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SPECIES

Burrowing Owl *Athene cucularia* ⓘ

Ray G. Poulin, L. Danielle Todd, E. A. Haug, B. A. Millsap, and Mark S. Martell

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Habitat

Habitat in Breeding Range

Suitable habitat throughout the breeding range typically includes open, treeless areas within grassland, steppe, and desert biomes. Generally inhabit gently-sloping areas, characterized by low, sparse vegetation (e.g. James et al. 1991, Clayton and Schmutz 1999). Often associated with high densities of burrowing mammals such as prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.). In addition to “natural” breeding habitats, areas such as agricultural fields, golf courses, cemeteries, road allowances, airports, vacant urban lots, and fairgrounds are regularly used. Presence of potential nest burrows is a critical requirement for the hypugaea subspecies ([Thomsen 1971 \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF58090\)](#), [Martin 1973c \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF58089\)](#), [Zarn 1974 \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF51618\)](#), [Wedgwood 1978 \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF36451\)](#), [Haug 1985b \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF25223\)](#), [Poulin et al. 2005](#)). In Florida, however, Burrowing Owls are capable of excavating their own nest burrows ([Millsap and Bear 2000](#)).

Habitat in Nonbreeding Range

Habitat in Migration

Information limited, but likely similar to breeding range ([Butts 1976 \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/references#REF25215\)](#)).

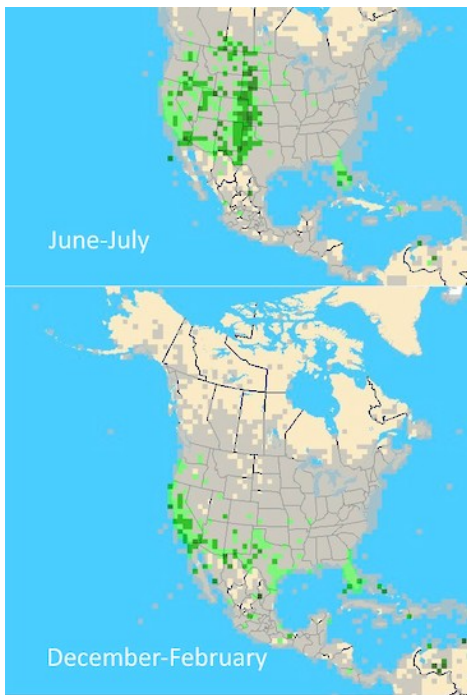
Habitat in Overwintering Range

Winter habitat in Texas and Mexico can be different than breeding habitat but roosting habitat generally consists of sparse or low vegetation. In s. Texas, uses burrows associated with barrier islands, agricultural land and roadsides or man-made objects such as road culverts, construction pipes, artificial burrows, rubble/rock piles ([Ortega 2003](#); [Williford et al. 2007, 2009](#); [Holroyd et al. 2010](#)). Unlike breeders, wintering owls are not as dedicated to a single burrow or group of burrows but there is some roost-burrow fidelity within and between winter seasons ([Woodin et al. 2006](#)). In many instances, wintering owls have been observed retreating into tufts of vegetation instead of burrows, even when burrows were available ([Holroyd et al. 2010](#)).

[◀ Distribution \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/distribution\)](#)

[Movements and Migration \(/bow/species/buowl/cur/movement\) ▶](#)





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Figure 5. Burrowing Owl seasonal distribution based on eBird data.

In this figure, note the southward movement of the western subspecies, essentially vacating its breeding range on the northern Great Plains and the Great Basin. The Florida subspecies, however, is mainly resident. Burrowing Owl migration is complex, with differential movements related to age and sex, and more study is needed. To explore these dynamic maps that are updated nightly, visit [eBird](http://ebird.org/content/ebird/) (<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/?hstc=65717809.1320e70591e3896c85822b0722280966.1586967515581.1610061455411.1628719608645.6&hssc=65717809.11.1628719608645&hsfp=1209027052>).



