

Umatilla man brings burrowing owls back from the brink

Lone biologist is their last hope

By IAN McCLUSKEY
Oregon Public Broadcasting

If it were up to David H. Johnson, he'd be out of the burrow-making business.

Instead, he stands on a wind-swept prairie, shovel in hand. He wipes the sweat from his brow and surveys the sagebrush as it stretches across the rolling hills. His eyes scan for any flutter of small feathers.

He doesn't see anything and keeps digging in the loose sand. This wide-open stretch of sage and sand and shrubs was once riddled with burrows. For millennia, animals like badgers and prairie dogs pockmarked the Columbia River plateau with burrows.

Johnson has been watching those burrows disappear, one by one. And now, as he stomps his spade into the sand, he knows that there is not a single natural burrow left. He knows because he's counted and tracked them for years.

The only burrows around here are the ones he's installed himself, one at a time.

Johnson builds his burrows out of plastic barrels, 5-gallon buckets, wire mesh and irrigation tubes. They don't look like much — sort of a backyard DIY project. And when he buries his buckets in the ground, they look like just holes in the ground.

But these burrows made of buckets are the last hope for a small population of owls.

Burrowing owls are disappearing across North America at a rate of 2 to 3 percent each year. Johnson has come to an unlikely place to do this work: a patch of wind-swept prairie surrounded by barbed wire and row upon row of concrete bunkers that once stockpiled America's deadliest chemical weapons.

There is probably no one who knows as much or cares as much for these small little owls as Johnson, or "DJ," as his colleagues call him.

"People say I look like an owl, even before they know my connection to them," Johnson says.

Johnson is a self-described "owl person." It started one moonlight-night in Minnesota when he was



Nick Fisher/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Burrowing owl populations are declining each year at a rate of 2 to 3 percent.

just a boy. He was camping when an owl swooped down and perched on his tent. Silhouetted by the moon, it called for some 20 minutes. Johnson listened, transfixed. In those moments, he felt a deep and personal connection with the owl. It was as if, he felt, the owl was calling just to him with a message he was supposed to hear.

"And so I didn't pick owls," he says. "They picked me."

Johnson has devoted his life to researching and advocating for owls. After 41 years in the field, he's the director of the Global Owl Project. His expertise is called on internationally.

One of the most significant calls came from an unexpected place — the Umatilla Chemical Depot. Since its construction in World War II, the Army base had been a top-security, off-limits stretch of sage-

brush, dotted by massive concrete bunkers.

Each concrete bunker is buried under several feet of earth. With their heavy covering of dirt, thick concrete fronts, and massive steel doors, the bunkers look like they were designed to be aircraft hangars, camouflaged and protected from bombing raids by enemy planes. But these bunkers weren't designed to withstand explosions from above; they were built to guard against explosions from within.

Since World War II, they held the Army's high explosives and munitions. During the Cold War, they held 12 percent of America's deadliest chemical weapons, like mustard gas and sarin.

Today, all of the 999 bunkers are empty except for one. Johnson uses this as his workshop.

The Umatilla Chemical Depot called Johnson about a decade ago. Employees there had noticed that the burrowing owls had all but vanished.

"When I came to the depot to work on the burrowing owl project, there were three or four pairs and we knew this was the last of them,"

Johnson recounts. "And it's really hard to recover from zero. So then the question is: what do you do?"

Johnson discovered that the problem was a lack of burrows. Burrowing owls don't dig burrows. In fact, owls in general do not build nests. Rather, they borrow.

In the prairie, where there are no trees to perch in, these little owls adapted to what was once available and plentiful: thousands of burrows left by badgers and prairie dogs and the like.

But as the populations of these animals were wiped out or displaced by human development, the burrows they once dug began to disappear. When the natural burrows began to disappear, so did the little owls that depended upon them.

"Not enough nest holes, no reproduction. Boom, they decline," Johnson explains. "So we put in artificial burrows to rescue that."

Now, Johnson has created 182 artificial burrows on the depot.

"We put in the first burrows here as a rescue mission and it quickly turned into an opportunity," he says.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST FOR ASTORIA AccuWeather DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP

TONIGHT	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY
45	52 / 39	48 / 39	46 / 37	49 / 45
Breezy with occasional rain	Mostly cloudy with a couple of showers	Cloudy with a passing shower	Periods of rain	Rain; breezy in the afternoon

ALMANAC Astoria through Wednesday.

Temperatures
 High/low 50°/30°
 Normal high/low 49°/37°
 Record high 61° in 1981
 Record low 21° in 1974

Precipitation
 Wednesday 0.00"
 Month to date 0.00"
 Normal month to date 0.69"
 Year to date 0.00"
 Normal year to date 0.69"

SUN AND MOON
 Sunset tonight 4:42 p.m.
 Sunrise Friday 7:58 a.m.
 Moonrise today 5:46 a.m.
 Moonset today 3:10 p.m.

