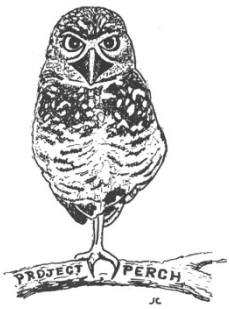
Project Perch's mission is to protect and nurture the Burrowing Owl in SE Florida.
A real life HOOT, join now!



Project Perch's BuOw Blog **May 23, 2013**

In the past, we have had to rely on the observations of whoever seemed to know the most about the owls at their location, which usually did not include which one was the male or female and was not based on a lot of observation time in the field. We normally don't have the luxury of watching the owls for long periods of time, but this web cam has changed all of that. We are also all watching the same pair of owls and that is quite unique.

How do we tell male and female Burrowing owls apart?

We checked a lot of sources. Here is a short list of why it is hard to tell them apart and what differentiates a male from a female:

Unlike most owls, where the female is larger, burrowing owls have little sexual dimorphism. The males and females are similar in appearance and size. Most sites described them as the same size, but some described the female as smaller or heavier and the male as taller and more linear, meaning longer wing and tail length measurements. Males tend to be lighter in color and females a little darker, because the female spends more time in the burrow incubating the eggs while the male stands guard and searches for food in the Florida sun, and so his feathers get "sun bleached" compared to hers.

The difference in coloring is not a very reliable way to tell them apart unless they stand side by side. Most sites recommend viewing the owls together, but perhaps a better way to tell them apart is to watch them together during nesting. When nesting, the eggs are incubated by the female only, while the male hunts and brings food to her and stands guard at the burrow entrance.

So which owl is the female and which is the male in this pair of Burrowing owls?

The Female: The female's face is much lighter and her facial markings are much more striking. Her eyebrows and her chin strap are bigger and whiter than the male's. She is also more speckled on her back side. When standing together, she looks lighter, shorter and heavier than the male. When she emerges from the burrow, she immediately needs to run and defecate and stretch her wings and feet.

The Male: The male's face is much darker and he has smaller, shorter eyebrows. James' has described him as having a darker neck or throat, which is the result of a smaller chin strap. He has a lot of brown on his back side, with two big brown patches on his shoulders. He is spending a lot of his time as sentry, guarding the burrow's entrance. He seems more nervous and is flushing less, but instead crouching and displaying when people walk by or there is a disturbance.

Why is this female lighter than this male?

The female is lighter than the male and this seems to contradict the literature; but there could be several reasons for this. These owls are very immature. This is their first season nesting and so the male has not had enough time in the sun yet for his feathers to get "sun-bleached". There is also individual variation in the burrowing owls color. Finally, the burrowing owls in Florida have historically nested in very light sandy soils. The sand is white and with time, the females may have evolved lighter plumage than their western cousins.

Sources:

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