

The Burrowing Owl

The Burrowing Owl or *Athene cunicularia hypugaea* has the longest leg length and most unique habitat of all owls. The burrowing owl is usually eight inches in length, with a twenty-two inch wingspan, weighing from six to eight ounces.

This owl is also known as the ground, prairie dog or gopher owl. Why would an owl be given such a name as a "ground" owl? The reason these owls are referred to as "ground" owls is because they live in the abandoned burrows of badgers, gophers, or foxes on the ground and not in a tree, which is where every other species of owls lives. This is a very unique aspect of this particular owl.

Usually, the male burrowing owl prepares the burrow for himself and his future family by lining it with dried plants, feathers, and cow dung. The courtship of these species is displayed in the flashing of white markings, cooing, bowing, scratching, nipping, and repeated short flights. After the owls mate, the females lay three to 12 eggs, from mid-May to early-June. The eggs hatch in about 14 days and the owlets can fly by the time when they are six-weeks old. In 42 to 50 days, the young owls leave the parent's nest.

These owls are fairly small. Unlike other owl species, the females are smaller than the males. They have yellow eyes, a yellow bill on a round head with brown auriculars, and no ear tufts. They have brown upper parts with white spotting on the back, wings, and head; a dark chest with white spotting; and a white belly with brown barring. The two distinguishing characteristics of these owls are their skinny long legs and the fact that they are most active during daytime - they are diurnal, unlike most of the other species of owls that are most active at nighttime (nocturnal).

In late spring and early summer, they eat small mammals such as moles and mice, but later in the year, they switch to insects, especially grasshoppers and beetles. These owls also prey on smaller birds, amphibians, and reptiles.

The burrowing owls make a variety of unique sounds depending on the location and the reason for the noise. "Who" - "Who" is the main sound, which is made by a male, when he wants to attract a female's attention or when he defends his territory. Other sounds include rasps, chucks, chatter, and screams - the owlets give a rattlesnake - like buzz when threatened into the burrow. In total, the burrowing owls can make up to 17 vocalizations.

These are small owls of North America - from southern Canada to Mexico. They can also be found in Florida, the West Indies and Central and South America.

The burrowing owl became an endangered species in 2000, with only half their population remaining in the Canadian provinces. In other parts of North America, such as North Dakota and Western Montana, they have virtually disappeared. What leads to the extinction of these owls? Because these owls are dependant on other "ground" animals, such as gophers, foxes, woodchucks, armadillos, and ground squirrels to provide them with burrows, they are directly affected when these species experience change. Like the burrowing owls, many of these species have a preference for uncultivated lands.

Environmental issues that humans have created in these areas have caused many these wildlife populations to decrease, which makes it difficult for the burrowing owl to find nesting sites. We must protect the burrowing owl and its habitat before these intelligent, beautiful birds become extinct.

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