



BURROWING OWL

Lechuza llanera
Lechuza de hojo

Centennial Museum Collection 1949.5.115

Scientific name: *Athene cunicularia*

Athene comes from the Greek Goddess of wisdom and warfare, Athena.

Cunicularia is from the Latin *cunicularius*, meaning miner or burrower.

Systematics

Class: Aves

Order: Strigiformes

Family: Strigidae

Description

Sandy brown plumage with rounded head, but no ear tufts. Legs are long. Male and females are similar, but the female is often larger.

Distribution

Southwestern Canada southward to Tierra del Fuego in South America.

Common resident and nester in the El Paso Region and Chihuahuan Desert

Food

Mainly eats insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, or crickets, and mammals such as mice, rats, small ground squirrels, or young rabbits. Sometimes eats birds, lizards, and arachnids.

Nesting

Often nests in vacant ground squirrel, prairie dog or badger burrows. Sometimes partially excavates and lines the burrow with grasses, feathers or dung. Also uses burrows for roosting.

Breeding

The 5 to 10 eggs in a clutch are white and about 1.25" long and 1" in diameter.

Desert Diary

by Arthur Harris, Ph.D, Director, Laboratory for Environmental Biology, UTEP

What has feathers, nests in underground burrows, and sounds like a rattlesnake? The answer is one of the more endearing birds of the Chihuahuan Desert—the Burrowing Owl. This medium-sized owl is quite at home on the ground and often is seen standing on its long legs next to its burrow. Open countryside, grassland to desert, from Canada to the southern parts of South American, is its home. Although most hunting is done during the twilight of dusk or dawn, it also may be on night-time or day patrol, looking for tasty insects—especially large beetles, small rodents—even such prey as frogs and small birds when opportunity knocks. It often breeds in loose colonies of up to a dozen pairs. Nesting in the ground can be dangerous, but a predator or a curious human may be met at the entrance to an occupied burrow with a rattling hiss, sounding much like the warning of a rattlesnake—a sure deterrent to deeper investigation.