Doreen asks, “What about joining us for spring clean-up?” This time a dozen of us are raking, weeding, wiping down perches, removing old burrow bedding and topping up with fresh.

The owls peer down at us.

Perhaps they are asking the same question that occurs to me, “Who are these people?”

Indeed who are the people willing to devote time to regu-

lar owl feedings; spring and fall clean up; trapping and recording assistance on pairing up events, and; assisting on field operations that include banding, live releases and even digging artificial burrows?

These are special people who give up a sunny Saturday to dig burrows or spend hours at the breeding pens. These are special people who recognize that many hands are needed to make Burrowing Owl recovery a reality.

As my friend Doreen tells me, “I love having a break from my other environmental work that puts me mostly at a desk at home.” It’s also about the pleasure of getting to know a wild species. “I think I might be getting more out of it than the owls.”

Doreen is also realistic about why there is a Burrowing Owl recovery program. “When there are no mice, there are no



**Volunteer Jodi Forster gets right into her work, digging a burrow in Nature Conservancy grasslands of the South Okanagan.** — Dianne Bersea

badgers. When there are no badgers there are no burrows. It’s simple ... no burrows, no owls. It’s all connected. We are the link that can help restore the owls.”

Other volunteers indicate a similar appreciation for the work and, getting out to do something different. Melodie Domene is keen on what she calls “Me-time in nature.” With a busy work and performance schedule as a dancer and dance teacher, visiting the owls is a restorative break. “I love animals and birds. Not everyone can be so closely involved with these owls so it feels very special to participate.”

For budding biologist Tyler Brightman, it’s a chance to work with live birds in a conservation setting. And he recognizes the benefit of building practical experience and a resume for future university applications.

At fifteen, Tyler is some-



**Volunteers Tyler Brightman and his mom, Tracy Brightman, examine a Burrowing Owl feather during clean-up at the Oliver breeding pens.**

— Dianne Bersea



# How you can get involved with the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC

New volunteers are occasionally needed for burrow cleaning and digging. Once a volunteer demonstrates a good understanding of the work and special care needed around the owls, they can be invited to assist with other tasks like breeding pen clean-up or banding. Burrowing Owl Field Director and South Okanagan Operations Manager, Lauren Meads, directs potential volunteers to the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society website [www.burrowingowlbc.org/](http://www.burrowingowlbc.org/), followed by an e-mail enquiry to [bocsbc@gmail.com](mailto:bocsbc@gmail.com) or [lmeads81@gmail.com](mailto:lmeads81@gmail.com).



thing of an anomaly at the breeding facility. Special permission is required for his contribution. To meet the protective guidelines established by the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society, Tyler must be accompanied by an adult. As Facility Manager, Lauren Meads, says, "We have an age restriction for volunteers at the breeding pens. They must be nineteen or older to avoid any complications for the owls. This is a fragile setting."

Fortunately, Tyler's mom Tracy is also a volunteer and they make their feeding visits together. "We both have busy schedules so feeding the owls once a week gives us guaranteed time together."

Tracy, a vegetarian, values the work even to dispensing the very non-vegetarian owl diet. "I'm not squeamish. That's what the owls eat. To support the owls sometimes we have to do the hard stuff."



**Dedicated volunteer, Corinne Ross, at Oliver area breeding pens.** — Dianne Bersea

Supporting the owl recovery program has taken over Tracy's heart. "I'm a librarian. I believe in active, hands-on, life-long learning. Though I did come into this blind. I had no idea what to expect. But there's been many highlights ... working directly with the owls at hatching time, and banding, feeding, cleaning, helping with the annual Burrowing Owl open house."

Likely another surprise for Tracy is Tyler's involvement in a rattlesnake research project at Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre. "I had to sign a lot of waivers for that one, but it's all part of our family concern for animal welfare."

I find it interesting that there are so many avenues to fulfillment as a volunteer. Three university students I met on the September burrow dig see volunteering as a way to network for future environmental work, either as contractors or in preparation for starting their own business.

As recent Environmental

Engineering graduate, Isabel Wirz told me, "I want to do things." And do things she and her buddies did, excavating new burrows in the Sage and Sparrow NCC grasslands in September.

Burrow construction volunteer and rattlesnake researcher Kristen Mancuso, feels good about improving the chances of Burrowing Owl recovery, but puts meeting people, "seeing new faces interested in nature" as a big plus.

Corinne Ross, a regular feeding volunteer, has a passion for birds and feels most at home working with wildlife; twelve years of service with animals both domestic and wild includes eight years at a South African avian sanctuary. "That's given me a good understanding of what's involved. It's all valuable experience."

For Corinne, volunteering for the Burrowing Owls began



**Volunteer, Melodie Domene, beams with enthusiasm at Nature Conservancy of Canada burrow dig.** — Dianne Bersea

with occasional banding and capturing owls, followed by a move to a feeding schedule. "Every little bit that I do adds up to making a difference. And I'm still good with a net and the mid-air capture!" In July, Corinne added another accomplishment ... she celebrated becoming a Canadian citizen. Congratulations Corinne!

Burrowing Owl Field Biologist and frequent volunteer Lia McKinnon is equally clear. "This is a job I can feel good about. It's a project moving in the right direction." She enjoys handling the new hatches, "We call them 'the kids', and I love seeing them after they've fledged. It feels good to see them flying in the fields."

