Burrowing Owls
Frequently Asked Questions

Photo Courtesy of Phil Avram

Are Florida burrowing owls found only in Cape Coral?
No. The Florida burrowing owl can be found throughout the State. However, with more than 1,000 nesting pairs, Cape Coral has the largest known population in Florida.

What do burrowing owls eat? Should I feed them and offer water?
Their main diet consists of insects, anoles (lizards), frogs, and mice. They obtain water from the food they eat. Feeding by humans is not in wildlife's best interest and is discouraged. It may be enjoyable for us, but it changes their natural behaviors and allows them to associate food with humans, which typically puts them in harm's way.

Photo Courtesy of Dan Tudor

When is nesting season?
Officially, from February 15th – July 10th each year. The peak time of nest initiation in Cape Coral is mid-March. However, some owls start nesting prior to the official nesting season.

The owls near my house are very protective. Will they attack me or my children?
The city has never received any reports of injury to humans or pets from owls. If you get too close to the burrow, the owls will make a lot of noise, bob their heads and display their wings to dissuade you from getting any closer. During nesting season this is even more evident, as the adults are protecting their young. In flight, burrowing owls ripple and roll as if they are flying an invisible obstacle course. At times this flight pattern has been known to startle people.

Photo: City Staff

Why is there garbage around the owl burrow?
During nesting season, burrowing owls "decorate" the burrow by lining the entrance with feathers, paper, cigarette butts, and feces. Biologists speculate that burrowing owls decorate the burrow to help camouflage the scent of the burrow from predators. Owls may also use the decoration to attract prey, such as dung beetles.

How long until the babies are on their own?
At approximately 42 days old, the owls are learning to fly and catch their own food. Becoming completely independent is a process that doesn't happen all in one day for the young owl. It is not uncommon for owls born in May to stay near the nest of their parents until August of the same year.

Photo Courtesy of Dan Tudor

Do the owls use the same nest repeatedly?
Owls are site specific, which means they are likely to return to the same territory year after year to raise their young. If the burrow is damaged either by humans or natural causes, becomes too overgrown, or if the owls are continuously harassed at their current location, they will often move to a nearby area to start a new nest.

Is it true you can't build a house if your lot has an owl burrow on it?
Though the burrow is protected by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC), you can build on your property even if there is an owl burrow on site. If the builder can maintain a 10-foot radius protection zone around the entrance, or 33-feet during nesting season, your home can be built right beside the owl's home, without a state permit. In fact, we encourage this practice.

Photo: City Staff

In the event that the burrow is in not a location that would allow your home to be built around it, the developer is required to obtain an incidental take permit from the FFWCC to destroy the nest. If the burrow is located within the building envelope, the FFWCC's policy is to issue permits to allow destruction of burrowing owl nest burrows only as a last resort and after all reasonable alternatives (such as realigning development to avoid the nest) have been considered and determined impractical. In order to minimize the adverse impacts to the species when a nest is destroyed, the contractor or homeowner is strongly encouraged to place a "starter burrow" some place on the property.

Can't you just relocate the owls?
Since owls are site specific, they return to the same nesting area year after year. The nest can only be destroyed if a permit from the FFWCC has been issued. However, owls can be attracted to starter burrows on the same site or on already developed properties nearby.

I haven't seen any owls at the burrow in a while. Is it legal to fill in the burrow?
No. It is important to remember that the burrows, along with the owls and their eggs, are all protected from harassment and/or disturbance by State law. Inactive burrows still require a state permit to remove. Juvenile burrowing owls often move into inactive burrows.

Photo Courtesy of Phil Avram

What should I do if I see someone bothering the owls, or trying to hurt them?
Any harassment of burrowing owls or malicious destruction of their nests should be reported to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC). Their toll free phone number is 1-888-404-3922 or access their website at https://myfwc.com/contact/wildlife-alert/ Complainants can remain anonymous.

What should I do if I see a sick or injured owl?
Call C.R.O.W. (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) at (239) 472-3644.

What can I do to help the burrowing owls?

- Restrict the use of pesticides and rodenticides. Owls eat the insects and rodents we consider pests and are therefore exposed to the pesticides we use around our homes. These can limit and contaminate the food sources available to the owls.
- Install a starter burrow on your developed property. Attracting burrowing owls to our developed properties and integrating them into our community will help ensure their survival. Contact Cape Coral Friends of Wildlife if you need help installing a starter burrow on your property. Click here
- Help keep staked out burrows in your neighborhood free of trash, weeds and overgrown grass.
- Report new owl burrows in need of protection from construction or lot mowers to the City of Cape Coral Planning Division by emailing us at planningquestions@capecoral.net

Photo: City Staff