

Cape Coral's burrowing owls: Everything you need to know about the city's famous bird

Charles Runnells Fort Myers News-Press
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They're the official city bird of Cape Coral and a source of pride for many residents and nature lovers.

Everyone, it seems, loves burrowing owls and their big yellow eyes, bobbing heads and curious — sometimes cranky — facial expressions.

“People come from all over the world to see our owls, photograph our owls, write about our owls,” Pascha Donaldson, vice president of Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife, told The News-Press last year.



A pair of burrowing owls look out from their Cape Coral nest.

The distinctive birds aren't like most owls, though. For one thing, they aren't much bigger than a soda can. For another, they don't live in barns or trees. They live underground in burrows.

And there's a lot more to learn about these owls, too. You can find out more at the Cape Coral's annual Burrowing Owl Festival on Feb. 23. Or just keep reading.

Here's everything you need to know about Cape Coral's ever-popular burrowing owls:

TEENY, TINY OWLS

Burrowing owls are some of the smallest owls in the world. They stand 8 to 11 inches tall on a pair of spindly legs and have a wingspan of about 20-24 inches.

They weigh just 6 to 7.5 ounces – less than a can of soda.



A burrowing owl flies over its burrow in Cape Coral Wednesday morning as it keeps an eye out for predators.

Ricardo Rolon / The News-Press

WHY THEY'RE CALLED BURROWING OWLS

The pint-sized raptors can fly, but they don't live in trees. Instead, they spend most of their time underground.

Their burrows have a saucer-sized entrance and a tunnel leading to a nesting cavity as deep as 8 feet underground. For obvious reasons, they prefer land that drains well.

The owls often take over holes abandoned by squirrels and other small animals. Sometimes, they even set themselves up in manmade pipes and plastic tubing in the ground.



A burrowing owl, one of at least three living in Cape Coral High School's athletics fields, takes refuge in a drainage culvert while football practice takes place next to his nest in the center of the practice field.

CAPE CORAL'S OFFICIAL BIRD

For years, the burrowing owl was Cape Coral's unofficial city bird. But that changed in September 2005, when city leaders made it official.

"They're really unique to the city," Councilwoman Dolores Bertolini, who drafted the resolution, said in a News-Press interview the week before the council voted. "Now the burrowing owl and Cape Coral will be synonymous."

Bertolini said highlighting the owls would draw more people to the Cape and increase tourism with wildlife lovers and others. Burrowing owls are featured prominently on the City of Cape Coral's website.



A juvenile burrowing owl, center, preens a sibling in a Cape Coral open lot.

LOVE BIRDS

This is the time of year when owl couples get the busiest, if you know what we mean. Breeding and nesting season takes place Feb. 15 through July 10, although some owls breed earlier or later.

Burrowing owls mate for life, too. And they'll stay in the same nest if the conditions remain unchanged. But tall grass, nearby development, predators and other factors can make the owls pick up and move their home elsewhere.

You can tell owls are nesting by their habit of “decorating” the entrance to their burrows with dog poop, straw wrappers, cigarette butts, grass, trash and other materials. The female stays underground and nests while the male hunts, feeds the mother and stands guard on a nearby perch. The owls clean up the mess after the eggs hatch.

MEET THE KIDS

Female owls can lay up to eight eggs within one week. About 28 days later, newborn owls emerge sporting white feathers — a stark contrast to their parents, which have a mostly brown back and head with patches of white spots and a mostly white underside. That pattern helps the adults avoid predators by blending into their habitat.

By about two weeks, the chicks usually appear outside the burrow. By four weeks, they're learning to fly. And by 12 weeks, they're able to take care of themselves and leave the burrow to strike out on their own.



Elmer Tabor and his granddaughter, Ava Garcia, 12, both of Cape Coral, dressed in burrowing owl costumes for the event. Cape Coral's inaugural “Ground-Owl Day” ceremony was Saturday, February 2, 2019.

Andrea Melendez/The News-Press/USA Today

MORE BURROWING OWLS THAN ANYWHERE ELSE IN FLORIDA

Florida burrowing owls can be found throughout the state, but they're more concentrated in Cape Coral than anywhere else in Florida. A two-day census in 2017 counted more than 2,800.

It's also one of the largest populations of burrowing owls in the world.

The owls moved to Cape Coral in the 1950s. They were drawn by the wide-open, flat land left by the city's developers as they chopped down trees to make room for streets and houses.

The owls love vacant lots, golf courses, fallow agricultural fields and other open, treeless spots. That helps them keep an eye out for approaching predators such as cats, hawks and eagles.

Burrowing owls can also be found on Marco Island, Broward County and elsewhere in Florida. There used to be a huge population in Central Florida, but they left as Central Florida was developed into malls, golf courses and neighborhoods.

Outside of Florida, burrowing owls can be found in southern Georgia, the Caribbean, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, and all U.S. states west of the Mississippi River. There are various subspecies of burrowing owls, including the Florida burrowing owl.



MEET THE MASCOTS

Cape Coral's new burrowing owl mascots, Owliver and Owlivia, debuted Feb. 2 at the Rotary Community Garden next to Cape Coral City Hall. The mating couple already had a burrow nearby on City Hall grounds.

The owls got their names from a city contest that saw almost 500 suggested names submitted by city residents.

For the owls' official debut, Owliver took a cue from the famous weather-predicting groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil: He cast a shadow from his perch and "predicted" six more weeks of winter weather. Meanwhile, up north in Punxsutawney, Penn., the celebrated groundhog offered a differing prediction: An early spring.

