

Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*)

Field Marks:

- length: 8-10 in, wingspan: 21 in
- small-bodied, with long legs
- sparsely feathered legs below the ankle
- small, round head without ear tufts
- buffy-brown, light tan, and white body
- white “eyebrow” over yellow eyes

Breeding Range:

Burrowing Owls breed in the western United States including Oklahoma, west to California. The northern and southern boundaries of their breeding range are Southern Canada and mid-Central America.



Wintering Range:

The northern two-thirds of the breeding range are inactive during the winter. These birds move south into the southern half of their breeding range.

Habitat Preferences:

The Burrowing Owl prefers dry, open, short grass plains that have a current population of burrowing animals such as prairie dogs and pocket gophers. Burrowing Owls are dependant upon these burrowing animals to provide a suitable habitat, since they excavate tunnels and keep vegetation short enough for Burrowing Owls to see over. Burrowing Owls live in close proximity to humans provided the habitat is suitable.

Nesting:

Burrowing Owls are monogamous for the life of the pair. Burrows are usually located near bare ground or very short grass. Recently abandoned burrows are renovated and maintained by the breeding pair. Burrows that have been empty for long periods are usually too degraded and are ignored by the owls. Egg laying usually begins in the third week of March with hatching occurring 28-30 days later. The clutch size ranges from 6-11 eggs, and young fledge 44 days later. They remain dependant on the parents the rest of the season. Young utilize burrows nearby their parents, and switch burrows frequently.

Feeding:

Burrowing Owls are opportunistic feeders. They prey primarily on insects, small mammals including prairie dogs and pocket gophers, and birds. They hunt primarily on the ground by hopping, walking, and running in search of prey, but occasionally hunt from low perches and by hovering over fields.

Conservation Status:

Burrowing Owl populations are strictly tied to burrowing mammal populations, and therefore suffer from persecution of burrowing mammals. They are listed as Endangered in two states in the mid-west, and they are species of special concern in twelve other states. They are listed as Threatened in Southern Canada. The introduction of artificial burrows is a successful conservation management strategy in many states with decreasing habitat.