

Elf Owl

By Celeste Silling

Christmas is approaching, so I think now is the perfect time of year to write about the Elf Owl. Yes, here in Texas, we are lucky enough to have the world's smallest raptor visit us during the breeding season. The Elf Owl, which stands only up to 5 inches tall, can be found during breeding season in the far Western and Southern parts of our state. What's it doing down there, and not at the North Pole?

Well, the Elf Owl is doing many things. For one, it's controlling the insect population! While most other owls prefer small mammals, birds, or amphibians, the Elf Owl mainly hunts insects and arthropods. To capture its prey, the Elf Owl will catch it in mid-flight or will chase it down on the ground or in trees. These owls can even hang upside down when they're trying to catch bugs on the underside of a branch. Elf Owls can even catch scorpions, though they have to carefully remove the stinger before eating it.

To make their nests, Elf Owls prefer to find pre-built property. They will find an old woodpecker hole in a tree or giant cactus, and make it their own. The male will court the female by calling out to her from his nest cavity. When she comes near, he will fly out to greet her. Once the female accepts the courtship, she can lay 1-5 eggs (usually 3). She will incubate them for 24 days, then, when they hatch, she will stay with the chicks for about a month. The male stays busy by bringing food for her and the chicks.

Elf Owls, like Santa Claus, are most active at night. They do their hunting, eating, and socializing during dusk and nighttime, and rest in their nest cavities during the day. Like other owls, they have large eyes that have a surplus of rods, which are light-sensitive cells that detect light and movement. This allows them to see in the dark and track their prey with little light.

Elf Owls, being so small, have some natural predators. This includes other, larger owl species, coyotes, snakes, and bobcats. Fortunately, the Elf Owl frequently builds its nest in Saguaro Cactuses, which provide excellent security. Any predators would have to climb through several feet of spikes to reach the owl or its chicks.

The Elf Owl is relatively common in its range, though populations are declining. This is largely due to habitat loss as their deserts are slowly being taken by humans and turned into grazing land or developed.

Now that it's winter, the Elf Owls will be in Southern Mexico, in their wintering grounds. The desert in the Southern U.S. and Northern Mexico gets too cold during the winter for this species, so they migrate South to find more abundant prey and warmer habitat. The Elf Owls migrate in small flocks, and are not pulled by reindeer.

On Christmas this year, be sure to leave a moth out with the milk and cookies for the Elf Owls. And (seriously) if you have a Christmas tree, be sure to recycle it at your local beaches to build up the dunes. Happy holidays from Gulf Coast Bird Observatory!

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