

POLLUTION PREVENTION & COMPLIANCE

# Currents

*The Navy's Environmental Magazine*

*Winter 2003*

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**MAMMALS**

Raising a Family of Herons

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Our Spotlight Interview with Robert Gisiner—  
the Navy's Marine Mammals Expert

# Winter Quarters for

# ed Owl

## “Miles” Finds Respite at NALF Orange Grove

**M**iles,” a burrowing owl from Montana, has found a new home at Naval Auxiliary Landing Field (NALF) Orange Grove near Alice, Texas compliments of several individuals, numerous organizations and the hospitality of the U.S. Navy.

Miles was injured last fall in a collision with a vehicle just outside of

Miles City, Montana. He suffered head injuries, but fortunately was taken to the Montana Raptor Conservation Center in Bozeman, Montana, where he was nursed back to health prior to being transported to South Texas.

Miles recovered well enough to be released back into the wild, despite the loss of sight in one eye. Although he would have normally been released near the site he was found, winter arrived in the northern states, making it impractical for Miles to be released in Montana. At the request of the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the U.S. Navy provided Miles with “winter quarters.”



Miles.  
Photos by Michael L. Rawson (used by permission)



Helen Trefry and Geoff Holroyd of the Canadian Wildlife Service take Miles to his burrow.



Fortunately, two Canadian Wildlife Service biologists, Geoff Holroyd and Helen Trefry, working in concert with USGS were traveling from Alberta to Texas at the same time that Miles needed a lift. Holroyd and Trefry were traveling to Texas to continue their winter work on owls in southern Texas and Mexico.

“He enjoyed the trip and took in all the sights,” Holroyd said. “He sat near the entrance of his cage and looked out the window the entire trip. He ate a mouse a day.”

Holroyd and Trefry arrived in Corpus Christi on 21 November, along with Miles. Miles was released early on the morning of 22 November at the artificial burrows at NALF Orange Grove.

Miles’ release was attended by staff from the USGS, the Canadian Wildlife Service, the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Department of Defense “Partners in Flight” Program Director, Chris Eberly, was also in attendance.

“This was a great opportunity to show that multiple agencies can work together to benefit this declining species and to get our message on burrowing owl conservation to the public,” Eberly said.

A local television station as well as several local and regional newspapers witnessed the event and allowed Miles to hold his first “news conference” there at NALF Orange Grove.

The hope is that Miles will be strengthened over the winter on his diet of crickets, beetles, grasshoppers, spiders and mice—all in ready supply in the subtropical climate of South Texas. After spending the winter as a guest of the Navy, Miles will fly the 1,400 miles back to Montana on his own.

Several artificial burrows were placed on Navy property in Kingsville and Orange Grove in August 2001 for the



Miles receives identification bands prior to his release.



Miles fully banded and ready for his new home.

## Studying the WINTERING HABITS OF BURROWING OWLS

Through a no-cost cooperative agreement among several agencies, NAS Kingsville is one of several sites participating in a research project to study the wintering habits of burrowing owls. In August 2001, Naval Air Station Kingsville began the study program by partnering with the United States Geological Survey (Texas Gulf Coast Field Research Station), the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and the Coastal Bend Ambassadors. The study is examining the winter ecology of the burrowing owls in hopes of finding answers to why the species is declining. Reversing the decline in burrowing owl populations is a long-term goal for the research team. Long-term objectives for burrowing owl research and conservation in south Texas are:

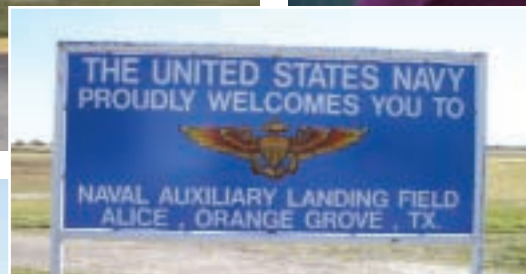
- Identifying where burrowing owls winter in south Texas to estimate the population size.
- Constructing artificial burrows made from industrial drainpipe, placed away from roads, then monitoring them over several winters.
- Identifying individual burrowing owls in south Texas and tracking their movements during the winter period by fitting the owls with leg bands and radio transmitters.
- Determining daily activities and behavior of burrowing owls using video surveillance at selected burrow sites.
- Calculating winter survival rates and determining causes of mortality.
- Determining burrowing owl winter diet by identifying prey remains in regurgitated pellets.
- Mapping owl locations and territories using Geographic Information System software.
- Assessing any contaminants that may occur in the owl diet by sampling insects and small rodents near known roost sites, then analyzing these prey items for contaminants.



Airfield tower at NALF  
Orange Grove, Texas.



Helen Trefry helps Miles show  
his identification bands.



Group gets last minute briefing from  
Marc Woodin of the USGS.





Burrows at NAS Kingsville.



Miles on top of a burrow.

purpose of studying winter migration of burrowing owls. Since then, the burrows have been home to several owls that have traveled from as far away as Canada.

“Since the artificial burrows have been used successfully for the past two years, we are hopeful that Miles will take up residence here for most of the rest of the winter,” Marc Woodin, USGS wildlife biologist, said.

The burrowing owl, a declining prairie bird, uses animal burrows in open prairies to survive. The burrows allow the owls to hide and avoid larger birds of prey. These “Little Winter Texans” winter-over in South Texas, but because of extensive development and cultivation, few natural burrows remain. Instead, in South Texas, burrowing owls use road culverts as roosts, which can be hazardous.

To increase the number of available roosts, the USGS and its partners placed artificial burrows at NAS Kingsville and NALF Orange Grove away from roadways. Artificial burrows simulate prairie dog holes used for nest sites by burrowing owls during the summer in northern states and in Canada.

“Burrowing owls are already listed as endangered species in Canada, threatened in Mexico, and are declining in the United States,” Mary Kay Skoruppa, a USGS biologist, said.

Banding and aerial surveys tracking the owls on migration led Canadian researchers to seek assistance from biologists in South Texas and Mexico, the winter habitat of the burrowing owls.

“Independent studies in Canada and in breeding areas in New Mexico indicate population declines at 16 percent per year, making it likely that without intervention, the species will become increasingly rare,” Skoruppa said.


Burrowing owls are small—about nine and one-half inches tall, they have long legs with yellow eyes and are nocturnal—they hunt and forage at night. They live in the open country from Canada to Mexico, and spend their winters in warmer climates such as South Texas. Burrowing owls are declining at an alarming rate, primarily due to the lack of protected burrows. The burrowing owl is one of only 11 species of birds identified for joint protection by an international envi-

ronmental agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

“Despite 10 years of intensive recovery efforts focusing on breeding populations in Canada and extensive cooperation by private landowners in Canada, biologists have been unable to stabilize the population or reverse the declining trend,” Woodin said.

The importance of South Texas to borrowing owls was not formerly known because the owls disperse widely over this large region of Texas. They inhabit highly altered or disturbed habitats—not usually considered good wildlife habitat.

South Texas historically featured coastal prairie and native brush, but with the conversion of much of this region to agriculture, native grasslands containing animal burrows have also been lost. As a result, burrowing owls wintering in South Texas use road culverts (usually along roads adjacent to cultivated fields) instead of natural burrows. Vehicles pose a serious threat for burrowing owls roosting along the roadways.

With the help of USGS, NAS Kingsville and NALF Orange Grove have rolled out the welcome mat for some new visitors from the north. These “Little Winter Texans” have discovered what many people in South Texas already know. It’s a great place to live and is indeed the birding capital of the world. 

## CONTACT

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