

Burrowing Owl

(Athene cunicularia)

People have long been fascinated with the Burrowing Owl, a ground dwelling inhabitant of western grasslands and deserts. The first published report was in 1782 by Giovanni Iganzio (Long, 1998). The Burrowing Owl has also been known as the Ground Owl, Prairie Dog Owl, Rattlesnake Owl, Howdy Owl, Cuckoo Owl, Tunnel Owl, Gopher Owl, and Hill Owl. Historically, the Zuni Indians called this owl “priest of the prairie dogs,” because it frequently nests and roosts in empty prairie dog burrows.





Adult Burrowing Owls. Note long legs and bright yellow eyes.

Burrowing Owls nest throughout much of New Mexico in grasslands and shrub lands primarily below about 6500' elevation. They retreat from most of the northern 2/3 of the state in winter but remain all year in the south

Adult/Young

Burrowing Owls are so named because they nest underground in burrows dug by small mammals like ground squirrels and prairie dogs. They have brown spotted feathers with white and long legs. The young owls have a buffy colored, unspotted breast and belly. The Burrowing Owls have distinctive white "eyebrows" above bright yellow eyes. They are one of the smaller owls in North America.

Juveniles

Juveniles can give a rattlesnake-like buzz when threatened. This fools predators into thinking there is something a lot more dangerous than an owlet in the burrow.

Habitat

Burrowing Owls inhabit dry, open, short grass, treeless plains, often associated with burrowing

mammals especially prairie dogs. Burrowing Owls can also inhabit golf courses, cemeteries, road allowances within cities, airports, vacant lots in residential areas, university campuses, and fairgrounds.

Owls tend to select their burrows in areas where there are other burrows, surrounded by bare ground or short grass, including areas such as mowed roadsides. Most often burrows dug by mammals such as ground squirrels, badgers, prairie dogs, and kangaroo rats are used. However, in areas where mammals are not present, owls will use human-made structures (pipes, culverts).

Diet

Insects are the owls preferred prey, but owls are opportunistic feeders and will eat rodents, small birds, amphibians, reptiles, and bats.

Incubation period

The female incubates 3-12 eggs, and the male feeds the female during this period. Incubation begins when the first egg is laid, and lasts for 28 days. Young owls start appearing at the burrow entrance at about 2 weeks of age. Chicks are able to leave the nest to hunt insects on their own at about 45 days. They can fly well by the time they are 6 weeks old

Burrowing Owl Conservation

Intensified land use, primarily the conversion of grasslands for agricultural purposes and urban development, has resulted in widespread loss of nesting habitat. The eradication of prairie dogs and ground squirrels, pesticide use, and low availability of food all contribute to population decline.

Conservation efforts should: Identify and prioritize the most valuable habitats for conservation activity, promote the conservation of burrowing mammals, reduce the use of pesticides that affect the owl's food supply, establish cooperative research programs to determine why the owls are declining, familiarize private landowners with owl conservation issues, and promote sustainable rangeland practices.

New Mexico Burrowing Owl Working Group information can be obtained at:

www.nmburrowingowl.com

Burrowing Owl Survey Protocol can be obtained from the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish: www.wildlife.state.nm.us

Reference: Haug, E. A., B. A. Millsap, and M.S. Martell. 1993. Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



Fledgling owlets outside their burrow