

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**FERRUGINOUS PYGMY-OWL****NOVEMBER 2025**

The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*) has an extensive range, encompassing much of South and Central America and extending north through western and eastern Mexico into southern Arizona and southern Texas. Up to 15 subspecies occupy a wide variety of habitats ranging from semiarid desert scrub to lush tropical rainforest. Populations resident to Arizona and Texas, at the northern edge of their range, are different subspecies (*G. b. cactorum* and *ridgwayi*, respectively) that both face threats from habitat loss. In 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the Arizona subspecies as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, following many years of litigation and opposition from a coalition of developers.

Until the late 1900s, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls were considered fairly common in south-central Arizona as far north as Maricopa County along the Salt and Gila rivers and as far west as Yuma County. Before the 1950s, they were most numerous along drainages with continuous water and extensive cottonwood-willow canopy. With the loss of much of this habitat, this small owl shifted to well-vegetated Sonoran Desert scrub with saguaros and large thorny trees and adjacent wooded dry washes, offering available nest cavities. The owl population is currently threatened by urbanization and the proliferation of invasive buffelgrass, which contributes to spreading wildfires that destroy columnar cacti and other vegetation the owl needs.



Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, 16 March 2019. Photo by Matt Van Wallene

The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl is now primarily located in southern Pima County, but much is still not known about the extent of its distribution and population density. The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD), USFWS, and other organizations are conducting surveys to learn more about its status, nest activity, site fidelity, and habitat requirements. To help restore the population, AZGFD, in collaboration with the Phoenix Zoo, has released nearly 50 captive-bred pygmy-owls since 2007 in areas where the species has been extirpated.

Like other species of pygmy-owl, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls lack ear-tufts and have dark “false eye” spots on the back of their heads. The false eyes create an illusion that the owl is watching, deterring predators or causing mobbing songbirds to target the false eyes instead of the owl’s vulnerable real eyes. This is advantageous because pygmy-owls hunt during the day, when they are more likely to be harassed by other birds. These small opportunistic hunters primarily consume large insects but have been known to eat doves, quail, small mammals, and lizards.