

WESTERN BURROWING OWL

(*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*)

STATUS: Protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be a Bird of Conservation Concern at the national level and in the Southwest Region, including Arizona.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The burrowing owl is a small owl (19.5-25.0 cm~150 g). The head is rounded, lacks ear tufts, and is chocolate in color with white streaking or spotting. There are buffy-white margins around the eyes and a white throat patch. Eyes are lemon-yellow and the beak is pale horn-colored. The wings are relatively long and rounded, the tail is short, and both are brown with buff-white barring. The dorsal area is heavily spotted with buffy-white. The belly of adults is buffy and heavily barred with brown on the sides.

HABITAT: The western burrowing owl is a grassland specialist distributed throughout western North America, primarily in open areas with short vegetation and bare ground in desert, grassland, and shrub-steppe environments. Burrowing owls are dependent on the presence of fossorial mammals (primarily prairie dogs and ground squirrels), whose burrows are used for nesting and roosting. Predators include coyote, bobcat, domestic cats and dogs, Swainson's, ferruginous, Red-tailed, and Cooper's hawks, Merlin, prairie, and peregrine falcons, great horned owl, American crow, and snakes.

RANGE: Historical: Burrowing Owls historically bred from Canada southward through the Great Plains and western United States and south to Mexico.

Current: Occurs in North America to the eastern limits of the Great Plains and from southern British Columbia to Manitoba and into Central America as far south as Panama. Although the historical breeding range is largely intact, some range contractions have occurred, primarily in southern Canada, the northeastern Great Plains, and parts of California and the Pacific Northwest. Burrowing owls winter in the southwest and south-central United States, throughout Mexico, and occasionally as far south as Panama.

REASONS FOR DECLINE/VULNERABILITY: Primary threats across the North American range of the burrowing owl are habitat loss due to land conversions for agricultural and urban development, and habitat degradation and loss due to reductions of burrowing mammal populations. The elimination of burrowing mammals through control programs and habitat loss has been identified as the primary factor responsible for declines of burrowing owls. Additional threats to burrowing owls include habitat fragmentation, predation, illegal shooting, pesticides, and other contaminants.

NOTES: The burrowing owl is the only North American strigiform not exhibiting reversed size dimorphism. Status Assessment and Conservation Plan for the Western Burrowing Owl in the United States can be found at: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/wbo/Western%20Burrowing%20Owlrev73003a.pdf>

Listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need by the State of Arizona.