

LITTLE WYOMING

Meet the

BURROWING OWL

01

Athene cunicularia

Burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*) are small, ground-dwelling birds that stand about 10 inches tall—which is a little shorter than this magazine! They are sometimes nicknamed the “howdy owl” because they bob their heads as if nodding hello to someone when excited or concerned. Unlike other owls, burrowing owls are active during the day and at night.

02

Little bird, long flight

Burrowing owls spend their summers in Wyoming, but migrate to Mexico before the cold Wyoming winter arrives. They typically migrate south between September and October, and return to their summer range between April and May. One owl that spent the 2019 summer in Wyoming migrated to southern Mexico to spend the winter—a trip that is over 2,000 miles one-way!

03

Their hole home

Burrowing owls found in Wyoming, the Western burrowing owls, cannot dig their own burrow, although other subspecies of burrowing owl can. So, burrowing owls rely primarily on prairie dog burrows, although they can also use burrows made by ground squirrels, American badgers, marmots and coyotes. Burrowing owls make the burrows their own, though, by decorating the outside entrance with cow, horse or bison manure to attract dung beetles, a favorite food of the owls!

04

Conservation needed

Burrowing owls used to be common and widespread, but their populations and range have both been declining. They are listed as a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” in Wyoming. One way to help the burrowing owl is to help protect both active and inactive prairie dog colonies, a key component of burrowing owl’s habitat needs. Where can you observe a burrowing owl from a safe and respectful distance? Check out the grasslands in eastern Wyoming! They are most abundant here, although they are also found throughout western and central Wyoming.

05

Fun fact

Because they live on the ground, they have a few threats. Baby owls will hide in the burrow and imitate the sound of a rattlesnake to scare away potential predators like coyotes, birds of prey and feral cats and dogs.

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