

Native Prairie Speaker Series

Presentation: Burrowing Owls in Prairie Canada; Going, Going

Speakers: Dr. Geoff Holroyd and Helen Trefry (retired Environment Canada biologists)

Presentation Summary:

The Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) is endangered in prairie Canada. The number of breeding pairs declined 22% per year during the 1990's even though over 700 landowners voluntarily protected over 37,000 hectares of the owls' grassland habitat. The population has continued to decline since then. Low productivity is implicated in the Burrowing Owl's decline; typically only 3-4 young fledge from the average clutch size of 9 eggs. Food supplementation experiments indicated that the wild food supply was inadequate for this species to reach its reproductive potential. Migration and dispersal are important ecological processes and understanding them is a requirement for species conservation efforts. Studies of movements of Burrowing Owls using banding, VHF telemetry, stable isotopes, geolocators, and satellite transmitters demonstrate that annual dispersal is a second factor driving the owl's decline. The federal Species-At-Risk Act's focus on critical habitat, recovery strategies and action plans have not slowed the species' decline in prairie Canada. This talk summarizes 30 years of research into the breeding biology, migration and dispersal of this species in Canada, Texas and Mexico and recommends a conservation solution - supplemental feeding of nests each June. Greater international cooperation and direct conservation action are needed if this species is to remain on the Great Plains. The status of burrowing owls in Grassland Park will be updated to 2019.

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