

THE REAL OWLS OF FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY



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Recent construction on Florida Atlantic University's Boca Raton campus could be responsible for dwindling burrowing owl populations. As the university's attendance reaches all-time highs, the population of its resident mascot reaches all-time lows. According to FAU student researcher Andrew Miller, the owl population has shrunk from 26 in 2003 to 16 as of a 2011 survey.

According to the university's website, FAU was designated a burrowing owl sanctuary in 1971 by the Audubon Society, an environmental conservation group. The school has since set up reserves for the owls and works to maintain them, but with recent construction, growth has encroached onto the preserves. "The territory is just shrinking and shrinking," says Miller. "They cannot just be pushed out of the way while we take up all the space that is meant for them."

FAU does work to maintain the remaining space set aside for owls. They keep the area flat with low grass and few trees to provide the required habitat. However, in the past year, mowers contracted to maintain the territory collapsed several burrows that the owls inhabit.



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This displacement caused a dangerous situation for the birds and put the school in violation of laws protecting the owls from harm. "Our law enforcement went there and gave them a written warning," says Richard Zambrano, a regional biologist for The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "It did get their attention." The contractors subsequently were fired and replaced.

Although burrowing owls are a species of special concern in Florida, their protection is limited. They are protected under the Migratory Bird Act of 1918, which keeps them from being hunted, harmed or captured. Although this protects the owls, it does not protect their burrows or habitats.



“We can’t stop the construction because there is an owl there,” says Zambrano in reference to FAU’s expansion. “We have some influence, but we don’t have complete control.”

Many regulations, including safe-distance recommendations meant to keep construction away from the burrows, are merely guidelines and suggestions. Still, the 1918 law only applies when an owl is molested or injured and when there is sufficient evidence to implicate the agitator.

The request is that any human activity be up to 50 feet from the burrows, but legally, Zambrano says, “They can build two feet away.”

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According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission website, burrowing owls are one of the world’s smallest species of owl at nine inches tall with a wingspan of 21 inches. They are characterized by their lack of ear tufts, common with other owl species.

Midwestern burrowing owls live in open prairies where they take over the tunnels of prairie dogs and other burrowing animals, but Florida’s subspecies is uniquely adapted. “Ours are more adapted to digging their own burrows compared to those in the Midwest,” says Miller. When they can not take over the burrows of gopher tortoises, another protected animal on FAU’s campus, they will often dig for themselves.

Florida is the only place in the eastern United States with burrowing owls. They prefer flat terrain at least ten feet from trees to have a broad sightline to avoid predators.

They are often attracted to urban areas. “Rats, mice, things they would eat, gravitate there to find food for themselves,” says Miller.

While population numbers are down, people are actively trying to protect them. “I think the school is running out of places for them to go,” says Zambrano. “It’s been an uphill battle. It’s going to take the continued vigilance of students, staff and the community.”