



ELF OWL

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Micrathene whitneyi*. Genus *Micrathene*, from the Greek words *mikros*, meaning small, and *athene*, for Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, to whom owls were sacred. Specific epithet *whitneyi*, for Professor J. D. Whitney, of the Geological Survey of California. Elf owls are also called Whitney's owl. Three subspecies are recognized: *M.w. whitneyi*, *M.w. idonea*, and *M.w. sanfordi*.

DESCRIPTION: One of the smallest owls in the world. Adults weigh 1 1/4 to 2 ounces, are 5 to 6 inches tall, and have a wingspan of 15 inches. Adult plumage olive-gray to gray-brown, spotted in white and buff. White and buff-brown barring on flight feathers, with a row of white spots down shoulder. Distinguishing features include round head, white eyebrows, absence of ear tufts, facial features edged with dark brown, yellow eyes, pale brown beak, and short tail. Juvenal plumage differs little from adults and only lasts until the first autumn.

DISTRIBUTION: Current U.S. breeding range restricted and discontinuous within the Southwest. Populations have been recorded as far south and east as southern tip of Texas; north to Fort Mohave, Nevada; and west along Colorado River valley. The two largest breeding populations are in Trans Pecos, Texas, and central and southern Arizona. In Arizona, elf owls have been recorded throughout the Gila, Salt, Verde, Bill Williams, and lower Colorado river watersheds. In the fall, elf owls assemble into flocks and travel to their wintering grounds in central Mexico.



HABITAT: Elf owls are found in a variety of habitats, ranging from 7,000 feet in elevation to low deserts. At higher elevations, they occupy pinyon, juniper, and oak woodlands on the steep slopes of larger canyons. In the lower deserts, they are associated with saguaros, cacti, mesquite, creosote, and various riparian habitats. The saguaro forests of southern Arizona are especially well known for their elf owl populations. The wintering grounds for this species are arid scrublands without large columnar cacti or trees.

BIOLOGY: Male elf owls return to their nesting grounds before females do, to establish territories and claim nesting cavities. Elf owls use abandoned woodpecker cavities in the dead branches of large riparian trees, oaks, pines, and saguaros for nesting. Males call from the cavities to attract females, and often fly from one cavity to the next to offer a variety of choices. The female

is attracted to the male's song and accepts her mate by simply entering the cavity with him. The male feeds the female from the time the pair bond is formed until the nestlings are 15 days old.

Female elf owls lay two to three (range 1 to 5) unmarked eggs near the end of May (range early March to mid-June). The female incubates for 24 days, and the nestlings fledge at 30 days post-hatching (range 28 to 33). This tiny owl's diet is primarily insects, although scorpions, lizards, and small snakes are also eaten as available. The male does most of the feeding of the nestlings.

STATUS: Elf owls are not included on the Department's draft list of *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona* (AGFD in prep.) and are not listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered or threatened. However, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and Arizona Title 17 protect this species and other owls from take or possession. Elf owls are listed by the State of California as endangered and have been reintroduced along the lower Colorado River.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Habitat loss is a limiting factor for elf owl populations. The clearing of land for agriculture, housing developments, and recreational areas reduces nesting and foraging habitat. Detailed studies on how urbanization and agriculture affect this species have not been performed in Arizona. Considering that our state has the largest breeding population of elf owls in the United States, more information on how human population growth is affecting our breeding populations is sorely needed. 🦉