Like Lia, everyone I spoke to appreciates all the direct experience they can have of this wild bird, especially that rare moment when you can actually hold a Burrowing Owl.



**Communications student and field volunteer, Lauren Sherwood, checks a burrow in preparation for a Burrowing Owl release last spring.**

— Dianne Bersea



**A highlight for volunteer Dianne Bersea ... handling a young Burrowing Owl as it's released into the wild for the first time.**

— Lauren Sherwood

# A letter from our field tech intern

**Charyl Omelchuk**  
**Intern Field Technician**  
**Funding provided by**  
**CICan Clean Tech Internship**  
**Nov.17, 2016**

Working with Burrowing owls started for me in 2013 where I began to volunteer my time helping Dawn Brodie cleaning the burrows and setting up for the release day as well as helping to monitor at Deleeuws. This gave me an understanding of how vulnerable Burrowing Owls are and that I was very interested in learning more and wanting to help.

Dawn offered Tonya, another TRU volunteer, and I the opportunity to monitor a site for the summer in 2013 and 2014 which included the duties of recording owl mortality, supplement feeding of prey items, and observing the pairs going from breeding pairs to nesting pairs. In 2015 Lauren Meads gave me the opportunity to monitor and record data for the Kamloops sites, which helped me to gain experience working on more than one site and to observe different characteristic behaviors exhibited by the different pairs throughout the sites.

This year I was hired as an intern field technician for the Burrowing Owl Society from May 2016 until October 2016. Lauren Meads gave me the opportunity to work on the sites in Kamloops as well as the sites in Merritt with Lia McKinnon.

My duties included; preparing sites for hard and soft-releases, cleaning burrows, setting up cages, releasing owls, monitoring and supplement feeding throughout



**Charyl Omelchuk with a wild-born owl**

the season. Throughout the internship I learned valuable techniques in how to identify band numbers and capture owls using methods taught to us by David Johnson in order to get all bands numbers from breeding pairs at each site.

I learned the value of establishing perch spots at each

burrow and how it can provide owls with an advantage for hunting prey and avoid predation.

Over the few years that I have worked with Lauren she has taught me how to properly band and record measurements on juvenile owls. This is the most interesting time

of the year for me as you get hands on experience taking down data and measurements as well as getting to see first hand how productive each nest was, which can be valuable for future nesting success.

I was also given the opportunity to work with the breeding facility at the BC Wildlife Park, which was very interesting to see the other side of the Burrowing Owl program. Getting first hand experience feeding, cleaning, repairing old burrows, and helping with banding within the breeding facility gives me insight to how the owls are raised and where the breeding pairs come from when it comes to the release each year.

The Napier Lake site is a new Burrowing Owl site that I got to be a part of installing which allowed me to see how burrow spots are selected as well as the hard work and effort that takes to install the burrows.

This internship has allowed me to gain more experience working with Burrowing Owls other than the Kamloops sites and getting to see the difference in nesting pairs across a change in topography from Kamloops to Merritt. Working along side Lauren and Lia as allowed me to learn how to better my field work methods as well as give me confidence in reporting data and other observations from the field.

I would love to continue working with the Burrowing Owl Society in the future and I appreciate all the opportunities I have been given.

Looking forward to doing more work in the future

Sincerely,  
 Charyl Omelchuk

## Hats off to the landowners

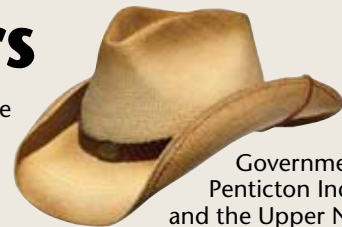
The society's reintroduction program would not be possible if not for the participation of the landowners in the Nicola Valley and South Okanagan who generously allow

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., Elkink Ranch,

Douglas Lake Cattle Company

Hats off to our partners at the Nature Conservancy of Canada, The Provincial



Government, Penticton Indian Band and the Upper Nicola Indian Band (more new partners to come in 2017!!)

# Pluto's working weekend



NatureKids BC's South Okanagan Club learns about Burrowing Owls and dissecting "owl puke" (pellets).

Pluto had a busy weekend at the end of November 2016. On the Friday he visited the Osoyoos Elementary School and had a presentation for the grade 4 class.

Then on the Saturday he participated in the Winter Wine Country celebrations at the

Burrowing Owl Winery.

Finally on Sunday he visited the NatureKids BC's South Okanagan Club. By the end of the weekend he was tired, but had fun visiting and educating the public on Burrowing Owls!



The newsletter of the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC  
[burrowingowlbc.org](http://burrowingowlbc.org)  
[bocsbc@gmail.com](mailto:bocsbc@gmail.com)



Lauren Meads: Executive Editor  
Chief Reporter: Dianne Bersea  
Nick Murphy: Design and layout

## 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.



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Here is the list of Directors and their roles. If you want to volunteer please contact the society at [bocsbc@gmail.com](mailto:bocsbc@gmail.com).

- **Mike Mackintosh**, Vancouver, BC: Chair of the Board and Public Relations and Media Director
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- Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk
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- The TD Environmental Fund
- Canadian Wildlife Service of Alberta
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