

# Pellet Post



## Burrowing owl speed-dating

Pairing Day at the South Okanagan Burrowing owl breeding facility



"What's your sign?" — Dianne Bersea

By Dianne Bersea  
dianne.islandartist@gmail.com

The small round puncture marks in my left hand bleed ever so slightly. A 200 gram Burrowing owl has exercised its powerful grasp on my misplaced hand. Once again I'm learning through direct interaction at the Burrowing owl Conservation Society's Oliver area breeding facility.

As the new newsletter content person, I can't just stand back and take pictures. When I'm asked to help move the small owl from its transfer cage back to its burrow in a

breeding pen I take the bird gingerly from facility Manager, Lauren Meads.

There's a right way and a wrong to do this. As a novice, I fail to grip the bird above its feet. Instead I immediately feel painful pressure as the owl's sharp talons break the skin on my hand. My other hand cradles its upper body gently but firmly while its mobile head swings around to give me the 'I-seriously-don't-like-you' stare.

For several hours I've watched birds be trapped, placed in transfer cages, removed from transfer cages

and positioned for pre-breeding weighing, tarsus and wing measurements, and returned to cages and finally returned to their burrows. Each time someone needs to firmly but gently grip the owls in a way that they can be handled safely for all concerned. I'm glad these captive owls see a lot of us humans and are regularly handled so they know the drill. I'm learning.

Fortunately progress is being made. When an owl escapes within the equipment room, I stand calmly still until the owl is recovered. The other volunteers congratulate

me. "You were so calm, it nearly landed on your hat!"

All this activity is part of Owl Pairing Day. In the course of a few hours the owls are separated into female and male transfer cages, weighed and measured, then twenty owls are selected and paired up in the breeding pens. With a delightful sense of whimsy, Lauren has scheduled this event for Valentine's Day, February 14th.

By April there will be owl hatchlings and by May, the mature birds from last year's

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Facility Manager Lauren Meads and volunteers Elmie Saaltink and Corrine Ross discuss proposed additions to accommodate Education Owl Pluto in the new breeding pen. — Dianne Bersea



Field Technician Lia McKinnon catches an owl using the "plunger technique". — Dianne Bersea

**CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE**

hatch will be ready for their debut as free birds, ready to live and propagate in the wild.

But first all thirty-five owls must be captured. With large white billowing fabric nets on long poles, volunteers scoop the owls from their perches. Or at least they try to. Sometimes the volunteers tire before the birds do. A more reliable

method is to encourage the owls into their underground burrows where they can be reached by hand and popped into the transfer cages.

Once all the birds are captured everyone gathers in the equipment room around a large freezer that doubles as a research table. Lauren sets out a scale, a pair of calipers, a metal ruler and a variety of small tools and clippers for trimming owl talons. Since



Corrine Ross prepares to capture an uncooperative owl. — Dianne Bersea



Facility Manager Lauren Meads confidently reaches for a Burrowing owl to place it in a new breeding pen burrow. — Dianne Bersea

the birds do not have the hard life of a wild owl, the talons continue to grow and need a slight trim occasionally.

A volunteer, Tracy and later Jackie, stand to one side to record data and another volunteer, Tyler, hands the owls, one by one, to Lauren, and returns them to their temporary cages after the scientific information is recorded.

Lauren identifies the bird and sex by its leg band. Then

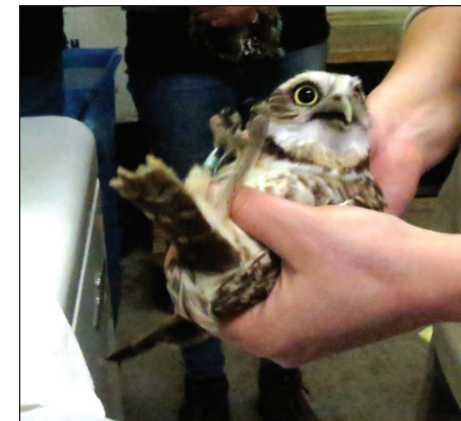
she tucks the owl into the 'burrito,' a square of cotton fabric wrapped gently over the owl's head and body leaving the feet and tail free. As soon as the 'burrito' wrap is applied the owl relaxes and can be placed on the weigh scale. I'm astonished that these owls are so little, weighing in at 120 to 200 grams, that's less than half a pound, the males generally a little heavier than the