REGIONAL WEATHER
 Shown is tomorrow's weather. Temperatures are tonight's lows and tomorrow's highs.

UNDER THE SKY
 Tonight's Sky: Before sunrise low in the east, waning crescent moon and Jupiter within 3 degrees. Quadrantid meteor shower peaks.

Source: Jim Todd, OMSI

TOMORROW'S TIDES
 Astoria / Port Docks

Time	High	Time	Low
12:29 a.m.	7.8 ft.	5:48 a.m.	3.3 ft.
11:42 a.m.	9.6 ft.	6:51 p.m.	-0.4 ft.

NATIONAL CITIES

City	Today	Fri.	Lo	W	Hi	Lo	W
Atlanta	59	52	c	64	42	r	
Boston	48	32	pc	48	36	s	
Chicago	39	29	s	45	29	s	
Denver	51	28	s	58	29	s	
Des Moines	47	28	s	50	28	s	
Detroit	39	29	pc	45	29	s	
El Paso	47	25	pc	53	28	s	
Fairbanks	-2	-22	pc	-14	-26	pc	
Honolulu	82	71	s	83	71	pc	
Indianapolis	42	26	s	48	30	pc	
Kansas City	47	25	pc	53	27	s	
Las Vegas	52	36	s	56	38	s	
Los Angeles	66	45	s	67	48	s	
Memphis	49	44	c	47	35	r	
Miami	83	71	pc	84	68	s	
Nashville	50	44	c	55	36	r	
New Orleans	66	47	r	57	44	pc	
New York	47	35	pc	47	39	pc	
Oklahoma City	34	25	sn	50	26	s	
Philadelphia	48	33	pc	49	41	pc	
St. Louis	45	28	s	50	33	pc	
Salt Lake City	30	20	pc	37	25	pc	
San Francisco	55	43	s	56	50	pc	
Seattle	53	46	r	52	41	sh	
Washington, DC	51	37	pc	52	45	pc	

TOMORROW'S NATIONAL WEATHER
 Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are highs for the day.

Sen. Wyden visits Astoria Sunday

The Daily Astorian
 U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden will be in Astoria Sunday. His town hall starts at noon at the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

government and listen to Oregonians' ideas for what they want accomplished," Wyden, D-Oregon, said in a release. "These open-to-all town hall meetings are part of what I call the 'Oregon Way' that focuses on conversations and solutions."

of a town hall tour, part of a pledge by Wyden since joining the Senate in 1996 to hold an event in each county once a year. Wyden will visit McMinnville and Sherwood Friday; Lincoln City and Tillamook Saturday; Astoria and St. Helens Sunday; and Woodburn Monday.

County seeks input on agritourism

The Daily Astorian
 Clatsop County wants public input about local agritourism. The county is review-

ing its land use regulations covering residential agriculture-zoned land. It is particularly interested in hearing from residents who use land for agricultural activities and

businesses to find out which uses they are interested in. An online survey through the county's website is available at tinyurl.com/Clatsopagritourism

ON THE RECORD

Domestic assault
 • Late Wednesday, the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office arrested David Kurns II, 37, of Gearhart, for fourth-degree assault, harassment and coercion. A call from Westlake Lane

came in around 10:45 p.m. from a female neighbor claiming she was being hit by a male.
DUII
 • Late Monday, Warrenton police arrested Bernardo Lozano Sanchez, 37,

of Astoria, on charges of driving under the influence of intoxicants and driving while suspended. Sanchez was pulled over near Ocean Crest Chevrolet and refused a blood alcohol test before his arrest.

DEATH

Dec. 28, 2018
 GOODENOUGH, Gary Leonard, 54, of Gearhart, died in Gearhart. Caldwell's Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

THURSDAY
 Astoria Design Review Committee, 5:30 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

LOTTERIES

OREGON	WASHINGTON
Wednesday's Pick 4: 1 p.m.: 6-8-1-4 4 p.m.: 8-7-4-8 7 p.m.: 0-0-8-8 10 p.m.: 2-9-4-0	03-06-19-26-29-30 Estimated jackpot: \$6.3 million Wednesday's Powerball: 08-12-42-46-56, Powerball: 12, Power Play: 2 Estimated jackpot: \$53 million
Wednesday's Lucky Lines: 02-07-10-15-FREE-19-21-25-30 Estimated jackpot: \$34,000 Wednesday's Megabucks:	Estimated jackpot: \$180,000 Wednesday's Keno: 09-18-19-20-21-23-24-25-26-29-37-40-43-46-48-50-51-62-70-79 Wednesday's Lotto: 01-02-04-08-09-34 Estimated jackpot: \$2.4 million Wednesday's Match 4: 02-17-18-24

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Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at DailyAstorian.com/forms/obits, by email at ewilson@dailyastorian.com, placed via the funeral home or in person at The Daily Astorian office, 949 Exchange St. in Astoria.

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