



ANIMALS

Not just a mascot: The real owls of Florida Atlantic are underdogs too.

The unlikely NCAA Men's Final Four team shares a campus with the burrowing owl, which has seen its numbers dwindle across the Sunshine State.

A burrowing owl in Florida peeks out from the entrance to its burrow. The owls are the only raptors to live underground and they thrive on the campus of Florida Atlantic University.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM VEZO, MINDEN PICTURES

BY UMA RAJA



PUBLISHED MARCH 30, 2023 • 5 MIN READ

The Florida Atlantic University Owls, the surprise team playing in the NCAA Men's Final Four basketball tournament on April 1, has a few things in common with its feathered mascots: They flock together—and they are underdogs.

As FAU point guard Bryan Greenlee [told ESPN](#): "It's probably the first team I've been on where really nobody cares about their stats. I feel like across the board, any game it's just a whole bunch of selfless guys just trying to get a win."

urban FAU campus in Boca Raton. A threatened species in the state, habitat loss has dwindled their estimated numbers across Florida to less than 10,000, according to Carli Segelson at Florida Fish and Wildlife.

Efforts such as those at FAU, designated as a burrowing owl sanctuary by the Audubon Society in 1971, have made a difference for local populations of the species. In a January 2023 assessment, 53 burrows were counted on campus, with an estimated 34 owls living in them.

“The owls are adapting to live side by side with us in Southern Florida,” says avian biologist Kelly Heffernan, founding director of the Florida burrowing owl nonprofit Project Perch.



A family of very alert burrowing owls huddle on a summer day in the Florida Everglades. There are estimated to be less than 10,000 of the owls in the state, due largely to habitat encroachment and rat poison, which the owls ingest with the mice they eat.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK ANDREW THOMAS,
ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ADVERTISEMENT



Burrowing owl backstory

grasslands to trees and are the only North American bird of prey to nest underground.

FAU's burrowing owls live on four preserved areas of campus, one just northeast of where the Owls play in a small arena nicknamed [The Burrow](#). The real mascots perch on posts and watch students with yellow eyes. The specks on their tawny bodies blur as they fly low and zip into their sandy holes like rabbits.

The owls dig their own burrows or move into unoccupied tunnels made by gopher tortoises, another threatened species that lives on FAU's campus. Students can walk five minutes from the science building to study the burrows, which inspire a number of master's and doctoral theses, says [Sandra Norman](#), a history professor at FAU.

"When students do learn that we have burrowing owls on campus, they get quite excited to find out that they're there," says FAU history professor [Evan Bennett](#). "It has created a nice sense of place and a nice connection to the environment."

The mascot's history

FAU opened in 1964 as an upper-division and graduate school with an enrollment of 867 students, a focus on technology, and no intercollegiate sports teams. It introduced sports after becoming a four-year university in 1984.

The owl was chosen as a mascot because of its presence on campus, but also as a symbol of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, says [Norman](#), who has served on FAU's conservation committee for 35 years. Norman recalls a consultant pushing a new mascot after the football team was established in 2001, claiming the owl was "a negative" because "it's got its head in the sand."

The consultant proposed a new mascot: the FAU sharks. "Everybody rose up and said, 'get out of here'," Norman says. "The students, the faculty, the alumni, they said, 'We love our owls'."

ADVERTISEMENT

2 Commo

Avoid these two
suffer from head

Bostc

mascot has “the characteristics of a burrowing owl rather than a barn owl or what people expect an owl to look like,” says Bennett.

Where owls rule

The owls determine where FAU can construct new buildings, and even how the school cuts its grass. Areas densely populated by owls are weed-whacked by hand four times a year, while maintaining a 33-foot distance from all burrows during the breeding season.

Florida wildlife policy requires a permit to develop property on land with owl burrows. If nesting activity is not present, the burrow is filled with dirt, a process Heffernan refers to as “evicting an owl.” Permits to do that cost \$1,900. Creating artificial or starter burrows for the homeless owls can drop the price to \$600.

But not everyone follows the rules: Burrows are often illegally crushed by excavators to avoid permit fees, says [Brittany Piersma](#), a field biologist who studies the burrowing owls across the state on Marco Island, the second largest population behind Cape Coral. Owls have been buried alive or had their homes stuffed with rocks. In 2019, a security camera recorded a Marco realtor [fumigating a burrow with mothballs](#).

Rat poison has also contributed to the owls’ population decline because rodents are a large part of their diet. A family of burrowing owls can consume 1,000 mice in a single nesting season, Heffernan says.

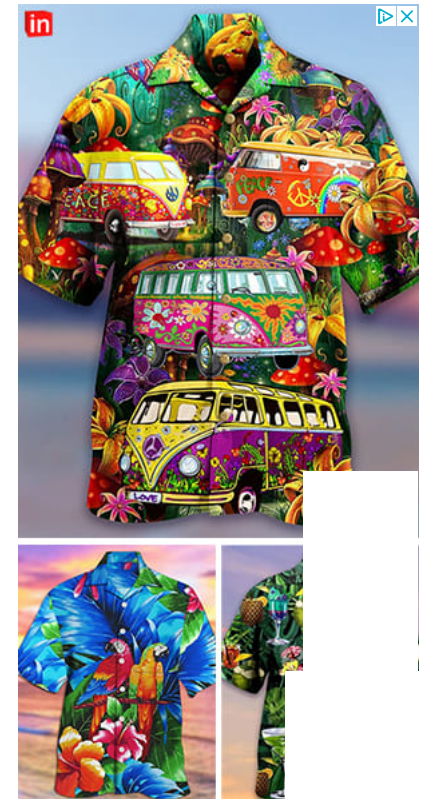
While FAU has now grown to over 30,000 students, its tiny ground owls remain a unique part of the school’s history and environment. And as a school where 80 percent of students commute, the burrowing owls—like the basketball team itself—add a sense of unity, spirit, and togetherness.

“Fierce little raptors—they’re a true mascot of the campus,” Heffernan says.





ADVERTISEMENT



READ THIS NEXT



ANIMALS

What bacteria lurk in your city? Consult the bees.



SCIENCE

Is melatonin giving you nightmares?



ANIMALS

Why are these orcas killing sharks and removing their livers?

ADVERTISEMENT

2 Common Foods Kill Memory

Avoid these two foods if you suffer from brain fog.

Boston Brain Science

Open

GO FURTHER