

**UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS NATURAL RESERVE**

# **BURROWING OWL**



**Martin Gonzales**

**Scientific Name:** *Athene cunicularia*

**Common Name:** Burrowing Owl

**Global Rarity:** Apparently Secure

**State Rarity:** California Species of Special Concern

**UCSC Rarity:** Very rare, overwintering



## General Description

The burrowing owl is a small-medium sized bird with long legs, a short tail and a round head. They are 7.5-9.8 inches in length, weigh about 5.3 oz, and have a wingspan of about 21.6 in. Both males and females are about the same size. Burrowing owls live in grasslands and spend most of their lives close to the ground, hunting small animals and living in ground burrows, hence their name.

## Identification

**Plumage:** Male: brown feathers mottled with sandy-pale spots. Spotted breast and dark brown bars on belly. A pale brownish facial disc, prominent white eyebrows above white, gray-olive bill and gray-brown cere, and a distinct whitish throat band. Yellow eyes and olive-gray feet.

Female: same as males but usually darker in color.

**Size:** 7.5"-9.8" length

**Shape:** Short tail, small head



## Geographic Range and Seasonal Movements

### Summer Breeding range:

Midwestern US states, southwestern US states, Great Plains of US and Canada

### Year-Round range:

Southwestern US states, Florida, Mexico and Central America, and much of South America outside of the Amazon and the southern Chilean coast

Range in California shown at right.





## UCSC Distribution

Very few numbers (sometimes as low as one) overwinter in south campus grasslands. The species used to breed in these grasslands as recently as the late 20th century.

## Life history

**Habitat:** Open grasslands, prairies, farmlands, deserts, shrub steppe. They usually prefer to use prairie dog and ground squirrel burrows as nests and refugia (ground squirrel burrows at UCSC).

**Reproduction:** Once a male attracts a female, they both start to clear the burrow for nesting using feet, beaks and wings to scrape dirt clear and then line the nest with horse or cow dung. The female lays 6-10 white eggs inside the nest and incubates the eggs for 23-27 days. During incubation, the male protects the nest and brings food for the female.

**Behavior:** Owls spend most of their time low to the ground: resting, reproducing and hunting all near the ground. They're active during the day as well as the night depending on what prey they're searching for and can live up to 9 years in the wild.

**Diet:** Mostly small rodents and insects but will also eat small birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and crustaceans.

**Predators:** Burrowing owls are preyed upon by coyotes, bobcats, hawks, weasels, feral dogs, feral cats and other larger owls.

## Research Highlights and Fun Facts

- The Winter Burrowing Owl Banding Project done by the Santa Clara Audubon Society examined burrowing owl distribution in the county.
- Burrowing owls are one of the smallest owl species in North America
- When there aren't enough natural burrows, burrowing owls have been known to use PVC pipe and other man-made items as homes.



## Conservation Status

### California Species of Special Concern

Breeding burrow and some overwintering sites are listed in this category in California.

## Threats

### Statewide:

The Burrowing Owl is threatened by:

1. Habitat degradation from large-scale urban development
2. Loss of habitat
3. The destruction of burrows either by humans or natural causes

### UCSC campus:

At UCSC, the Burrowing Owl is threatened by

1. Development of south campus grasslands



## Ways you can help

### In your community:

1. Support the efforts of local conservation organizations
2. Submit your observations to iNaturalist and any observations on the UCSC campus to the Campus Natural Reserve: [cnr@ucsc.edu](mailto:cnr@ucsc.edu)
3. Restrict the use of rodenticides, as these can cause secondary poisoning in the Burrowing Owls.

## References

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