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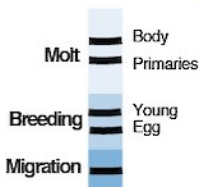
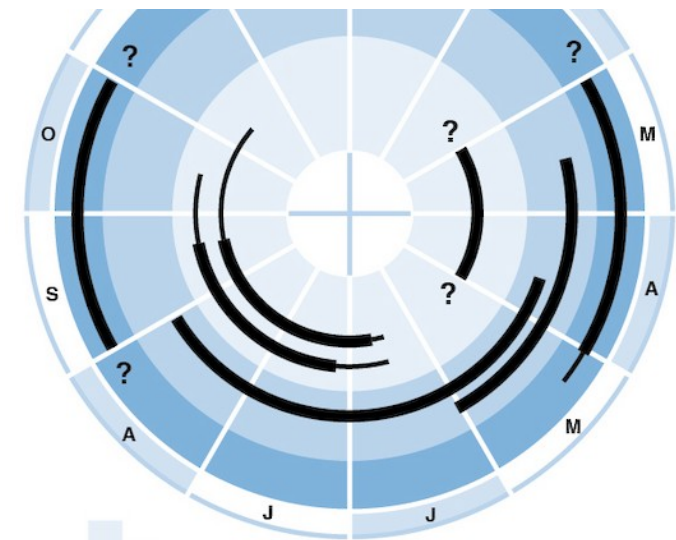
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Burrowing Owl, western subspecies, Monterey, CA, 2 March.

Burrowing Owl is a medium-distance migrant throughout the northern part of its range, but in some places it is resident even in the north (suburban nesters). Moreover, migration patterns can differ between ages and sexes. This bird wintered on the rocky coast of Point Pinos, Monterey County, California (where rare), where it occupied a ground-squirrel burrow for the winter. Numbers arrive in fall on the California Channel Islands, presumably from Great Basin breeding populations. The following is a link to this photographer's website: <http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/> (<http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/>).





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Fig. 3. Annual cycle of Burrowing Owls, n. US and Canadian prairies.

Annual cycle of breeding, migration, and molt of Burrowing Owls that nest in northern states and the Canadian prairies. Thick lines show peak activity, thin lines off peak.



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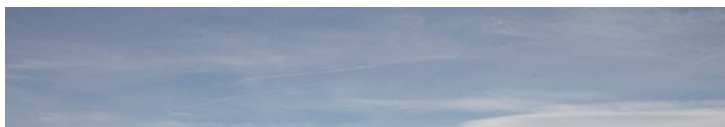
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Adult Burrowing Owl in typical breeding habitat, CO, June.

Typical grassland breeding habitat, here within a prairie dog colony. The adult is standing at its nest entrance -- an abandoned prairie dog burrow.; photographer Rick and Nora Bowers





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Burrowing Owl habitat and nest, Salton Sea, CA, 6 March.

Burrowing Owls breed in the agricultural lands around the Salton Sea in California's Imperial Valley. They mostly nest along roadsides; see burrow here marked with an arrow. The following is a link to this photographer's website: <http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/> (<http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/>).



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Burrowing Owl in typical agricultural habitat, Salton Sea, CA, 18 June.

Unlike the grasslands dotted with prairie dog burrows where this species breeds across much of its western range, at the Salton Sea it breeds in big agricultural landscapes, foraging mainly on bare dirt roadsides. The following is a link to this photographer's website: <http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/> (<http://www.briansullivanphotography.com/>).

Recommended Citation

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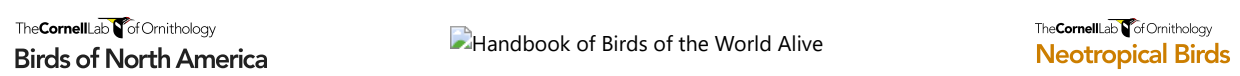
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