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Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia*

Most non-Floridians do not envision subtropical, palm-fringed prairies when they think of this long-legged, ground-dwelling owl. In fact, even many ornithologists are surprised that Burrowing Owls exist so far from the prairie dogs and badgers whose burrows they inhabit on the North American Great Plains. However, the Burrowing Owl has a wide distribution outside the western United States, ranging eastward throughout much of the Caribbean Basin and southward to the southern tip of South America.

Habitat. Burrowing Owls inhabit open native prairies and cleared areas that offer an expanse of short, herbaceous groundcover, such as pastures, golf courses, fallow agricultural fields, vacant lots, airports, and athletic fields. In both natural and human-made habitats, they are attracted to elevated areas, such as road berms and canal banks. In Florida, Burrowing Owls prey heavily on insects and vertebrates associated with disturbed areas, including mole crickets, June beetles, dung beetles, and, in South Florida, brown anoles and Cuban treefrogs (Lewis 1973, Hennemann 1980, Wesemann and Rowe 1987).

Burrowing Owls also feed on road-killed animals and songbirds that are killed by flying into windows (B. Millsap, pers. obs.).



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Like their western relatives, Florida Burrowing Owls (*A. c. floridana*) lay their eggs and raise their young in burrows in the ground (an occasional anomalous pair will lay eggs above ground). Although the birds will use gopher tortoise and armadillo burrows, most pairs excavate their own burrows (B. Millsap, pers. obs.), unlike western Burrowing Owls. Active nest burrows are lined with sod, animal feces, and decorative pieces of shell or trash. Burrowing Owls lay from 3 to 10 unmarked white eggs (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Incubation lasts approximately 30 days, and the young fledge about 40 days after hatching (Millsap and Bear 1990).

Seasonal Occurrence. Burrowing Owls occur throughout the year in Florida. Stevenson and Anderson (1994) indicate that data suggest postbreeding dispersal and short north-south movements. Egg-laying has been observed from early October to early May, with a peak in mid-March (Millsap and Bear 1990). Heavy summer rains appear to put an end to nesting (and many nest burrows) in late June and early July.

Status. As the Atlas map shows, the Florida Burrowing Owl occurs over a relatively wide area of the state, from Madison and Duval counties south to the middle Keys. Within this broad range, the species can best be considered local and spotty in distribution and dependent on the availability of suitable habitat. Burrowing Owls are conspicuously absent from the extensive wetlands of the Everglades and Big Cypress areas of South Florida and of the Panhandle and much of the northeastern Atlantic Coast. Since the end of the Atlas survey period, nesting has been observed on Eglin Air Force Base, and a pair was found in Decatur County, Georgia (B. Millsap pers. obs.).

The center of the Burrowing Owls range in Florida remains as it was in the early 1900s the prairies of Osceola, DeSoto, and Okeechobee counties. However, since the 1920s, and fairly rapidly since the 1950s, Burrowing Owls have expanded their range to the north and south as these areas have been cleared for cattle grazing and land development (Courser 1979).

Unlike most owls, Burrowing Owls give the impression of being colonial breeders, with several pairs or family groups occupying a single pasture (Howell 1932, Johnsgard 1988). Whether or not they are truly colonial is a matter of interpretation, but the species does attain incredibly high densities in some areas. For example, in Cape Coral in Lee County, densities of up to 44 pairs per square mile have been observed (Millsap and Bear 1990).

Because much of its native habitat has been converted to other uses, the Burrowing Owl is listed as a Species of Special Concern in Florida (Wood 1991). Fortunately, it readily adapts to human-made habitats.

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Burrowing Owl

