

BURROWING OWL (*Athene cunicularia*)

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/birds/owls/burrowing-owl/>



Appearance

The burrowing owl is one of the smallest owls in Florida. It can reach a length of nine inches with a wingspan of 21 inches. Burrowing owls have brown dorsal (back) feathers with patches of white spots, and a white underside with brown bar-shaped spots. The body color pattern helps them blend in with the vegetation in their habitat and avoid predation (Millsap 1996). They also have large yellow eyes and a white chin.

The burrowing owl is a pint-sized bird that lives in open, treeless areas. The burrowing owl spends most of its time on the ground, where its sandy brown plumage provides camouflage from potential predators. One of Florida's smallest owls, it averages nine inches in height with a wingspan of 21 inches. The burrowing owl lacks the ear tufts of the more familiar woodland owls. Bright yellow eyes and a white chin accent the face. Unusually long legs provide additional height for a better view from its typical ground-level perch.

Behavior

The diet of the burrowing owl primarily consists of insects; however, they will also feed on snakes, frogs, small lizards, birds, and rodents. Burrowing owls are different than other owls as they are active during the day time (diurnal) rather than at night (nocturnal) during breeding season. During the non-breeding season, they become more nocturnal.

The typical breeding season for the Florida burrowing owl is February 15 to July 10, though owls can breed earlier or later. Nesting occurs in burrows in the ground that they dig. These burrows will be maintained and used again the following year (Haug et al. 1993). Females lay up to eight eggs within a one-week period, and they will incubate the eggs for up to 28 days. Once the white-feathered juveniles are born, it takes two weeks before they are ready and able to appear out of the burrow. Juveniles will begin learning how to fly at four weeks, but will not be able to fly well until they are six weeks old. Juveniles will stay with the parents until they are able to self-sustain at 12 weeks old.

PHOTO: <https://audubonwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FWC-guidelines-2018.pdf>



Habitat

Burrowing owls inhabit open prairies in Florida that have very little understory (floor) vegetation. These areas include golf courses, airports, pastures, agriculture fields, and vacant lots. The drainage of wetlands, although detrimental to many organisms, increases the areas of habitat for the burrowing owl. The range of the burrowing owl is throughout the peninsular of Florida in patches and localized areas. Burrowing owls can also be found in the Bahamas (Florida Natural Areas Inventory 2001).

Threats

The burrowing owl faces many threats to its population. The main threat is the continued loss of habitat. Threats to habitat include construction activities development and harassment by humans and domesticated animals. Heavy floods can destroy burrows in the ground, which can cause the destruction of eggs and young. Other threats include increased predation by ground and aerial predators in the burrowing owl's habitat, and vehicle strikes.



BURROWING OWLS AT BROWARD COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD PROPERTIES

The Environmental Compliance Section of the Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) Department tracks and monitors the presence of burrowing owls located on school properties. Florida burrowing owls are currently classified as **State Threatened Species** by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This means that taking, possessing, or selling burrowing owls, their nests (i.e., burrows), or eggs is prohibited without a permit (68A-27 F.A.C.). Burrowing owls, eggs, and young are also protected by the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.



Burrowing owls may nest in any month of the year; however, nesting generally takes place between February 15th and July 10th with fledglings appearing outside the burrows in July and August. Florida burrowing owls excavate their own burrows, which are typically between 5 and 10 feet long. They can have one breeding burrow and 1 or more satellite burrows.



If a burrow is observed and located within a playground, track area, football field, baseball field or a proposed construction site on school grounds, we instruct school staff to prohibit activities in the vicinity of the burrow (greater than 33 feet from burrow) and promptly notify EH&S. Upon notification we will arrange for the installation of a 10 foot square barrier around the burrow utilizing rope, wood, or PVC (not plastic fencing), a perch and sign explaining this is a protected bird site and that molesting owls or their nests is a crime.



Interior of Barrier Does not Need Line Trimming



Interior of Barrier Needs Line Trimming

The 10 foot barrier allows for string cutting with hand held equipment inside the barrier and mowing outside of the barrier. It is important to keep the grass trimmed to a height of less than 5 inches within the 10 feet barrier so owls are able to avoid predators. Mowers should not be used within 10 feet of the burrow entrance to prevent burrow collapse. The Environmental Compliance section of EH&S periodically visually inspects identified facilities and burrow(s) during the nesting season for activity including the number of burrows, number of owls present, and if there are any young present.

Burrows should never be filled in by onsite or Grounds Maintenance personnel, whether they believe it is abandoned or not. A permit is required, and a specific protocol must be followed, to investigate burrow occupancy and determine if burrow closure is possible. Please contact EH&S Environmental Compliance section at 754-321-4200 or help@browardschools.com with any questions or concerns regarding Burrowing Owls at your facility.