Passive Burrowing owl 'burrito' on weigh scale. — Dianne Bersea



Callipers measure Burrowing owl tarsus. — Dianne Bersea



Best practice Burrowing Owl handling. — Dianne Bersea

females. Weight is a good indicator of health, and at these weights the breeding owls are very healthy. In the wild where food prey is more problematic, the owls may weigh quite a bit less.

Unwrapped, Lauren spreads an owl wing and measures it from wrist to wing tip. Then the calipers are used to measure the tarsus, a fused bone that leads from the tibia and fibula to the foot bones and

talons. Final step, a talon trim.

With an owl in hand, Lauren takes advantage of 'teaching moments' responding to questions and offers the volunteers hands-on opportunities. She encourages us to feel the sternum keel. Depending on how sharp it might feel helps determine if the bird is carrying more or less flesh, another determinant in owl health and feed-



Wing span is examined while volunteer records data. — Dianne Bersea

ing protocols. We are also able to examine its beak at close quarters, an anatomical feature to avoid, along with talons, if you want your fingers unblemished.

Another surprise, owls have eyebrows, or at least these Burrowing owls do. And eyebrows differ between female and male owls.

After the scrutiny, the breeding owls are paired up and placed in the breeding

pens. The owls that will be released later this spring are returned to the open pens. This is the moment I find out about the strength of a Burrowing owl. Holding an owl that has taken a powerful grip on my hand I tentatively ask, "Will it let go?" "No problem," is the answer. As I lean toward the burrow, the owl instantly releases my hand and vanishes into its new home.

# Catching up on 2015

Dianne Bersea

You may have noticed that with the remarkable progress of the Burrowing owl Breeding Program, we've been so busy we haven't updated our newsletter recently. Remedy...acquire a newsletter content person to assemble information. That would be me and I'm fascinated by Burrowing owls.

On February 27, 2016, the Burrowing owl Conservation Society Annual General Meeting brought together a good crowd at the Burrowing Owl Estate Winery. Reports were presented, ideas exchanged, new connections made and board members elected. Steve Church is member at large and Cliff Lemire is membership Director.

Overall consensus, 2015 was a very productive year highlighted by the migration return of over fifty owls to the BC breeding sites from wintering grounds in the Southern United States and Mexico.

Big news at the Oliver area breeding facility was the completion of new flight pens for pre-release separation of the sexes with a special area for Pluto, the aspiring education owl. Big thanks to the volunteer construction crew!

The availability of suitable release locations has been enhanced by additional sites provided by the Nature Conservancy.

Photo Ops – Lauren Meads has been experimenting with wildlife cameras at the Oliver location. These special cameras will eventually be placed at release locations to assist with band identification and undisturbed behavior observation. Nighttime motion sensitive cameras will provide improved prey identification and owl movement information.

The successful US cross-border relationship with Burrowing owl programs continues. In particular, a GPS study will hopefully contribute to solving the puzzle of what happens to the owls on migration.

Everyone is looking forward to the official debut of Education Owl Pluto. Regular sighting are anticipated shortly. As mentioned, he will have his own enclosure in the new Oliver flight pen and be more visible there without disturbing the owls in the big enclosure.

## Upcoming big events

■ The 2nd weekend in April, (9 & 10), upcoming release date.

