

BURROWING OWL.

† *SURNIA CUNICULARIA*, *Gmel.*

PLATE XXXI.—MALE AND FEMALE.

This singular species was added to our Fauna by Mr. THOMAS SAY, who met with it in the course of Colonel LONG's expedition to the Rocky Mountains. The observations of that zealous naturalist have been published in the first volume of the Continuation of WILSON's American Ornithology by the Prince of MÜSIGNANO, and will be repeated below, after I have presented you with the notice transmitted to me by my friend Mr. TOWNSEND. He says:—

“This species inhabits the plains near the Columbia River and the whole extent of the Rocky Mountains, residing in the forsaken burrows of the Marmots and American Badgers, but never lives on terms of intimacy with either of these animals, as has been so often stated. The burrow selected by this bird is usually found at the foot of a wormwood bush (*Artemisia*), upon the summit of which this Owl often perches, and stands for a considerable while. On their being approached, they utter a low chattering sound, start, and skim along the plain near the ground for a considerable distance. When winged, they make immediately for the nearest burrow, and when once within it, it is impossible to dislodge them. They are strictly diurnal, feed principally upon grasshoppers and crickets, and, according to the Indians, sometimes upon field-mice. The nest is composed of fine grass, and placed at the extremity of the hole. The eggs are uniformly four in number, pale white, and about the size of those of the common House-Pigeon, the great end, however, being remarkably large, and tapering abruptly. Nothing can be more unpleasant than the bagging of this species, on account of the fleas with which their plumage swarms, and which in all probability have been left in the burrow by the Badger or Marmot, at the time it was abandoned by these animals. I know of no other bird infested by that kind of vermin. This species suddenly disappears in the early part of the month of August, and the Indians assert with great confidence that it retires into its burrow, and spends the winter there in a torpid state.”

Mr. SAY's account, as presented in the Continuation of WILSON's American Ornithology, is as follows:—“In the Trans-Mississippian territories of the United States, the Burrowing Owl resides exclusively in the villages of the Marmot or Prairie Dog, whose excavations are so commodious as to render

it unnecessary that our bird should dig for himself, as he is said to do in other parts of the world, where no burrowing animals exist. These villages are very numerous and variable in their extent, sometimes covering only a few acres, and at others spreading over the surface of the country for miles together. They are composed of slightly elevated mounds, having the form of a truncated cone, about two feet in width at base, and seldom rising as high as eighteen inches above the surface of the soil. The entrance is placed either at the top or on the side, and the whole mound is beaten down externally, especially at the summit, resembling a much used foot-path.

"From the entrance, the passage into the mound descends vertically for one or two feet, and is thence continued obliquely downwards, until it terminates in an apartment, within which the industrious Marmot constructs, on the approach of the cold season, the comfortable cell for his winter's sleep. This cell, which is composed of fine dry grass, is globular in form, with an opening at top capable of admitting the finger; and the whole is so firmly compacted, that it might, without injury, be rolled over the floor.

"It is delightful, during fine weather, to see these lively little creatures sporting about the entrance of their burrows, which are always kept in the neatest repair, and are often inhabited by several individuals. When alarmed, they immediately take refuge in their subterranean chambers, or, if the dreaded danger be not immediately impending, they stand near the brink of the entrance, bravely barking and flourishing their tails, or else sit erect to reconnoitre the movements of the enemy. * * *

"In all these prairie villages, the Burrowing Owl is seen moving briskly about, or else in small flocks scattered among the mounds, and, at a distance, it may be mistaken for the Marmot itself when sitting erect. They manifest but little timidity, and allow themselves to be approached sufficiently close for shooting; but, if alarmed, some or all of them soar away, and settle down again at a short distance. If further disturbed, their flight is continued until they are no longer in view, or they descend into their dwellings, whence they are difficult to dislodge.

"The burrows into which these Owls have been seen to descend, on the plains of the river Platte, where they are most numerous, were evidently excavated by the Marmot, whence it has been inferred by SAY, that they were either common, though unfriendly residents of the same habitation, or that our Owl was the sole occupant of a burrow acquired by the right of conquest. The evidence of this was clearly presented by the ruinous condition of the burrows tenanted by the Owl, which were frequently caved in, and their sides channelled by the rains, while the neat and well-preserved mansion of the Marmot shewed the active care of a skilful and industrious owner. We have no evidence that the Owl and Marmot habitually resort to



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one burrow, yet we are well assured by PIKE and others, that a common danger often drives them into the same excavation, where lizards and rattlesnakes also enter for concealment and safety.

The note of our bird is strikingly similar to the cry of the Marmot, which sounds like *cheh, cheh*, pronounced several times in rapid succession. Its food appears to consist entirely of insects, as, on examination of its stomach, nothing but parts of their hard wing-cases were found."

BURROWING OWL, *Strix cunicularia*, Say, in Long's Exped., vol. i. p. 200.

BURROWING OWL, *Strix cunicularia*, Bonap. Amer. Orn., vol. i. p. 68.

BURROWING OWL, *Strix cunicularia*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. v. p. 264.

BURROWING OWL, *Strix cunicularia*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 118.

Feet rather long, slender; tarsus covered with short soft feathers, of which the shafts only remain toward the lower part; toes short, their upper surface covered with bristles or the shafts of feathers; tail short, arched, narrow, slightly rounded. Bill greyish-yellow; claws black. General colour of upper parts light yellowish-brown, or umber-brown, spotted with white; the quills with triangular reddish-white spots from the margins of both webs, there being five on each web of the first; the tail similarly barred, there being on the middle feathers four double spots, and the tips of all white. Face greyish-white; throat and ruff white, succeeded by a mottled brown band, beneath which is a patch of white; the rest of the lower parts yellowish-white, with broad bars of light reddish-brown, which are closer on the sides of the breast; abdomen, lower tail-coverts, and legs without spots.

Male, 10, 24. Female, 11.

GENUS II.—ULULA. NIGHT-OWL.

Bill short, strong, very deep, its upper outline decurved from the base; lower mandible abruptly rounded, with a notch on each side. Nostrils broadly elliptical, rather large. Conch of ear very large, elliptical, extending from the base of the lower jaw to near the top of the head, with an anterior semicircular operculum in its whole length. Feet rather short, strong; tarsi and toes covered with very soft downy feathers. Plumage full, and very soft; facial disks complete. Wings rather long, very broad, much rounded, the third quill longest; the filaments of the first, half of the second, and the terminal part of the third, free and recurved. Tail of moderate length, arched, slightly rounded.



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Audubon, John James. 1840. "Burrowing Owl, *Surnia cunicularia*, Gmel. [Pl. 31]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 119–121. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319144>.

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