



# Urban Floridians

Text and photos by Jeff Bouton

**A**s relatively small birds, Burrowing Owls measure 9 to 9.5 inches in length and weigh 5 ounces or less. That's less than a McDonald's Quarter Pounder "with all its toppings and wrappings," according to The Florida Burrowing Owl Project.

These owls typically roost and nest in underground burrows. Their long legs allow them to run across the ground rapidly and help them to stand in tall grass.

Two distinct populations occur in the United States: the migratory western population found from the Great Plains west to California and the resident Florida population (*A.c. floridana*). The Florida population occurs in small numbers across most of the peninsula although rarer north of Orlando.

Due to their localized nature, active burrows remain a novelty in most areas of Florida. The most notable exception to this is in the Cape Coral area – on the lower Gulf Coast just north of Fort Myers — which hosts the vast majority of the population.

Exact numbers statewide are not well-known, and historic estimates range from as low as 3,000 individuals to a high of 10,000 birds. Recent surveys in the Cape Coral area indicate more than 2,000 birds.

The city of Cape Coral embraced its good fortune and named Burrowing Owl as its official bird. The city's website offers a link to a Burrowing Owl nest cam, which provides day and night views, as well as information about viewing and protecting burrows. Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife sponsors an annual Burrowing Owl festival in February and provides on its website owl news, life history facts, tips for attracting owls and steps to protect an active burrow on your property.



The diminutive owls typically eat brown anoles, large insects, frogs, snakes and some small birds and rodents. Although primarily crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk), the birds feed at all hours of the day and night.

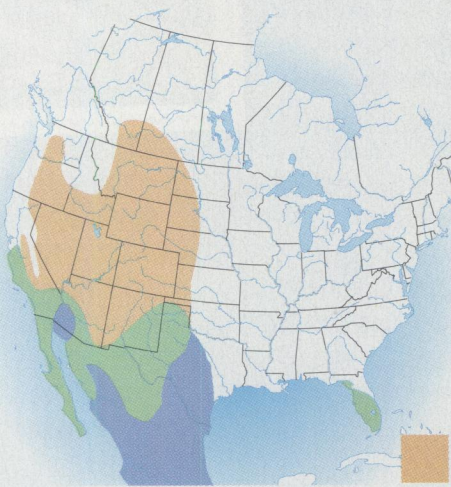
They use abandoned gopher tortoise burrows when they can find them but will dig their own and often nest in small colonies. They prefer well-drained areas devoid of vegetation. Historically, their primary habitat was the native prairie regions in the peninsula's interior, and they might have been nomadic, taking advantage of areas cleared naturally by fires and/or floods.

In recent times, the owls have benefited from human activities such as widespread land clearing for agriculture and development. They often are drawn to active pastures, but urban populations have adapted to airports, golf courses, cemeteries, university campuses and vacant lots.

Decades ago, most of Cape Coral was cleared, and grids of roads were laid in anticipation of future development. When the anticipated development lagged, the wide expanses of fallow, grassy lots and the loose, sandy soil offered prime habitat for Burrowing Owls.

The state currently lists Florida Burrowing Owls as a species of special concern. The subspecies' plight recently received attention in Carl Hiaasen's book "Hoot" (Knopf, 2002) and the movie (2006), which features three middle-school students trying to protect Burrowing Owls from developers in Florida.

While the book is a work of fiction, art often imitates life, and urban development remains a threat to Florida's urban Burrowing Owls. Fortunately, the



**Breeding range** **Year-round range** **Winter range**



Many of these folks were the same individuals who had been driving by for weeks, only noticing the street signs and cars alongside them. Their present reactions were not simply responses to a beautiful image. In some cases, people were seeing nature for the first time.

I followed my intuitive family's lead and relinquished my digiscoping adapter on the spotting scope. Numerous visitors mounted their cameras to the scope, allowing them to capture and preserve

digital memories of the event.

After another month, the two youngsters prepared to fly off and begin the rest of their lives. The perceived unfortunate choice of nest sites became a fabulous opportunity for outreach.

The extreme tolerance exhibited by these raptors resulted in the introduction of two Bald Eagles into the wild. Perhaps more importantly, the urban nest contributed immeasurably to public awareness of nature locally.

