

Burrowing Owls are small, sandy colored owls with bright-yellow eyes, and they are absolutely ADORABLE! 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 feathers with patches of white spots, and a white underside with brown bar-shaped spots. Please find a splendid Youtube video of the Burrowing Owl linked [here](#) to become familiar.

Burrowing Owls live in open, treeless areas with low, sparse vegetation. They can be found in grasslands, deserts, golf courses, pastures, agricultural fields, airport medians, and road embankments to name a few. They are often associated with high densities of burrowing mammals such as prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and tortoises. Breeding pairs stay near a dedicated nesting burrow.

These petite owls eat invertebrates and small vertebrates, including lizards, birds, and mammals. Invertebrates, especially insects, constitute most food items, while vertebrates make up the bulk of the diet by mass. Females catch more insects, mostly during the day; males take most of the vertebrates, mostly at night. Their diet makes SW Florida an excellent habitat for these adorable creatures.

These owls hunt at all hours of the day and night. Usually staying close to the ground, they fly, hover, walk, or run, seizing prey in their talons. Between hunting for food, they sleep on dirt mounds at their burrow

entrances or on depressions in the ground. When the owl is disturbed, it will bob jerkily up and down, as do hunting owls pinpointing prey. They are mostly monogamous and breed close together in loose colonies. Females stay in or near the nest burrow until chicks fledge, while males tend to stand guard at a nearby burrow or perch. Males defend their territories against other males by vocalizing, displaying in a weaving crouch with feathers fluffed, or chasing and attacking with outstretched talons. Courting adults—mainly males—display by circling overhead or flying dozens of feet into the air, hovering for a few seconds and then rapidly descending. Pairs vocalize, rub bills, and preen, the male calling and presenting food to the female. Young owls play-hunt by jumping on each other, on prey brought by their parents.

Burrowing owls are still numerous, but their populations have been declining for many years, primarily due to habitat loss. They are listed as a threatened species. Burrowing owls are protected under the [Migratory Bird Treaty Act](#) and considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be a bird of conservation need. This law protects the owls, their eggs and their burrows from harassment and destruction.



While there have been spotty reports of colonies at in Collier County, a birder should always respect wildlife, not approach too closely, give the wildlife the space it needs to feel safe, and use binoculars. The many areas within the county where these owls have been spotted number almost 500 (counted by volunteers, who mark the burrows for monitoring). The high number of owls in our area is thanks to conservation efforts spearheaded by environmental organizations.

In 1999, a local wildlife inventory was done, which found only a handful of burrowing owls. Countless volunteer hours and concerted educational efforts allowed those few birds to flourish into a population that is growing nicely now.

Again, please be respectful of their space and comfort. It is best to use binoculars when available, and stay calm, still, and quiet to ensure an experience that is exciting and peaceful for the owls.

QUICK FACTS

- Mating behavior: Monogamy
- Reproduction season: March-April
- Clutch size: 4-12 eggs
- Incubation period: 3-4 weeks
- Independent Age: 2-4 months
- The sexes of the Burrowing Owl are the same size.
- Burrowing Owls often stow extra food to ensure an adequate supply during incubation and brooding. When food is plentiful, the birds' underground larders can reach immense sizes. One cache observed in Saskatchewan in 1997 contained more than 200 rodents.
- Before laying eggs, Burrowing Owls carpet the entrances to their homes with animal dung, which attracts dung beetles and other insects that the owls then catch and eat. They may also collect bottle caps, metal foil, cigarette butts, paper scraps, and other bits of trash at the entrance, possibly signifying that the burrow is occupied.





OWL WATCH



Monitoring & Protecting Owls

Owl Watch is a citizen-science, volunteer-based project founded to help monitor and protect the Burrowing Owls of Marco Island, FL. Under the guidance of Audubon Western Everglades (AWE) and our partners at the University of Florida (UF), we train and mentor volunteers in conducting scientific surveys to measure nesting success and track changes in the population of Burrowing Owls in Marco Island over time.

Owl Watch was founded in 2016 on the concerns of Marco Island citizens and their love for the Burrowing Owls, and its success now depends on collaboration with our partners, including the City of Marco Island, UF-IFAS, dedicated volunteers, and caring citizens like you, your family, and your friends.

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