

Burrowing Owls: The “howdy” bird

This long-legged burrowing owl, often active by day, is popular with people wherever found, but the birds have become rare. A nickname of the bird is the howdy bird because of the way it appears to nod in greeting.



They favor flat open ground with very short grass or bare soil. Their sandy brown plumage and color pattern helps them blend in with the vegetation in their habitat and avoid predation. They have brown dorsal (back) feathers with patches of white spots, a white underside with brown bar-shaped spots, feathered tarsi (feet), large yellow eyes, a white chin, and no ear tufts.

The pint-sized burrowing owl is one of the smallest of the 171 species of owls worldwide. An adult weighs from 5 to 8.5 ounces and can reach a height of nine inches with a wingspan of 20 to 24 inches. Their unusually long legs provide additional height for a better view from its typical ground-level perch.

The scientific name *Athene cucularia* comes from the Greek word *athene*, referring to the Greek goddess of wisdom whose favorite bird was an owl, and the Latin word *cucularia*, meaning a miner or burrower.

There are approximately 22 subspecies of genetically distinct subspecies of burrowing owls, most found in the Andes and Antilles. Only two – *A. c. hypugaea* (Western burrowing owl) and *A. c. floridana* (Florida burrowing owl) – are found in North America.



Burrowing owls were observed in Florida in the late 1800s on dry prairies in south-central Florida. As native dry prairie habitats were reduced because of fire suppression and conversion to human land uses, the owls expanded their breeding range. They are now found mostly on agricultural fields, airports, ball fields, and residential lots. A two-day state-wide census in 2017 counted more than 2,800 nesting pairs across the state with an estimated 1,000 nesting pairs in Cape Coral.

The life of a burrowing owl

The life span of the burrowing owl is six to eight years. They may be sexually mature at one year of age. Burrowing owls live as single breeding pairs, often forming loose colonies of multiple families.

Burrowing owls mostly eat insects, but they may also eat frogs, anoles, and snakes, and they also capture and kill small mammals and other small birds. They hunt mostly at dusk and at night by swooping down from a perch, hovering over fields, or running along the ground, then clutching prey in its talons. They can also hover in midair to catch food.

Burrows have a small opening at the surface but the tunnel can be up to 3 feet deep and 12 feet long. Cape Coral has upwards of 2,500 burrows within the City limits, but not all are in use. Every known burrow in the City not on residential property has been marked with PVC pipes. The burrows where the owls live can extend outside the marked area.

Before laying eggs, the owls place animal dung near the entrances of the burrow to attract insects that the owls then catch and eat. They may also collect trash bits to adorn the entrance, possibly signifying that the burrow is occupied.

Burrowing owls form monogamous bonds during the nesting season. In Florida, females typically lay four to six eggs within a week from February through July. The eggs incubate in about 28 days. The chicks spend two weeks in the burrow with the female. The male stands guard over the burrow and provides food. They learn how to fly when they are four to six weeks old and stay with the parents until they can sustain themselves at about 12 weeks of age. They remain in the parent's territory to forage. The adults begin molting about the time the young fledge, and the molt is complete in August.

Conservation status

Burrowing owl populations have been declining for many years due to habitat loss, climate change (flooding, hotter summers), predation by other animals, and mortality directly caused by people (hit by cars, poisoned, and construction activities).

As of 2016, Florida classified the burrowing owl as Threatened. They are protected both by state and local laws. This classification means it is prohibited



to significantly disrupt normal breeding, feeding, and sheltering behavioral patterns, taking, possessing, or selling burrowing owls, their nests (burrows), or eggs. The federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act also protects burrowing owls, eggs, and young. There is a permitting process to “take” burrowing owls.

The protection status requires that at least a 10-foot buffer be maintained around the entrance of the burrows during the non-breeding season (July 11 to Feb. 14) and at least a 33-foot buffer during the breeding season (Feb. 15 to July 10).

One of a kind

- One of the smallest species of owls.
- Spends its time on the ground in open, treeless areas.
- It is one of a few ground-nesting owls and the only one that nests exclusively underground.
- Most owls are nocturnal, mainly active at night, but burrowing owls are diurnal, active both day and night during the breeding season.
- Unlike most owls in which the female is larger than the male, the burrowing owl's sexes are the same size. Their plumage is also similar, although the male may become lighter in color due to sun bleaching from standing outside the burrow while the female remains darker in color due to being inside the burrow when nesting.
- Unlike the Western species that take over others' burrows, burrowing owls in Florida will dig their own burrows but readily accept a “starter” burrow provided by conservation groups.
- Burrowing owls are migratory, except for the population in Florida. They often hide in the summer to avoid the hot summer sun.

You can help

- Reduce the use of insecticides near burrowing owl populations to reduce the chance of inadvertent owl poisoning. Remember, burrowing owls feed on insects.
- Don't use rat poison. Many owls, birds, cats and dogs eat mice and rats. If they eat poisoned animals, they can die too.
- Call 1-888-404-FWCC (3922) to report malicious destruction or harassment of burrowing owls or their nests.
- The best time to see burrowing owls is from January through June, and the best time to see the chicks is late April through June. Stay 20 feet away and don't stay for long periods. While the owls may seem unaffected by your presence, their activity is disrupted and may prevent them from hunting for food, especially when there are chicks.
- Learn more from the Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife, Audubon Society of the Everglades (Marco Island), and other citizen organizations. They help educate the public by holding festivals, offering tours, providing guidance on starter burrows, and more.
- Learn more. Visit GreenSyncInc.org for more information.
- Be concerned. As many as a million species on the planet are now at risk because of increased human population and too little concern, according to a recent United Nations report.

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