



Coyote Scavenges Road-killed Burrowing Owl in British Columbia

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On 25 July 2010, while travelling along the Pennask Lake Road, about 2.2 km from Highway 5A and 1.4 km southeast of Quilchena, British Columbia, I startled a Coyote (*Canis latrans*) picking something up from the side of the paved road (Figure 1). I beeped the car horn, stopped, and the Coyote dropped what it had and ran about 120 m up the side of a small hill. The adjacent habitat was open grassland and rangeland and the elevation was 762 m.

I inspected the object and was surprised to see it was a Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto cunicularia*). The body was still warm indicating it had recently died, probably after colliding with a vehicle. The bird was a juvenile showing a downy head and rump on the upper surface (Figure 2) and a uniformly light and unmarked breast and abdomen on the underside (Figure 3). It had a standard U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service aluminum band on the left leg (#120435733) and a colour-band on the right leg (metallic green [#65] over black [letter P]). I collected the carcass, kept it frozen, and when I returned to Victoria, I intended to donate it to a museum because the specimen could be preserved knowing its exact age and origin.

On 25 August, I contacted Myke Chutter, bird specialist with the provincial government, to let him know about the incident and get information on the bands. On 1 September, Dawn Brodie (pers. comm. to M. Chutter) provided the following information. The Burrowing Owl was hatched in a natural nest on 6 June 2012 and banded on 7 July 2010. The father was a bird from a previous year that returned and the mother was captive-bred, presumably last year, and released this spring [2010]. The juvenile was released about one kilometer from where I found

it. A few years ago when we did track post-fledging juveniles, four were recorded as hit by vehicles at the same site – lots of traffic there.



Figure 1. Road-killed Burrowing Owl dropped at the side of a road by a scavenging Coyote. Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, 25 July 2010. BC Photo 3744a (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).



Figure 2. Dorsal view of juvenile Burrowing Owl showing downy head and rump. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, 25 July 2010. BC Photo 3744b.*

The carcass was examined by Helen Schwantje, provincial wildlife veterinarian, who reported “In surprisingly good condition, fair muscling and the gut contained fresh insect remains and a whole grasshopper. Unfortunately while there were no bone fractures, his liver was fractured, causing him to bleed into his air sacs and abdominal cavity. I am calling his cause of death trauma from a vehicular collision. Sort of fits the history.”

The Burrowing Owl carcass was donated to the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria and catalogued as RBCM 30007.

Burrowing Owl collisions with moving vehicles is also a significant cause of mortality elsewhere in North America (Konrad and Gilmer 1984, Haug and Oliphant 1987, Millsap and Bear 1988). This high incidence of death has been attributed to the species’ habit of sitting and hunting on roads at night (Bent 1938, Ratcliff 1987, Haug et al. 1993). I found the fresh carcass at 0820 hr, shortly after the owl was probably hit flying across the road.



Figure 3. Ventral view of juvenile Burrowing Owl showing unmarked belly region. *Photo by R. Wayne Campbell, 25 July 2010. BC Photo 3744c.*

In British Columbia, Coyote (Figure 4) is an opportunist and feeds mainly on small to medium-sized mammals but it is also a generalist whose list of food items in its diet is extensive (Hatler et al. 2008). In the grasslands and ranchland where the carcass was recovered, Coyotes are frequently seen patrolling main roads for road-killed prey, especially during snow-free periods when birds are migrating or adults are preoccupied with gathering food for their young (D. Reese pers. comm.). The chance encounter with a scavenging Coyote on 25 July 2010 has added Burrowing Owl to the mammal's varied diet in British Columbia. †



Figure 4. Wherever it occurs in British Columbia, the Coyote is a cunning predator and opportunistic scavenger. *Photo by Mark Nyhof.*

Acknowledgements

Myke Chutter and Dawn Brodie provided information on the origin and history of the banded Burrowing Owl and Helen Schwantje examined the carcass. Myke further reviewed the final draft for accuracy and content.

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