

Burrowing Owl in Champaign County

by James O. Smith

On the morning of 17 March 2003, our son, Thomas, was transferring a 12-row corn planter with a John Deere tractor from our farm northeast of Homer, to a John Deere repair and maintenance shop at Allerton, a distance of about 14 miles. Most of the travel route was along the Champaign-Vermilion County line road. I was to give him a half hour's head start, and then drive his pickup to the shop, then pick him up and return to the farm. While driving to Allerton, I traveled on a road one mile east of the county line to see if there were any interesting roadside birds. The only item of interest was a coyote by a mound of dirt at the entrance to what appeared to be a burrow on a hill.

After Tom got in the pickup, I started driving back the way I went to show him the coyote. After we were on our way, Tom asked what kind of small owl could be flushed from the entrance to a burrow along side the road. He told me that the owl was the size of a screech-owl, only more slender, and was about one mile north of Allerton. The description he provided fit a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicular-*

ia). I immediately turned the truck onto a connecting dirt road to go west to the county line road. He could not remember exactly where the owl had been, so we drove south toward Allerton until he pointed out the mound of earth at the entrance to a burrow. The burrow appeared to have been made by a badger digging for ground squirrels. Sure enough, there sat a Burrowing Owl staring at us. It had a rounded head, a slender body, and big yellow eyes. I never saw it fly. The bird was using a narrow (less than 5 m wide) strip of grass between the road and a plowed corn stubble field, with agricultural fields for several miles in all directions, except for the small town of Allerton just to the southeast.

I turned the truck around, and drove quickly home to get a camera. I knew I'd need photos to convince the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee that I had actually *Burrowing Owl, Champaign County. 17 March 2003. Note at least one small pellet in front of the bird's burrow. At least three or four pellets were seen at the burrow's entrance. Photo by Steven D. Bailey.*

observed this rare bird. When I got home, my wife, Eleanor, had lunch ready, but I asked her to forget lunch for the present. We needed to return to the owl to observe and obtain photos. I tried to call a few birders, most of whom either did not answer or were on the phone with someone else. I did reach Steve Bailey, who spread the word further, and he immediately drove to the owl's location with his camera.

Eleanor and I drove to the owl's location, and actually found the owl still present. I mounted my camera with a 500 mm lens on a car window mount while still some distance from the owl. The road is very much traveled, but traffic did not appear to bother the owl. It did, however, appear to be quite nervous when we eased the car closer and parked on the opposite side of the road. I obtained several photos, but did not go closer for better photos. I did not want to disturb the bird to obtain better photo images from different angles. We then drove a short distant away, and parked for further observation. Before we left the immediate area, Steve arrived and also took photos from a distance.

