

**Project Perch's mission is to protect and nurture the Burrowing Owl in SE Florida.
A real life HOOT, join now!**



Project Perch's BuOw Blog – Day 1

Thursday May 16, 2013

A lot of people were viewing the burrowing owls for the first time today. This generated a lot of questions! Some of us have been lucky enough to watch them for a little while as we worked through some technical issues. So I'll start with some of the basics about "School Yard Burrowing Owls" that we use in school presentations.

School Yard Burrowing Owls: Why do the owls live at schools? There are a lot of good reasons.

Open Habitat: Some people wish there was a more natural setting for the owls but the landscape is very developed in Southeast Florida due to population growth. The School Board of Broward County is the largest landholder in the county. The schools are often clustered together and have parks or sports complexes nearby so they provide a big green space. We always tell the school children to get on Google map and type in their school address. Pretend you are an owl flying and looking for a good place to live. Where do you go? As we zoom out on Google map in Broward County we would see an airport, a golf course, a park, or a cluster of schools because these are the green spaces that are available. Other than county parks, the largest green spaces in the county are at the schools.

Oh no, the Mowers! Oh yes, the Mowers! When the owls are nesting and staying close to their burrows, we always get calls from people and students worried about the owls and the lawnmowers. One day soon on the video, we will see the maintenance crew doing their job. The natural tendency of caring people everywhere is to rope them off, or somehow stop the mowers and weed trimmers from going near their burrows. We take the school children into the yard and ask them to lay belly down in the grass; we want their eyes about 7 to 10 inches off the ground, the approximate height of a burrowing owl. Then we ask them, "What do you see?" The children are laughing and are happily getting dirty and then they look around and realize they can't see anything. The burrowing owls were native to the sandy habitats of south central Florida where there was not very much groundcover. If you are a burrowing owl, you are short! So if the grass hasn't been mowed recently, the owls can't see. They need to see so they can hunt and stay safe from predators. If the grass gets too high the owls may abandon their burrow to find a safer, more open place. This is why the schools and parks keep the grass trimmed around burrows and it is good for burrowing owl visibility.

The Lights are a Bug Buffet: A lot of the athletic fields and parks have lights and there are night games. The buildings are also equipped with safety lighting that stays on all night. Those lights attract the bugs and the bugs attract the owls. Burrowing owls are Florida's natural pesticide and 80-90% of their diet consists mainly of bugs. That is a lot of grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, roaches or palmetto bugs, as we like to call them in Florida. They also eat crabs, crayfish, toads, frogs, salamanders, lizards, snakes, brown anoles, turtles, mice and voles. Some of the owls are helping to keep the rodent populations in check near the dumpsters as well. So the schools provide well balanced meals for the owls as well.

Chain Link Fencing: Why do the owls burrow near the chain link fences? Airports, golf courses, parks and schools are usually surrounded by chain link fences. Some of the drainage areas are also surrounded by locked fencing so they provide habitat that is rarely disturbed, except by the ground crew. The areas next to or inside the chain link fence can provide a safe habitat, with no traffic of any kind. The burrowing owls are very concerned with aerial predators getting them from above. Coopers Hawk populations are on the rise in Florida and some bird watchers wonder about the impact that will have on burrowing owl numbers. Chain link fencing ranges from 5 to 10 feet tall. If the owl burrow entrance is next to the fence it prevents a hawk from swooping down and surprising them at their burrow. There are fewer ground predators at schools (like foxes) and there are usually no cats or dogs on the grounds. Sometimes the owls burrow right at the fence and can escape underneath to the other side. This would be another advantage when they are trying to evade a predator.

The School Schedule versus the Owl's Schedule: Why don't we see the burrowing owls in the afternoon? Burrowing owls are not nocturnal as everyone is learning by watching the camera feed. They are "**crepuscular**" and that means they feed at dawn and dusk. The owls are busy before the students arrive at school and after they leave. This schedule works well for the owls. During the day, when the students are around, the owls are usually napping or grooming. They can rest in the burrow during the commotion of the students arriving, between classes or recess, and during dismissal when they are going home. Any teacher, parent or student is familiar with the craziness of the buses and parent pick up around a busy school. While this is going on the owls are usually safe down in their burrow, not to be seen. This is why we usually don't see the owls as the buses and cars arrive in the morning or in the afternoon.

These urban owls get used to or "**habituate**" to the schools schedule and calendar. Although the roar of the buses sounds loud to us, the burrowing owls have grown up here. Electric scooters, skateboards, the class bell and the daily rustling of students going by, followed by a quiet summer break is what these owls are used to. The day after school let out for the summer, a school called us to talk about the owlets that had just emerged. They had been completely hidden while school was in session and then appeared well developed and able to fly on that first day of summer break for the second year in a row.

Green Schools and their role as Environmental Stewards: As if the school grounds weren't appealing enough to the owls, now the schools are going green and adding clubs with names like SITE which stands for Students for the Improvement of the Environment and PAWS which Promotes Animal Welfare in Schools. They are planting butterfly and edible gardens which create bugs for owls. The schools are going pesticide and herbicide free and the owls do their part by taking care of bugs and rodents. The

schools are creating artificial burrows for their owls in good locations and are putting up owl friendly fences to create “traffic free” zones around them so people avoid those areas. These areas do provide access for the mowers so they can keep the grass in check. The schools are serving as environmental stewards by hanging signs to educate the students, parents, and the local community. They are a real life HOOT, already in progress.

There are a lot of good reasons for the burrowing owls to live on school grounds!