

THE TALE OF A BURROWING OWL

By Paul Gardner

The Ohio Bird Records Committee strives to gather all the sightings of rare birds within the state. Although reports sent to us through the mail are still most welcome, the majority of reports of sightings of rare birds come to the Ohio Bird Records Committee via the internet. Reports are submitted directly to our section of the Ohio Ornithological Society's webpage (www.ohiobirds.org), emailed to the Secretary (psg0708@gmail.com), or gleaned from eBird or one of the many mailing lists or social media sites dedicated to birding in Ohio. While this provides a considerable outreach to the birding community, that community is only a small fraction of Ohio's population. We are always left wondering, What is being seen that we never hear about?

On 31 May 2014, my third day in the position as OBRC Secretary, a report came in "over the transom" that provided a reminder as to how much of Ohio's bird-watching is by people who would never think to identify as birders or participate in the birding community. On that day I opened my new OBRC email inbox and found an email from Jay Withgott, who identified himself as a member of the Oregon Bird Records Committee. I expected that the rest of the email would be some sort of friendly "welcome to the madhouse" camaraderie, but instead, he informed me of a conversation that he had recently had at his cousin's wedding. It seems that the groom's father, who is from Ohio, learned of Jay's interest in birds and had recounted that years ago his father-in-law used to see a burrowing owl during his daily walks in the countryside near Dayton and had photographed it. Using his new kinship network, Jay was able to get copies of the photos, which he forwarded to me, along with the contact info for the groom's father, who was our link back to the original sighting.

The photographs were quite well done and indisputably showed a Burrowing Owl. However, I learned that the original sighting had been in 2007 and that Harold Shelley, the photographer and only known observer of the owl, was now 87 years old. The odds that I would be able to gather sufficient details to allow the report to be reviewed did not seem encouraging. However, a telephone conversation with Mr. Shelley quickly put any doubts to rest. Harold is not only remarkably vital for his age, but his photo files were date

stamped, so he was able to quickly determine that he had made them on 26 and 29 May 2007. Also, he had encountered the owl during his daily walks near New Carlisle in Clark, so while he could not provide a street address for the farm where the owl was seen, he could provide me with turn-by-turn directions for getting there. By using Google Earth, I was able to quickly pinpoint the farm, save the image and send it to Harold, who confirmed it as the proper place. Armed with Harold's photographs and his recollections of the sightings, I was easily able to assemble a report that was accepted by the OBRC with a vote of 9-0, becoming Ohio's fifth record of Burrowing Owl.

One piece of the puzzle remains missing, however, as nothing could be learned about the fate of the bird. Harold remembered only that he quit seeing it "after a while", and in his conversations with the farm family, no one ever mentioned finding it dead. Intriguingly, 13 months later, in Jun 2008, another Burrowing Owl was seen in *Darke* about 40 miles from the New Carlisle sighting, and one was turned into a wildlife rehabilitator in adjacent *Montgomery* the same month (Boone 2008, *The Ohio Cardinal* 31(4):28). It is not known if these sightings represent a small influx of Burrowing Owls to the state, or if a single owl wandered for months across western Ohio largely beyond the gaze of the birding community.

Paul is Secretary of the Ohio Bird Records Committee.