

BIRDS

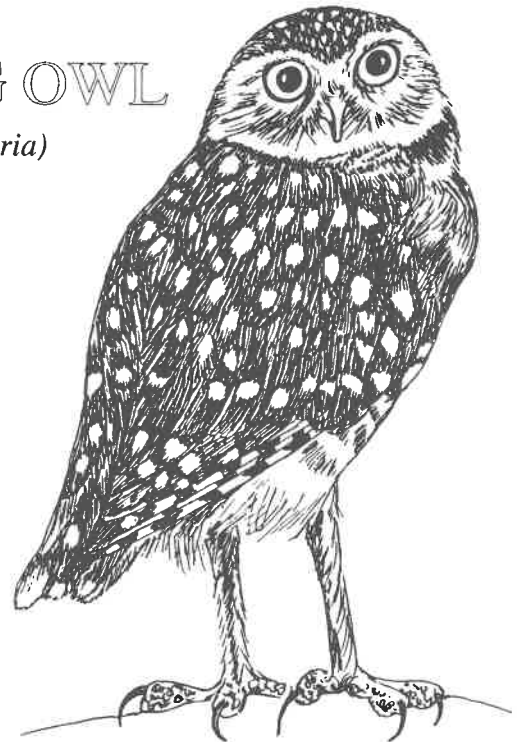
Status: Native Summer Resident

BURROWING OWL

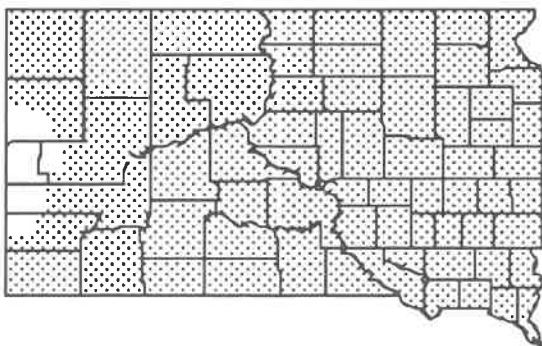
(*Athene cunicularia*)

Description

The burrowing owl's generic name, *Athene*, refers to the Greek goddess of wisdom, to whom owls were sacred. The species name comes from the Latin word for miner, referring to the birds' habit of nesting underground. This small brown and white owl is 9 to 11 inches (23 - 28 cm) tall, with unusually long legs for an owl. The markings of this species include barred and spotted underparts, a white chin stripe, a stubby tail, and a round head with yellow eyes. When scared, the owls emit a rapid chattering sound. At night their call is a mournful, high cry, co-hoo.



Distribution



Burrowing owls are common summer residents throughout the western South

Dakota prairies, are uncommon in the east, and are rarely found in the Black Hills. The species is usually associated with black-tailed prairie dogs, whose abandoned burrows they use for roosting and nesting.

Natural History

This migratory species begins arriving in South Dakota as early as mid-March, with the peak of migration in April. They leave the state, after nesting, beginning in late September. By late October, most burrowing owls have moved to the southern United States. Most burrowing owls

that have been *banded* in South Dakota have been recovered during the winter in Oklahoma and Texas. There are a few winter records for South Dakota. They have been recorded on the Rapid City and Aberdeen Christmas Bird Counts. One winter in the late 1800's, 20 burrowing owls were found sharing a burrow in Clay County.

Burrowing owls are small birds of prey that prefer open country. They are active during daylight hours, but usually hunt in early evening and throughout the night. They have a varied diet, but they eat mostly insects (grasshoppers, moths, crickets, beetles and caterpillars) and small mammals (mice, rats, ground squirrels, young prairie dogs, shrews and occasionally bats). Burrowing owls are also reported to feed on small birds, amphibians and reptiles. As do other owls, burrowing owls spit-up undigested fur and bones of their prey in the form of pellets.

Although they usually nest in abandoned prairie dog burrows, they also will use burrows abandoned by foxes, ground squirrels, and gophers. If not disturbed, they will return to the same burrow year after year. The birds line their burrow en-

trance and nest with plants and dried horse or cattle manure. They begin nesting in May in South Dakota. Eggs can be found in the burrows at the end of 4 to 9 foot (1.2 to 2.8 m) tunnels between May 1 and June 13. The female lays between 3 and 10 eggs in her nest. Nests with young have been found in South Dakota as late as the end of July. Both the males and females sit on the eggs during the incubation period that lasts 28 days.

Predators of burrowing owls include cats and snakes, both of which will eat the eggs and young. Occasionally these predators might be deterred by the alarm call of the young burrowing owls. It perfectly mimics the rattling of a prairie rattlesnake.

Conservation Measures

Burrowing owls are protected by federal law, as are all birds of prey. It is illegal to harm the birds or disturb their nests. Many of these owls are accidentally killed while hunting low over the highway at night, when they collide with cars. They also succumb to poisons that are put out in attempts to control rodent populations.

Glossary

Banded - referring to the scientific practice of placing a numbered, metal ring on a bird's leg to learn about the species' life span and migratory behavior.

References

- Johnsgard, Paul A. ,1979, *Birds of the Great Plains Breeding Species and Their Distribution*, University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln and London.
SDOU, 1991, *The Birds of South Dakota*, NSU Press: Aberdeen, SD 57401.
Terres, John K., 1980, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York.

Written by:

Dr. Erika Tallman, Professor of Science Education, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD 57401. ©1997.

Illustrated by:

Kathy Colavitti, independent artist, Green Bay, WI.

Reviewed by:

Dr. David Swanson, Biology Department, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD.

Publication of the *Burrowing Owl* fact sheet was funded by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD.