

TIPS FOR SAFELY PHOTOGRAPHING BURROWING OWLS

Photographers are naturally drawn to Burrowing Owls because of their adorable owlets, amusing antics, and the fact that they are out during the day and much easier to find than most owls. Unfortunately, in their efforts to get a good picture, some photographers harm the owls by getting too close, flushing them from the entrance of their burrows, interfering with the adults' ability to leave their owlets to hunt for food. Ron Dudley, on his Feathered Photography blog, describes the consequences he has observed of this kind of unethical photography:

“Early in the Spring, an obviously mated pair showed up and set up residence. [Later]...Mia and I were aghast at what we saw – a group of birders and photographers had left their cars and were walking all over the burrow area, including tramping right over the top of it. We never once saw two owls at the burrow after that day.”

He has observed that the effects of unethical behavior are different later in the nesting season: “However, when they're caring for chicks or juveniles they're more reluctant to leave the area so they will typically fly a very short distance and show signs of alarm and stress.” Stressed birds are less able to care for their young and will suffer health consequences themselves.

Basic ethical photography of any bird requires that the birds' behavior, health, and ability to care for their young are protected. Some guidelines are:

- When photographing Burrowing Owls, stay in your car and use that as a blind.
- If a car is not available, stay 50 ft. (about 3 car lengths) from the burrow or owl.
- If the owls appear agitated or bob their heads and chatter, you are too close. Move further away.
- If an adult is looking directly at you, you are perceived as a threat. Move further away.
- Do not enter field areas surrounding an active burrow as this interferes with owl parents' ability to timely hunt and gather adequate prey to feed their growing family.
- Do not place branches, stick, or other objects near the nest to get a better shot of the owlets.
- It is less threatening to move sideways across the owl's field of vision than to advance toward the owl.
- Do not use flash. The burst of bright light may blind the owls for a period of time.
- If you see other photographers disturbing the owls, speak up.

References:

<https://www.featheredphotography.com/blog/2012/07/04/a-plea-for-respect-for-the-burrowing-owl/>

<https://www.audubon.org/get-outside/audubons-guide-ethical-bird-photography>