

# PRINCE PHILIP'S 1987 CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONSERVATION IN SASKATCHEWAN

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When Prince Phillip visited Saskatchewan in 1987, he gave a significant boost to four conservation efforts in the province. We wish to honour and acknowledge his contributions to Operation Burrowing Owl, creation of the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area, recognition of Saskatchewan and Canada's contribution to the efforts to preserve wetlands of international importance, and Ducks Unlimited's wetland conservation program.

Prince Philip's visit was arranged through World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Canada in recognition of the centennial of wildlife conservation in Canada. 1987 marked the 100th anniversary of the creation of North America's first Migratory Bird Sanctuary in 1887 at the north end of Last Mountain Lake.<sup>1</sup>

Prince Philip came in his role as President of WWF International to speak at the meeting of the RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, which was being held in Regina. At this convention, Saskatchewan dedicated 63,500 hectares at the Quill Lakes to this international effort. This added to the 15,600 hectares of federal and provincial lands at the north end of Last Mountain Lake previously dedicated in 1982. At the time, Canada became the largest signatory to the RAMSAR, with more than 12,886,000 hectares of wetlands included under the convention. Prince Philip's commitment to international conservation efforts brought attention



Prince Philip addresses guests at the 1987 launch of Operation Burrowing Owl. Lorne Scott (left) and Dale Hjertaas (right) look on. Photo credit: Warren Hjertaas.

to Saskatchewan and Canada's leadership role in wetland protection.

WWF Canada, under Monte Hummel's leadership, had initiated the Wild West Program and was working with local conservationists to stimulate conservation action on prairie species. Prince Philip agreed to aid conservation efforts by attending the launch of Operation Burrowing Owl, the opening of the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area, and to attend a fundraising banquet organized by Ducks Unlimited.

A 1986 survey of Burrowing Owl habitats in the Weyburn and Regina topographic map sheets<sup>2</sup> had shown that the Burrowing Owl population in southeastern Saskatchewan was relatively small, and that the habitats they were nesting in were being lost. We also learned that farmers knew the Burrowing Owl and liked the species but did not know it was threatened. The study recommended development of a habitat protection program.

Operation Burrowing Owl (OBO) was developed to protect Burrowing Owl habitats by creating awareness

and support for owl conservation.<sup>3</sup>

To do that, it was necessary that farmers and ranchers became aware of the Burrowing Owl as a threatened species and of OBO so they would report owls to OBO. This is where Prince Phillip made his major contribution. By attending the opening, speaking to the 600 people convened at Grant and Sheila Fahlman's Farm, and presenting the first OBO signs to eight landowners from different areas of the province, the Prince made OBO front page news in most of the weekly newspapers across the Burrowing Owl's range. Almost overnight, awareness of the Burrowing Owl's plight and of OBO rose. Hundreds of reports of Burrowing Owls were received. During the initial five years, 499 landowners enrolled in the program. Without Prince Philip's support, the OBO program would have developed more slowly and required much more effort in publicity and advertising to create awareness of the Burrowing Owl's plight.

In 1987, the area that is now the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife



Prince Philip points to a Burrowing Owl chick being held by Dale Hjertaas during the launch of Operation Burrowing Owl. Photo credit: Warren Hjertaas.

Area consisted of a Migratory Bird Sanctuary and a Provincial Wildlife Management Unit on a mix of federal and provincial lands. While discussions on bringing the whole area into a National Wildlife Area were underway before Prince Philip's visit was planned, they were progressing slowly. Phil Taylor, then with Canadian Wildlife Service, and Dale Hjertaas, then with the provincial Wildlife Branch, recall Prince Philip's visit spurring the necessary work by both governments to transfer provincial lands to Canada and create the National Wildlife Area. While it may have been created anyway, it certainly moved forward more quickly because of Prince Philip's visit.

Money is also important to conservation. While in Regina, Prince Philip attended a fundraising banquet at the Saskatchewan Centre of the Arts organized by Ducks Unlimited. Besides being the Guest of Honour at the banquet, Prince Philip agreed to be photographed with all successful bidders at the auction, which almost certainly helped raise bid prices. Many people flew in from other parts of Canada and from the United States to attend this very successful fundraiser, providing funds to help with Ducks Unlimited Canada's wetland conservation work.

Internationally known wildlife artist Robert Bateman donated a painting

titled "American White Pelicans at Last Mountain Lake", from which the signed, limited edition prints were sold at the auction, aiding the fundraising effort.

As we remember Prince Philip's life, we also wish to share two small incidents from the Operation Burrowing Owl launch that show Prince Philip was both knowledgeable and very interested in the local wildlife.

During the OBO opening the official party — which included Prince Philip, Hon. Tom McMillan, Federal Minister of Environment and Hon. Gary Lane, Provincial Minister of Justice, and the two authors — walked from the yard into the pasture to see the Burrowing Owls nesting there. Everyone was, of course, wearing a jacket and tie. Keen as we are on birds, neither of the authors had binoculars with us but Prince Philip pulled a pair of binoculars from a pocket so he could have a good look at the owls. His interest was real.

We also opened a nest box. The plan was for members of the official party to each hold an owl chick and show them to the people at the event. Lorne Scott was pulling the chicks from the nest box. When he offered one to Prince Philip, the Prince said "No thank you." As some readers will know, and Prince Philip clearly knew, young birds, when disturbed,



Prince Philip presents the first Operation Burrowing Owl sign to Grant Fahlman. Photo credit: Warren Hjertaas.

often defecate. Someone else took the chick, which promptly defecated in his hand. Prince Philip said, "Now I will take it" and the program proceeded. He was clearly familiar with this aspect of bird behaviour.

Prince Philip's recent death prompted us to write this reflection on his 1987 visit to Saskatchewan. He used his fame to move conservation objectives forward during his visit. We expect he had a similar positive impact on conservation during his visits in many other areas of the world.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Phil Taylor for his recollections of Prince Philip's visit and thoughts on positive outcomes from that visit.

1. Various authors (1987) *Blue Jay* 45(4):187-280. This issue was devoted to centennial celebrations across Canada: Wildlife '87: Gaining Momentum.
2. Hjertaas, Dale G. and Wendy Lyon (1987) A Stratified Random Survey For Burrowing Owls On The Weyburn (62E) and Regina (72I) Map Areas. Wildlife Technical Report 87-2. Saskatchewan Parks, Recreation and Culture, Regina, Sask.
3. Hjertaas, D.G. (1997) Operation Burrowing Owl in Saskatchewan. Pp. 112-116 in J. L. Lincer and K. Steenhof, Eds., *The burrowing owl, its biology and management including the proceedings of the First International Burrowing Owl Symposium*. Raptor Research Report Number 9, Raptor Research. 