

BURROWING OWL

Athene cunicularia (Threatened Colorado)



Vocalizations of adult burrowing owls mimic the distress calls of prairie dogs.

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THE BURROWING OWL IS A small, ground-dwelling owl that is highly visible to humans. This brown, long-legged owl can frequently be seen in the daytime bobbing up and down while perched on a fence post or the mound of a prairie dog burrow.

Contrary to what their name implies, these little owls don't dig their own burrows, but will instead use an abandoned rodent burrow, usually from a prairie dog. The male and female select the nesting burrow together, then line it with dead grass, cow dung or other available lining material.

Burrowing owls sometimes nest in colonies within a prairie dog town. The female will lay from 6-11 eggs, with an average clutch being 7-9 eggs. Both adults incubate the eggs and care for the young. The young owlets are usually moved to a new burrow 2-4 weeks after they appear above ground. If they

become distressed for any reason, they will often mimic the sound of a rattlesnake rattling. Families will remain together into September.

Burrowing owl foods include rodents, small birds, eggs, nestlings, reptiles and insects; and they will hunt for food anytime, day or night.

In Colorado, burrowing owls are a migratory species, and can be found almost anywhere there are prairie dog burrows from late March or early April through October. During winter, our Colorado owls migrate to Mexico and Central America.

Some Colorado burrowing owl habitat has been lost to housing and suburban development along the Front Range. There is also concern about the loss of burrowing owl habitat in areas where sylvatic plague occurs in prairie dog colonies. If prairie dogs are absent, burrows will eventually collapse from disuse, leaving no homes for burrowing owls.