The prediction was part of Cape Coral's newly proclaimed Ground-Owl Day, an annual recognition of the city's beloved critters.

For the occasion, Mayor Joe Coviello wore a tuxedo and top hat in the style of Punxsutawney Phil's handlers. "The city

of Cape Coral recognizes the value and contribution of this unusual species to our city as a whole," Coviello said, reading from the city proclamation creating Ground-Owl Day.



The 13th annual Southwest Florida Burrowing Owl Festival celebrates and educates residents about Cape Coral's official city bird, the burrowing owl.
Special to Cape Life

WHAT TO CALL THEM

Their scientific name is *Athene cunicularia floridana*, which comes from the Latin words "*Athene*" for Athena (the Greek goddess of wisdom, known for her love of owls), "*cunicularia*" for burrower or miner, and "*floridana*" for Florida. But it's much easier to just call them burrowing owls.

Burrowing owls have other names, too — both in Florida and elsewhere in the world. They're also called howdy birds (because they seem to nod in greeting from their burrow entrances), ground owls, prairie dog owls, rattlesnake owls, cuckoo owls, tunnel owls, billy owls, long-legged owls, gopher owls and hill owls.

WHAT THEY EAT

Burrowing owls mostly chow down on crickets, grasshoppers, moths, beetles and other insects. But they'll also eat snakes, frogs, small lizards, birds and rodents.



A burrowing owl keeps an eye out for predators near its burrow in Cape Coral Wednesday morning. Some volunteers with the Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife are known as the Burrow Patrol. They help clear out overgrowth and debris from owl burrows in Cape Coral and check out the conditions of known burrows.

A THREATENED SPECIES

In November 2016, the owls landed on Florida's threatened species list after years of being labeled as "species of special concern." The upgraded designation offers more protections for the birds, which are considered to be at risk for becoming endangered in the future.

It's illegal to injure, capture, possess, destroy or sell burrowing owls, their nests or their eggs without a permit.

The reason for the change: Dwindling owl populations statewide, due mostly to development and the resulting loss of the owls' habitat.

Fines and penalties start at \$100-\$500 and up to 60 days in jail and can go as high as a \$5,000 fine and five years in prison, depending on the severity of the crime. Last year, two Southwest Florida men were charged with a third-degree felony for allegedly destroying six owl nests during construction and landscaping at 904 S.E. 33rd Terrace.

In January, Cape Coral's city council unanimously approved a new ordinance that lets city police officers enforce the state statute protecting the owls, putting more teeth into the existing state rules. Councilman John Carioscia said it would speed up response times for violations.

Cape Coral is one of the country's fastest-growing metropolitan areas, and all that home and business construction has left fewer and fewer vacant lots for the owls' burrows. The city has a population of about 180,000 people, but that's expected to reach 400,000 by about 2070.



The burrowing owl is the official bird of Cape Coral.
Image courtesy of Harry Phillips.

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

If you want owls as a neighbor, you can encourage them to move onto your property with a "starter burrow." The Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife offer these tips: Select an open lawn area located between the drainage swale and the front of your house (the best location) or in your backyard. Make sure that spot is safe from pets; away from trees, shrubs and buildings; and not prone to flooding.

The starter burrows can help replace some the owls' lost habitat as the city continues to develop. Learn more at ccfriendsofwildlife.org/starter-burrow.



Spend your morning searching for local birds during the Cape Coral Bird Walk. Assist a biologist to find, identify, and record resident bird species in Cape Coral environmental parks. Call for meeting locations and times. 549-4606.

Andrew West/News-Press

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Burrowing owls usually live to about 6 years old, but some of them can reach 10.

However, many owls don't reach old age. Instead, they're killed by cats and other predators, flooding, collapsed burrows and cars — which

often hit the owls at night when they're hunting and flying around more.

THEY'RE NOT JUST OWLS. THEY'RE MOVIE STARS

Burrowing owls had a starring role in Carl Hiaasen's 2002 kids novel, "Hoot," and its 2006 movie adaptation starring Luke Wilson, Logan Lerman and Brie Larson.

"Hoot" follows a group of kids trying to save a burrowing-owl habitat from bad-guy developers building a pancake restaurant. The story is set in Coconut Cove, a fictional town based on Cape Coral.

At a 2006 sneak preview of the movie, Hiaasen said he got the idea for "Hoot" from an owl habitat that was destroyed and turned into a parking lot when he was a kid. "This is my book," he told the audience, "and it ain't going to end the same way."



A burrowing owl chick peers from it's Cape Coral burrow on Friday.
Andrew West/ The News-Press

CELEBRATE THE BURROWING OWL

For 17 years, the Burrowing Owl Festival has celebrated Cape Coral's favorite bird with exhibits, demonstrations, live animals, speakers, vendors, kids activities and more.

The annual fest returns Saturday, Feb. 23, to Rotary Park at 5505 Rose Garden Road, southeast Cape Coral. The event takes place 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is a suggested donation of \$5.

Just don't expect any actual burrowing owls at the fest. That's why they offer bus tours of nearby burrows.

The event is organized by the Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife, a volunteer group dedicated to preserving and enhancing the habitats of protected wildlife species —including burrowing owls — and educating people about the city's wildlife.

For more information on the fest, visit ccfriendsofwildlife.org/burrowing-owl-festival.

SOURCES: News-Press file stories, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife, audobon.org

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