

**Project Perch's mission is to protect and nurture the Burrowing Owl in SE Florida.
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Project Perch's BuOw Blog 20

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A Softer Kinder Release from Rehabilitation

This young owl was found in North Miami Beach, stunned and disoriented. It was turned into Pelican Harbor Seabird Station and then transferred to the South Florida Wildlife Center. On admittance, the physical exam comments read "bright, alert, responsive, feisty, no injuries or wounds seen. Flies."¹ It was described as quite normal once it was released into the flight pen.¹ Dr. Schneider described it as healthy, definitely not what I was used to hearing.

The owl needed to be released but no specific location was given. There were no owls in North Miami Beach in the 1999 census. So we asked Dr. Mealey, whose graduate work covered owls in Miami. He said "We were receiving owls from North Miami 20 years ago but never had a definitive spot. They could be owls dispersing, attempting to find suitable habitat."² So we asked at Oleta State Park to see if they were there, but they didn't know of any and sent us to Ricardo Zambrano, FWC's regional biologist. He only knew of owls near Dolphin Stadium, but that was really far west. We had just developed a new soft release protocol that includes an available burrow to increase the owl's chances of survival. This owl was also a juvenile, so it had no experience digging a burrow. A burrow was critical if we couldn't return it to its natal burrow, but we had no idea where to put a burrow in North Miami Beach and this owl was ready to go.

As we looked on a map, we realized just how close South Broward was, Hollywood, Hallandale Beach and Miramar. Hallandale Beach was too far east and there are very few owls east of 95 due to development. There were no known locations in Miramar which was too far west, but Hollywood was perfect and there are plenty of owls there. We had an available burrow at Hollywood Hills Elementary School where there were 8 owl pairs and juveniles. We also had just put in burrows at McNicol Middle School (McNicol). In August, there was a family of owls on their soccer field and they couldn't stripe the field. So we put in four burrows, two on each side of the field. We knew the McNicol burrows were ready to go and we also had a volunteer to prep the other burrow while we decided which location made more sense.

Ernest Leupin, one of our wildlife biologists, was quick to write that "One concern of putting the owl too close to established pairs was that it might get beaten up by its not so friendly neighbors. This is something to consider to make sure inter burrow distance is adequate. Juveniles experience displacement from areas with established pairs and that is why I have seen them often living on building roofs and perching high on palm trees in apartment complexes. Predation plays a big role in juvenile survival, but intraspecific aggression makes juveniles prone to starvation as well as predation."³ We had done a release a couple of years ago where we had released an owl right near a vacant burrow, only to have a not so close neighbor chase it off.

The owl family at McNicol disappeared not long after we put in the artificial burrows and now there was one lone adult owl hanging around. So with fewer owls around and no active pairs defending any of the burrows, McNicol was the right spot. The resident owl was occupying a burrow on one side of the field and so the rehabilitated owl would go on

the other side. Ernest noticed this owl had some dark anomalies along the edges of his iris and we were very interested in recessive eye colors in owls.³ This also might be a way to tell this owl apart in the future.



The Resident Owl – Ernest Leupin

So on a quiet Sunday at dusk, the owl arrived in a carrier. Two students from McNicol environmental research class welcomed the owl to its new home. Then it was released using the new protocol. It was put into the empty burrow, a towel was stuffed in the entrance and the owl had an hour to calm down, explore the new burrow and figure out that it was empty, safe and available. When the towel was removed, the owl could come out into the safety of darkness and not have to worry about the hawks until morning. If the owl was hungry, crickets and a mouse were waiting or it could bring them down into the burrow for later. The extra food would provision it as it tried to find food in its new home.



Welcome to Your New Home – Ernest Leupin

Ernest estimated the juvenile to be 10-12 weeks old and it had pale yellow speckled eyes. That would be one way to tell the owl apart in the future, although the eye color can change as the owl matures. Under Dr. Mealey's federal scientific permit, the owl got a silver id band, which will be another way to tell it apart from others. The environmental research class at McNicol will be watching for it. The new soft release protocol tries to help the owl make it back out into the urban landscape, although in this case we wish we could have brought it back to its natal burrow. An owl that is stunned and disoriented was most likely hit by a car and found near the road and not close to its burrow. Perhaps this juvenile was dispersing or displaced somehow from its natal territory even before it was hit by the car.

At least we were able to find it an available burrow quickly and relatively close to home. As our school projects add more burrows to the landscape, this is a secondary benefit. In August, the first burrowing owl to ever undergo laser eye surgery at the South Florida Wildlife Center was able to return to an available burrow less than 1 mile from where it was recovered. This burrow was hopefully in a much safer place, in the center of a park and more protected from traffic.



Speckled Eye Juvenile – Lara Ruddy

From watching the owls on the webcam, we know this owl will have to be feisty and a survivor to make it without its parents. We hope the juvenile will get some much needed help from the resident owl. Maybe we will be lucky, and the juvenile is a female and the resident owl a male. Female owls tend to disperse farther than their male siblings and juveniles often get injured in this process.⁴

This young owl has some good white in its marking which may mean female, but sex is unknown and there is always individual variation. Burrowing owls live in a philopatric society, meaning sons inherit their natal territory or live nearby if possible.⁴ So maybe the resident owl is male and taking up residence on his natal territory. The resident owl appears to have no mate. There are a lot of variables, but even if it's not a perfect match, burrowing owls are colonial and have been known to help each other out especially when they're not nesting or paired. Hopefully the students will be able to see their hard work really pay off for this owl.

Sources:

¹ Dr. Renata Schneider, South Florida Wildlife Center, 2014. Admittance Notes from the Day Sheet.

² Dr. Brian Mealey, 2014. Personal Communication.

³ Ernest Leupin, 2014. Personal Communication.

⁴ Millsap, Brian and Cindy Bear. May, 1997. Territory Fidelity, Mate Fidelity, and Dispersal in an Urban-Nesting Population of Florida Burrowing Owls. Journal Raptor Research Report 9, pp. 91-98.