

Introducing....BEAKER!

He's about the size of a can of pop, weighs in at a robust 220 grams, and has been described, rather impolitely, as a short, fat little owl on stilts. Meet Beaker, a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), native to the provinces and states of western North America. Beaker is a comical little bird with oodles of personality. But he has a very important role to play. He represents a wide range of animals and plants, many of which are disappearing due to loss of habitat resulting from human development.

With the loss of habitat, spade-foot toads, sharp-tailed grouse, sage thrashers and badgers are all disappearing, to name just a few. Worst of all for Beaker, his relatives are also facing serious problems. They have been virtually extirpated in BC and the population in the Prairie provinces has declined by over 70% in the last 30 years. .

Beaker's start in life was a bit tumultuous. In British Columbia the population of burrowing owls had virtually disappeared. An ambitious program to reintroduce owls produced by captive breeding has been underway since 1990. Beaker was fondly termed a LOTH, the last owl to hatch in his brood. As the eighth of eight tiny little owlets to hatch in his underground burrow, he was undersized and underweight. Chances were very good that he would end up as food for the others rather than reaching adulthood. Fortunately for him, he was hatched at a Burrowing Owl breeding facility, where his human guardians were able to intercede. He was raised from 7 days old, fed on a mixture of chopped up mice, insects and vitamins, fed by dropper and tweezers. It was touch and go at first but, after the first few days, Beaker proved that he was a survivor. Over the next three weeks he shot up in weight from 10 grams to 160 grams. At 20 days he would limbo under the door of his little cage that was now home. By the time he was 35 days old he was taking his first test flights, helicoptering up and down on Mike Mackintosh's kitchen table.

At the breeding centre owl chicks are occasionally raised outside of the burrow and then successfully fostered back into the brood once they are strong enough to survive. But Beaker had a special role to play. Beaker became the ambassador for the Burrowing owl Conservation Society representing the program and raising awareness of the plight of grassland habitat. He is an imprinted bird and is perfect for the role. He has grown up in a house and is very comfortable with people, dogs and all the noise and confusion of the family home. He is still not terribly fond of other owls, especially in his space, which is his own personal flyway. We are hoping that he will eventually breed in the next few years. Other owls similar to Beaker have led a double life and raised families.

But, over the last 4 years, he has done a wonderful job representing his world to hundreds of students and community groups throughout BC. His message is simple –grasslands are priceless ecosystems that provide home for hundreds of species. Without them they can't survive.

By Mike Mackintosh

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