

**Project Perch's mission is to protect and nurture the Burrowing Owl in SE Florida.
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Project Perch's BuOw Blog 5

Saturday, July 6, 2013

Do the owls have eggs or owlets? When will we see babies?

This is the question we have been getting the most. So we'll tell you everything we know.

The "official" burrowing owl breeding season is from February 15 – July 15, but that is just a general guideline because some owls nest early or late and resident owls can nest at other times of the year. We were trying to have the camera live before breeding season, but technical and other delays meant that by the time the camera was up and working, we were well into nesting season and the owls had already formed a pair bond, so we didn't get to capture their courtship rituals.

The pair of owls we are watching are very immature and so we weren't really sure what to expect. We had looked it up to see exactly when they were mature enough to breed and some references said that owls were sexually mature at one year of age and others said they could breed the summer after they hatched. Although we can't be sure because these owls are not banded, they probably hatched at the end of March 2012. They still looked immature in January when a student took a picture of them at the burrow with their parents. They look much different now when you compare them up close. They are unusual because they didn't leave the burrow where they hatched and the parents stayed with them until February 2013.

Mating

After a lot of frustration with technical issues we finally had a camera signal. The very first night we saw the owls they were mating! This was on April 4, 2013 at 7:44p.m. The male flew off, came back, they mated two times and then they both flew off in opposite directions. We were texting James and e-mailing EarthCam to see if we could get the footage. Unfortunately, the camera had just come on line and footage wasn't being saved. They mated again the night of April 5, 2013 at 8:01p.m. We debated whether their mating would be successful because they still looked young, with a bit of fluff still left on them from their youth and the mating attempts were very quick. We kept watching, and on May 16, 2013 at 8:14pm James' saw them mating again. He described an incredibly quick attempt that lasted only seconds. On May 20, 2013 at 8:35pm the male tried to mate again but the female shrugged him off and started eating.

So we did the math. If mating is successful, the female lays eggs and it usually takes 1-2 days for each egg. Females can lay anywhere from 1 – 12 eggs, but the average is 6-9. Here in suburban Florida, the numbers are a little lower, averaging more like 2-6. The eggs are incubated by the female only and take another 28-30 days to start hatching. The

young are fed in the nest and emerge into the burrow's entrance at about 14 days. So now we are talking about 2 weeks to lay the eggs, 4 weeks to incubate and another 2 weeks until we see the young, so 7-8 weeks depending on the number of eggs laid. So if the first mate we saw on April 4 was successful, we could expect young somewhere between May 23 and May 30.

They could have been mating before the camera went live and we missed it. This means owlets could emerge earlier, but they haven't so far. On April 4, they still looked so young we really wondered if they were sexually mature enough. They mated again on May 16 so maybe those earlier attempts had failed? She shrugs him off on May 20 and so does that mean there are eggs already? We had a lot of questions that only time could answer.

On May 23 we thought we could hear baby birds, but we weren't sure. On May 25 at 7:14:46a.m., the male brought back a black snake with an orange belly about a foot long. At 8:09:16a.m., the female took the snake into the burrow and again we could hear baby birds. After she brought the snake down there, everything got quiet. So we were thinking there were owlets down there. We were listening intently whenever she brought food into the burrow.

Tropical Storm Andrea

Then the storm hit on June 7. The night after the storm, we saw the owls mating again, a behavior we had seen very infrequently since early April. On June 8 they mated a couple of times in the late afternoon; but on June 9, they were seen mating at 4:10pm, 5:27pm, 6:02pm, 6:48pm, 7:02pm, 7:35pm, 7:48pm and 7:54. Post storm, they were very busy mating. Again on June 10, 11 and 13 we saw them mate a couple of times each at around or a little after 8pm.



June 9, 6:02pm Mating at Dusk

Replacement Clutches

In the event a nest fails, Burrowing owls can lay replacement clutches. So we are hoping some of these recent mates have been successful and the female is busy laying more eggs. On June 12, the female was looking heavier to us and tired, like she could be laying eggs.



June 12 2:18pm A Heavier Female

We'll just have to stay tuned a while longer, to see if these birds are successful on their second clutch as we wouldn't expect to see owlets now until about the end of July. We are also hoping for some mild summer rains so they have a chance at fledging some young this season.

Sources:

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