My family and some friends made one more visit to the nest before the youngsters fledged. I gathered three spotting scopes, five binoculars and two digiscoping adapters. We couldn't wait to share the natural event with all who stopped to take a look. **WB**

*During 24 years as a birder, Jeff Bouton has worked as a field researcher, tour leader, festival speaker and optics specialist in the birding/naturalist markets.*

## Our Duck Stamp

Everyone who enjoys watching birds and wants to protect the land that they need can participate in conserving their habitats. It doesn't require a huge amount of time or money — just \$15 once a year.

For that reasonable amount, birders and other conservationists can purchase an annual Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, also known as the federal Duck Stamp. Even those who don't hunt can appreciate the valuable impact of the stamp.

Since 1934, stamp sales have contributed to wetland and grassland conservation. Today, 98 cents of every dollar goes into a fund to purchase or lease these habitats. That means more than \$700 million has protected more than 5 million acres in the National Wildlife Refuge System.



threatened and endangered bird species as well as other wildlife.

Birders can purchase the stamp online at [www.duckstamp.com](http://www.duckstamp.com) or [www.usps.com](http://www.usps.com) and at thousands of post offices. By showing the stamp at national wildlife refuges, they can gain free admission from July 1 to June 30.

The Duck Stamp offers one of the easiest ways for birders and those who enjoy other wildlife to protect habitat. Please do your part today to make sure that the birds you enjoy have the land that they need. — Amy K. Hooper

owls have exhibited incredible tolerance to human activities and often have adapted to cohabitation in urban lawns. CCFW members have worked with state agencies to promote education among the general population and developers to encourage residential nest sites as vacant lots disappear.

Despite increased developmental pressure, these efforts are proving successful. With a little cooperation by developers and new home owners, many Burrowing Owls are staying put rather than being displaced by construction.

Tom Allen, a wildlife consultant in the Cape Coral area, does a lot of work with Burrowing Owls. In his experience, supplying starter burrows away from the footprint of the new building has been nearly 100 percent effective at offering the owls safe haven through the construction process and beyond. He recommends these starter burrows be placed in a high spot, such as a raised mound of dirt.

While some websites recommend digging starter burrows at least 8 inches deep, Allen prefers to dig as far as his arm can reach and then form a small hollow at the end. He thinks that this gives the owls a better start and offers superior protection from predation and the elements as the owls dig the remainder of the burrow. Common predators include Red-tailed and Cooper's Hawks, domestic cats and raccoons. Vehicle collisions remain one of the biggest threats to these urban birds, though.

Some individuals have buried 4-inch-wide corrugated PVC drain lines and an inverted 5 gallon bucket or similar as a makeshift nestbox. With this effective design, the pipe offers protection against tunnel collapses, but the plastic pipe can be noisy and alert a predator to the arrival of an owl. Plus, it appears that the birds prefer the natural burrows when available.

Another design utilizes an inverted

The Florida population appears darker above and less buffy below. The darker plumage also shows more whitish spotting.



“U”-shaped channel made of exterior grade plywood, which supports the tunnel sides and roof while the quieter, natural dirt substrate remains at the bottom of the tunnel. The final touch is a short T-shaped perch near the burrow entrance so the owls can keep an eye out for predators.

Florida birders can help these urban dwellers while they scratch out a living. If you live in the Sunshine State, consider what you can do today. **WB**

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## For More Information...

### Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife:

[www.ccfriendsofwildlife.org](http://www.ccfriendsofwildlife.org)

### Cape Coral Burrowing Owl cam:

<http://archive.capecoral.net/owlcam>

### Nestbox designs with PVC pipe:

[www.srcsd.com/nestsite.html](http://www.srcsd.com/nestsite.html), [http://mirror-pole.com/burr\\_owl/bur\\_owl1.htm](http://mirror-pole.com/burr_owl/bur_owl1.htm)

### Plywood nestbox design:

[www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/wildlife/ndblinds/burrowin.htm](http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/wildlife/ndblinds/burrowin.htm)

### The Florida Burrowing Owl Project:

<http://members.aol.com/pjbowen/owls.html>

### Thomas J. Allen Wildlife Enterprises:

[www.thomas-j-allen.com](http://www.thomas-j-allen.com)