■ May 22, Burrowing owl Field Trip, Meadowlark Nature Festival, meadowlarkfestival.ca



Burrowing owl C/28 contemplates dinner. — Dianne Bersea



Field Technician Lia McKinnon explains burrow construction in breeding pens. — Dianne Bersea



An owl guards its burrow at the BOCSC breeding facility near Oliver. — Dianne Bersea



Facility Manager Lauren Meads takes a break with a crew of volunteers at Fall Clean-up. — Dianne Bersea



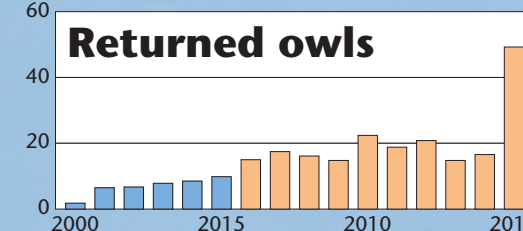
Activity in the equipment room during Fall Clean-up Day. — Dianne Bersea



Volunteer Doreen Olson enjoying Fall Clean-up at the Oliver area breeding facility. — Dianne Bersea

## 2015 Burrowing owls by the numbers

12 release sites currently in use. 400 individual volunteer-made burrows. 50+ Burrowing owls returned over the course of the season.



67 Burrowing owls released from our three breeding facilities.



2.8 owlets hatched for each owl released

# HooKnew?

## Taxonomy of the Burrowing owl

The Burrowing owl is sometimes classified in the monotypic genus *Speotyto*. This is based on an overall different morphology and karyotype. However, osteology and DNA sequence data suggest that the Burrowing owl is a terrestrial member of the *Athene* little owls, and it is today placed in that genus by most authorities.

Many subspecies have been described, but they differ little in appearance and the taxonomy of several need to be validated.

Most subspecies are found in or near the Andes and in the Antilles. Although distinct from each other, the relationship of the Floridian subspecies to (and its distinctness from) the Caribbean birds is unclear. — [Wikipedia](#)

- Kingdom — *Animalia*
- Subkingdom — *Bilateria*
- Infrakingdom — *Deuterostomia*
- Phylum — *Chordata*
- Subphylum — *Vertebrata*
- Infraphylum — *Gnathostomata*
- Superclass — *Tetrapoda*
- Class — *Aves*
- Order — *Strigiformes*
- Family — *Strigidae*
- Subfamily — *Suriniinae*
- Genus — *Athene*
- Species — *Athene cucularia*

- 1** *A. c. hypugaea* (Bonaparte, 1825). Northern (or Western) Burrowing owl. S Canada through Great Plains south to Central America.
- 2** *A. c. floridana* (Ridgway, 1874). Florida Burrowing owl. Florida and Bahamas (Caribbean).
- 3** *A. c. rostrata* (C. H. Townsend, 1890). Revillagigedo Burrowing owl. Isla Clarión, Revillagigedo Islands.
- 4** *A. c. guantanamensis* Garrido, 2001). Cuban Burrowing owl. Cuba and Isla de la Juventud.
- 5** *A. c. troglodytes* (Wetmore & Swales, 1886). Hispaniolan Burrowing owl. Hispaniola, Gonâve Island and Beata Island.

- 6** *A. c. amaaura* (Lawrence, 1878). Antiguan Burrowing owl. Formerly Antigua, Saint Kitts, and Nevis Islands; extinct (c.1905).
- 7** *A. c. guadeloupensis* (Ridgway, 1874). Guadeloupe Burrowing owl. Formerly Guadeloupe and Marie-Galante Islands; extinct (c.1890).
- 8** *A. c. brachyptera* (Richmond, 1896). Margarita Burrowing owl – Isla Margarita.. Might include *apurensis*.
- 9** *A. c. tolimae* (Stone, 1899). West Colombian Burrowing owl – W Colombia.. Might include *carrikeri*.
- 10** *A. c. apurensis* (Gilliard, 1940). Venezuelan Burrowing owl – NW Venezuela.. Doubtfully distinct from *brachyptera*.



