

Meet the Puerto Rican owl: the only species endemic to the island and currently under threat ^[1]

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The goal of caring for the múcaro is to reintroduce it to a habitat close to its rescue site in order to maintain the cohesion of the population. (Olivia Maule)

As the sun sets, between the crowing of roosters and the calling of coquí frogs, you may hear a sound from above similar to that produced by shoes on a slippery surface. It comes from the Puerto Rican owl, also known as the common múcaro, a species that inhabits the entire island.

“This múcaro is the only owl endemic to Puerto Rico; it is not found anywhere else in the world,” said **Ángel Atienza Fernández**, director of the Wildlife Unit of the **Department of Natural and Environmental Resources** (DRNA) during an interview with **El Nuevo Día**, in which this media outlet had the opportunity to interact with one of these birds.

This owl, whose scientific name is *Megascops nudipes*, is one of three species found in the archipelago, along with the barn owl (*Tyto alba*) and the short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*).

Anatomically, the common screech owl has impressive adaptations. When touched, its plumage feels like putting your hand inside a pillow.

In addition, there are several anatomical features on its face that help it navigate the world with heightened senses. For example, on the front, fine white hairs—similar to a cat's whiskers—detect movement in spaces where sight cannot reach.

Around their orange eyes—which open and close slowly—they have a frontal structure that also acts as an ear canal, directing sounds toward the inner ears located under feathers and at eye level.

Their plumage, ideal for stealthy flight, does not extend to their legs, giving rise to their name “nudipes,” which means “bare feet.” Their claws, sharp like a cat's, and their pointed beak function as precise tools for catching frogs, reptiles, and insects. Their bite feels like the pressure of a clothespin.

Although the múcaro is mainly found in wooded areas, where it helps control insect pests, including Cuban frogs, according to Atienza Fernández, it is increasingly approaching urban areas, where the concrete of the streets attracts insects that stick to surfaces after rain. But searching for food in these spaces carries risks: while pecking at concrete or asphalt, they are exposed to being hit by motor vehicles.

In addition, deforestation represents one of the greatest threats to the species, the director said.

The Puerto Rican owl population is stable, but keeping it that way requires individual and community action and awareness. Atienza Fernández's recommendation is clear: “When people go to buy land, leave as many trees as possible.”

This is key, he explained, as the múcaro nests and lives in tree branches and needs well-preserved wooded areas to reproduce and hunt.

During the breeding season, which runs from spring to summer, pairs raise an average of two chicks, which remain in the nest for almost a month, depending entirely on their mother, according to Atienza Fernández.

At the Cambalache Species Center in **Arecibo**, they mainly arrive as juveniles to complete their rearing, as many tend to fall out of the nest, he said.

There, a rigorous process is followed before releasing them: first, they are moved to a larger cage to ensure they can fly well, then it is verified that they are eating on their own.

“They are not kept in captivity,” emphasized the director of the Wildlife Unit, as the múcaro is not allowed to reproduce in closed environments. The goal is always to reintroduce them to a suitable habitat close to their rescue site to maintain population cohesion, he said.

Although the múcaro has few natural predators, cats pose a major threat, especially when they are young and may fall from the nest. “The cat, if it doesn't kill it to eat, kills it to play,” said Atienza Fernández. Attacks by iguanas and large birds have also been reported.

The average life expectancy of the Puerto Rican owl is 12 years. To ensure its survival, the DRNA acts on citizen complaints about circumstances that threaten its life.

If someone finds an injured or disoriented owl, they should call the Ranger Corps in one of the seven environmental surveillance regions, warned the DRNA official. Then, if necessary,

those in charge will take it to a veterinarian.

There is no exclusive initiative for the Puerto Rican owl; its conservation depends on the general maintenance of the ecosystem, for example, not polluting water or plants, avoiding deforestation, and allowing wildlife to thrive without unnecessary intervention.

“We continue to pour so much cement and cut down so many trees that the time will come when the animals that are native to this area, if we do not protect them, will be left without a habitat,” warned Atienza Fernández.

His call to citizens is clear: “When you find animals like this, not just owls, don't leave them there. Call the Ranger Corps to receive the species and release it.”

To contact the Ranger Corps, call (787) 999-2200 ext. 2911.

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