



MONTEREY NEWS

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Snowy Owls— Arctic Visitors

The seasonal reports of appearances of snowy owls in early winter gets our undivided attention with all the environmental concerns about global warming and the effects on annual bird migrations. The population of snowy owls has already declined to about 200,000 in the northern hemisphere, with only 40,000 left to migrate down here in early winter. Since the last heavy migration in 2013 there has not been a huge influx of these snowy visitors. Early speculation was that this influx was due to a shortage of lemmings, their favorite food. A diurnal snowy owl, hunting by day and night, lives on about five lemmings per day, or more than 1,600 a year.

Ornithologists visiting the Arctic found that owl nests that year were overflowing with leftover dead lemmings. This changed the thinking for the reasons of the massive departure in 2013. It was not a shortage of lemmings, but rather there was such a food abundance for young owls that the owls were overcrowding their habitat. This led to the young owls being hassled by their parents and other owls, pushing them to move out of their usual territory and migrate south in record numbers. This surprising increase in migration, as in 2013, is referred to as an “irruption.”

The snowy owl is a high-profile visitor as the largest owl on the continent, with a wingspan of at least five feet and weighing up to six and one-half pounds. The female is normally larger than the male, and has lined markings all over its body, as opposed to the nearly all white plumage of the male, as in my illustration that my daughter Elizabeth helped me draw while a snowy owl was sitting in a pine tree a few miles from my house in Fairhaven. Their piercing yellow eyes are fixed in their heads to see only in one direction, forcing it to swivel its head around to allow their excellent hearing to follow audible movements, which this individual did as we were trying to get a closer view.

We have seen snowy owls frequently stopping to perch on our coastal landscape which is very similar to bleak northern tundra habitat, and similar to areas on Cape Cod, Crane and



Salisbury Beaches, Plum Island. Recently at Logan Airport one was injured in traffic but could not be saved by conservationists.

The females make their nests by digging a shallow hollow in the ground, laying more eggs when prey is abundant. For a period of time after the eggs hatch the male brings her a wide variety of food consisting of mammals, birds including ducks and geese, fish, and various carrion.

The snowy owls (*Bubo scandiacus*) are fearsome creatures when defending their nests or young. They have been seen going after predators like ravens, foxes, wolves, and actually divebombing interfering human beings. Conservationists now recommend giving snowy owls plenty of space because when disturbed their movements become noticed by heckling crows, eagles, and crowds of people, which can then threaten their safety. Leaving them alone as stately sentinels from the tundra helps to preserve a wildlife-watching opportunity for future generations.

— George B. Emmons

Editor's Note: In February 2017 and again in February 2020 George submitted columns about snowy owls, but each column has had a different focus and information, and distinct original artwork