— Wikimedia



- 11** *A. c. arubensis* (Cory, 1915). Aruba Burrowing owl. Aruba.
- 12** *A. c. minor* (Cory, 1918). Guyanan Burrowing owl. S Guyana and Roraima region.
- 13** *A. c. carrikeri* (Stone, 1922). East Colombian Burrowing owl. E Colombia.. Doubtfully distinct from *tolimae*.
- 14** *A. c. pichinchae* (Boetticher, 1929). West Ecuadorean Burrowing owl. W Ecuador.
- 15** *A. c. punensis* (Chapman, 1914). Puna Burrowing owl. Altiplano region around Peruvian-Ecuadorian border.. Doubtfully distinct from *juninensis*.
- 16** *A. c. intermedia* (Cory, 1915). West Peruvian Burrowing owl – W Peru.. Doubtfully distinct from *nanodes*.
- 17** *A. c. nanodes* (Berlepsch & Stolzmann, 1892). Southwest Peruvian Burrowing owl. SW Peru. Might include *intermedia*.
- 18** *A. c. juninensis* (Berlepsch & Stolzmann, 1902). South Andean Burrowing owl. Andes from Central Peru to NW Argentina. Might include *punensis*.
- 19** *A. c. grallaria* (Temminck, 1822). Brazilian Burrowing owl. Central and E Brazil.
- 20** *A. c. boliviana* (L. Kelso, 1939). Bolivian Burrowing owl. Bolivian altiplano.
- 21** *A. c. cucularia* (Molina, 1782). Southern Burrowing owl. Lowlands of S Bolivia and S Brazil south to Tierra del Fuego.. Probably includes *partridgei*.
- 22** *A. c. partridgei* (Olrog, 1976). Corrientes Burrowing owl. Corrientes Province, Argentina. Probably not distinct from *cucularia*.

## Hats off to the ranchers

The society's re-introduction 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, Haughton Ranch, Guichon Ranch, Chutter Ranch, Frolek Cattle Co., Elkink Ranch and Douglas Lake Cattle Company.



### 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.



Donate online via PayPal at: [www.burrowingowlbc.org/donate.htm](http://www.burrowingowlbc.org/donate.htm)



Charitable Registration No. 86540 6177 RR0001  
Tax receipts will be issued for all donations.

Donate by credit card: Here is my donation of: \$   Visa  Mastercard

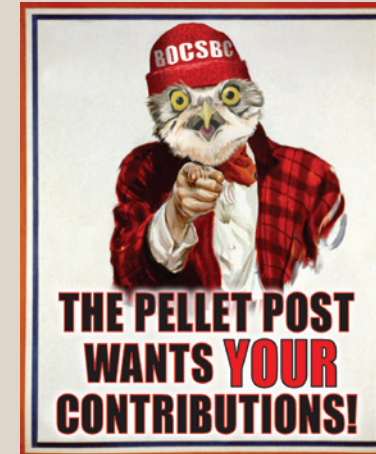
Card number: \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Cardholder signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Donate by cheque: Make your cheque payable to: BURROWING OWL CONSERVATION SOCIETY OF BC  
Mail this form to this address: BOCSSBC, C/O #111 365 EAST 1ST STREET NORTH VANCOUVER BC V7L 4W5

Information for tax receipt Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_



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

## Meet the BOCSSBC board of directors

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
- **Jim Wyse**, Oliver, BC: Finance and Fundraising Director
- **Tara Geiger**, Kamloops, BC: Captive Director
- **Aimee Mitchell**, Vancouver, BC: Science Director
- **Elaine Humphrey**, Victoria, BC: Education Director
- **Cliff Lemire**, Vancouver, BC: Volunteer and Membership Director
- **Dave Low**, Kamloops, BC: Director of Lac Du Bois
- **Jack Madryga**, Merritt, BC: Director at Large
- **John Gray**, Vancouver, BC: Director at Large
- **Rick McKelvey**, Penticton, BC: Director at Large
- **Steve Church**, Burnaby, BC: Director at Large

## Thanks to our sponsors

- Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk
- We acknowledge the financial assistance of the Province of British Columbia through the BC Gaming Grant program
- The Burrowing Owl Winery – Jim Wyse
- 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

# Burrow Briefs

## Rare B.C. Burrowing owl found injured in Chilliwack

CBC News — January 3, 2016

An animal rescue group couldn't save an injured burrowing owl found in Chilliwack but hopes the discovery of one of the rare birds means there are more.

