

DOCUMENTATION OF UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTING

SPECIES: Burrowing Owl

OBSERVER: Jim Fuller, 6 Longview Knoll, RR#6, Iowa City, 52240

DATE: April 8, 1991 8:00-8:02AM

LOCATION: Johnson County along Dupont Bridge Road one-quarter mile north of County Road F-28.

BACKGROUND: I had completed a swing through a portion of the Coralville Reservoir on my way to work, and had just stopped to look at a vesper sparrow sitting on a fence line, so I was not driving very fast when I noticed what appeared to be a burrowing owl sitting on a steel fencepost. After slamming on the brakes, and backing up I was eye to eye with a burrowing owl only about 20 feet away. I watched it for several minutes, and it was still sitting there when I drove away. I notified other birders, and Cal and Bernie Knight were able to find the bird soon thereafter, but it was not found after mid morning. by others. It was in an area of open agricultural land, with a rural airport across the road. I used Swift Audubon binoculars 8.5X44, but could see the bird quite well without optics. It was early morning, and I was looking east on a clear day. I do not remember the sun being a problem, however.

DESCRIPTION: My very first impressions of the bird produced three thoughts. (1) A small owl (2) Long legs (3) Yellow eyes. It was a very small owl, not much bigger than a saw whet. It was differently proportioned, however, mostly because of its long legs which made it appear tall and thin. It was generally brown and white. The rather small head had small facial disks, and there were white areas above and below the disks. The forehead was brown spotted with white. The eyes were a bright yellow color, and the bill was a yellow-white color. It was facing directly at me, so I saw a brown and white chest and belly, with mostly horizontal brown barring. The wings and back were darker brown with white spots. The legs were long and light colored. It swiveled its head a number of times, but I did not see it rock as I have seen other burrowing owls do. It made no vocalization.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Eastern screech owl is grey or red streaked, not brown, and has ear tufts. It is not a long legged owl either. Boreal owl is not known in Iowa, does not have long legs, has a much greyer face and relatively larger head. Northern saw whet owl does not have long legs, has vertical breast streaking, and a relatively larger head. Any of these other owls would be very much out of habitat at the location of the sighting in daylight.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE: I have seen burrowing owl many times out west, and in Florida, as well as two viewings of family groups in

Iowa, one in Cherokee County, and one in Cerro Gordo County. I saw as many as a dozen as recently as three weeks previously in southern California near the Salton Sea.

FIELD NOTES and REFERENCES: Notes were jotted down when I got to my office, and were typed on April 12. No field guides were used, except to look at similar species.