

The 1996-97 Record Invasion of Snowy Owls in Illinois

With a Summary of Records from Illinois and Lower Lake Michigan

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From 4 November 1996 through 15 April 1997 a record invasion of 73 Snowy Owls (*Nyctea scandiaca*) occurred in Illinois. They were re-recorded as far west as the Mississippi River (although in Iowa), as far east as Danville in Vermilion County, and as far south as Carlyle Lake in Bond and Clinton Counties.

Most Illinois' owls (48) were recorded along the Lake Michigan shoreline. This was also typical of Snowies (34) reported in northern Indiana along its shores (Ken Brock in litt.; see appendix) and at least 11 more reported from Berrien County, Michigan along the shoreline (Kip Miller in litt.; see appendix).

While many Illinois observers lamented the lack of owls in the interior, the Snowies were there as well, though often in areas where access by birders was limited. One example is O'Hare International Airport in Cook County where as many as five Snowy Owls were present from December through February (Glenn Dunn pers. comm.).

Unlike the previous Illinois record of 59 Snowy Owls during the winter of 1980-81 (Kleen 1981), nearly all the owls reported in this documented invasion were from northeastern Illinois. The distribution of owls in this invasion (see appendix) was more like that of the winter of 1991-92 when 46 Snowy

Owls were recorded mostly along Lake Michigan (Johnson 1992).

Methodology

Though the methodology for determining whether an owl sighting represented a new individual was fairly subjective in some cases, we tried to be conservative and consistent in the manner of recording new individuals. The decision to include an owl as a new individual depended on the number present during the sighting, the number of days certain individuals lingered, whether the observation was during, before, or after a heavy migration period, the maximum count during a single day at a particular location compared with the number at other locations nearby, the distance between observations, and how frequently an area was covered. Some owls stayed a single day while others remained throughout winter. Leapfrogging or moving off a wintering territory may have occurred but was often difficult to prove or detect.

We reviewed all daily winter Illinois Snowy records from Illinois bird alert hotlines during this period. John Purcell (in litt.) also provided daily records of owl observations at Montrose Harbor in Chicago. Glenn Dunn, a biologist at O'Hare Airport, also provided some of the data used in this report. We suggest that many owls went undetected.

This irruption or flight was clearly evident elsewhere in the Great Lakes region with Snowy Owls being reported on many statewide birding hotlines from November through April. To quote the Wisconsin hotline on 21 November 1996, there were "too many owls in some areas to count." Iowa recorded Snowy Owls in at least 8 counties during the winter (Peter Peterson pers. comm.) the closest to Illinois was in Scott County. Great Lakes State's Christmas Bird Count data (LeBaron 1997) revealed 59 owls in 39 count circles, and in Canada, an amazing 91 individuals were counted in 12 count circles in Manitoba with 40 in Winnipeg alone! Further afield, British Columbia and Washington State recorded Snowy Owl numbers "the likes of which haven't been seen in 27 years!" Sixty-six owls in 10 count circles in Washington State were recorded, for example, and a new record was established, 62 Snowies in one count circle at Ladner, British Columbia-Washington. However, along the eastern coast of North America, Snowy Owls were noted in average numbers (LeBaron 1997).

The first report in Illinois came on 4 November 1996 with a singleton reported at Waukegan in Lake County and two individuals on the Navy Pier jetties in Chicago, Cook County. This arrival date was normal for most Illinois Snowy Owl irruptions. At the beginning of the fourth week in No