

Artemis – One Young Owl’s Journey to Recovery by Tara Mulhern Davidson

There are many species at risk that make their home on prairie grasslands including the endangered burrowing owl. The burrowing owl arrives on the prairies in early spring to breed and nest, then flies back to Texas and Mexico starting at the end of September until about mid-October. One can imagine that there are several possible obstacles that these small owls encounter in their journeys to and from Saskatchewan’s grasslands. For one owl named Artemis, her journey would have reached a dead end were it not for the rescue efforts of Parks Canada-Grasslands National Park and the Saskatchewan Burrowing Owl Interpretive Centre (SBOIC).

This past September, two Parks Canada staff members were returning home after a long day of field work in the Grasslands National Park when they noticed a burrowing owl along the road. The young owl appeared to be flapping its wings abnormally, so they stopped to check. Parks staff determined that the owl wasn’t simply feigning distress, the owl was injured and its left wing was drooping unusually. The staff members made the quick decision to try and gently catch and calm the bird, who then hitched a ride with them back to Val Marie. “Given the precarious situation that this species is in population-wise, the decision to capture and treat this bird was an easy one,” says Sherri Clifford, Manager of Resource Conservation at Grasslands National Park.

Fortunately for Artemis, the timing couldn’t have been better. A phone call to the Calgary Zoo research house located in Val Marie revealed that there was a visiting veterinarian on site who could examine the owl right away. It was determined that Artemis had a broken humerus in her left wing. While the news wasn’t great, the owl was kept comfortable and safe and she spent the evening in a pet carrier dining on a defrosted mouse which was helpfully supplied by Calgary Zoo staff.

The next day Clifford and Parks Canada staff got in touch with SBOIC to see what



Artemis is healing comfortably at the Saskatchewan Burrowing Owl Interpretive Centre. Photo credit: Lori Johnson, courtesy of SBOIC.

the next logical steps should be. “SBOIC was very helpful, they were willing to do anything to help out the injured owl,” explains Clifford. The owl was soon headed to SBOIC in Moose Jaw.

“The first steps when we receive an injured owl are to take them to a vet and get them the care they need as soon as we can,” says Lori Johnson, Owl Coordinator at SBOIC. “We use a local vet, Dr. Melanie Blager, who does some wildlife rehabilitation for other species in

the area as well,” explains Johnson. “After Dr. Blager examined the owl and made sure she was stable, we took her to the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan for further examination,” Johnson said. A closer look revealed that the bird’s wing was broken in two places and had already started healing on its own, meaning that surgery was out of the question. Ultimately, Parks Canada and SBOIC were hoping to reintroduce Artemis to the wild following

continued on page 46

Stewardship

Artemis
cont. from pg. 44

her recovery, but without the possibility of surgery, reintroduction is unlikely.

While working with owls is unique and rewarding, Johnson explains that there is a lot of paperwork involved. "We need permits to travel, house, breed or release the birds," says Johnson. The Saskatchewan Burrowing Owl Interpretive Centre is involved in raising and releasing burrowing owls, although arguably their most successful role is in outreach and educational programming. The centre hosts visitors throughout the spring and summer and spends time on the road travelling with the owls visiting schools across the province and providing awareness about prairie and species conservation.

Parks Canada and its staff also offer education and information to visitors, the public and surrounding land managers. "We advocate for the species beyond our boundaries," Clifford explains. Other organizations in the province that work to conserve burrowing owl habitat include Nature Saskatchewan, through their Operation Burrowing Owl Program. The program currently has 360 voluntary landowner participants and conserves almost 150,000 acres of habitat. "Nature Saskatchewan is very fortunate to have so many passionate landowners participating in our programs and keeping a look out for species at risk, including the burrowing owl," says Kaytlyn Burrows, Habitat Stewardship Coordinator with Nature Saskatchewan.

"Without the voluntary efforts of landowners, land managers, and the general public, recovery of this unique prairie owl would not be possible" says Burrows.

Artemis can take short flights, which indicates she is healing, and according to Johnson, she's fitting in well with the other owls at the centre, including her roommate, Monkey. When asked how Artemis is doing these days, Johnson smiles and says "Artemis is doing well. She's a plucky little one." 🦉



A healthy pair of burrowing owls in their habitat.
Photo credit: Shelly Fisher, courtesy of Nature Saskatchewan

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