During the last week of 2015, a woman contacted the Orphaned Wildlife Rehabilitation Society (O.W.L) to report she had found an injured bird.

"We were thinking it would be a Northern Saw-whet owl which is very common," said Mindy Dick, who speaks for the society. "But it was actually a burrowing owl and that is not a common bird we get."

Sadly, the (bird) found in Chilliwack died from its injuries but advocates like Dick hope that its existence is a sign that the birds may be slowly becoming re-established in the area.

— CBC

▶ [cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/rare-b-c-burrowing-owl-found-injured-in-chilliwack-1.3387936](http://cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/rare-b-c-burrowing-owl-found-injured-in-chilliwack-1.3387936)

## Wanted alive: more Burrowing owls

The Western Producer — August 21, 2015

Livestock and burrowing owls make good pasture partners.

Lorrie Reed, who farms near Elrose, Sask., said he has seen the proof firsthand.

"If there's cows in there, it's good for the Burrowing owls because they keep the grass short so the Burrowing owls can see



— BOCsBC map

predators coming and can hopefully survive," said Reed. "(The owls) use the manure for nesting material as well."

When Reed was growing up on the family farm, he used to see five or six pairs of burrowing owls each year.

"Now you're lucky to see one."

— By William DeKay

▶ [www.producer.com/2015/08/wanted-alive-more-burrowing-owls/](http://www.producer.com/2015/08/wanted-alive-more-burrowing-owls/)

## Rare Burrowing owl sighting is a real hoot

Charlotte Observer — March 9, 2016

A Burrowing owl was seen hanging out on the rock jetty on the south end of Masonboro Island, near Wilmington, North Carolina. (SEE MAP)

With the aid of a spotting scope, it was observed from Wrightsville Beach across the Masonboro Inlet. Perched on a rock, it stood still for an hour but swiveled its head around to survey the area.

It has been 44 years since the last burrowing owl sighting; who knows when the next one will be found.

— Taylor Piephoff

▶ [charlotteobserver.com/living/home-garden/article65061542.html](http://charlotteobserver.com/living/home-garden/article65061542.html)

## Give hoot: Watch for Burrowing owls

Marco Eagle — March 26, 2016

The city of Marco Island (SEE MAP) began monitoring the Burrowing owls in 2001. In a newly announced project, Owl Watch, the city has partnered with the Audubon of Western Everglades (AWE) to continue the science-based chick/adult data collection for the Burrowing owls.

This project will continue the data collection started by then city environmentalist Nancy Richie in 2001. AWE will supervise the data collection and monitoring of burrow sites throughout Marco Island.

— By Maria Lamb

▶ [www.naplesnews.com/community/marco-eagle/give-a-hoot-watch-for-burrowing-owls-2ecccca0-2e28-7aac-e053-0100007f054e-373373051.html](http://www.naplesnews.com/community/marco-eagle/give-a-hoot-watch-for-burrowing-owls-2ecccca0-2e28-7aac-e053-0100007f054e-373373051.html)

## SWFL's beloved Burrowing owl

Fort Myers Florida Weekly — March 30, 2016

They are underground, adorable and abundant in our area

Joe Fitzpatrick continues to lead sold-out workshops to photograph Cape Coral Burrowing owls.



Fitzpatrick's burrowing owl photowalks have

been selling out for four years. It seems focusing on 9-10 inches of avian adorableness is always a treat. "They're so cute and fun to look at," the Bonita Springs photographer says about this particular subject. "They're constantly bobbing their head around and they have these gigantic yellow eyes — they're just fun to photograph."

— By Lindsey Nesmith

▶ [fortmyers.floridaweekly.com/news/2016-03-30/Top\\_News/SWFLS\\_BELOVED\\_BURROWING\\_OWL.html](http://fortmyers.floridaweekly.com/news/2016-03-30/Top_News/SWFLS_BELOVED_BURROWING_OWL.html)

