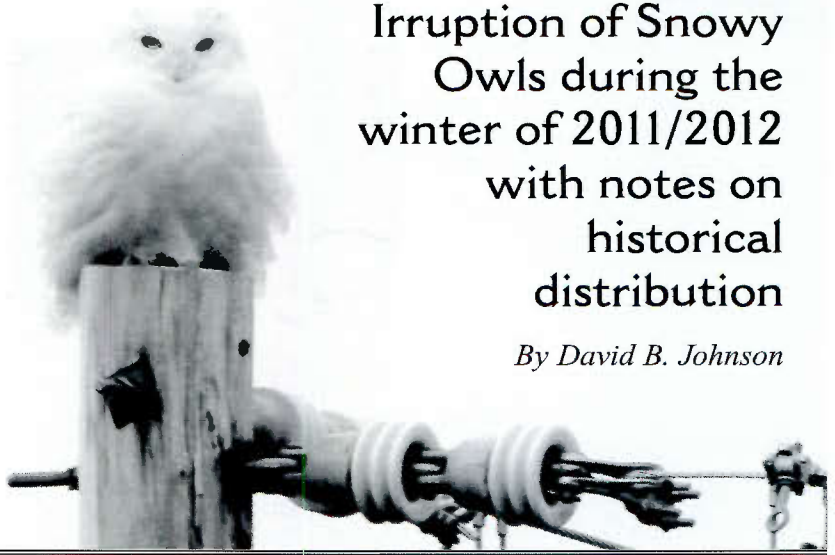


*In many natural objects,
whiteness refiningly
enhances beauty, as if
imparting some special
virtue of its own, as in
marbles, japonicas, and
pearls...that as in essence
whiteness is not so much a
color as the visible absence
of color, and at the same
time the concrete of all
colors; is if for these reasons
that there is such a dumb
blankness, full of meaning,
in a wide landscape of
snows...*

– Herman Melville,
Moby Dick

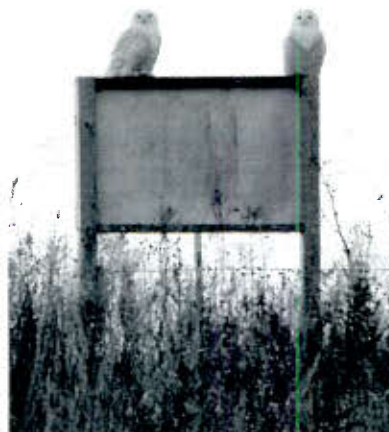
Illinois's Record Irruption of Snowy Owls during the winter of 2011/2012 with notes on historical distribution

By David B. Johnson



Across Illinois during the fall, winter and spring of 2011/2012 observers, birders, raptor rehabilitators, scientists and the general public were amazed at the extent to which Snowy Owls irrupted into the state. Articles and photographs of Snowy Owls made front covers of Illinois newspapers (DeVore 2011), television stations ran special newscasts about the irruption, and birders were often treated to multiple sightings of Snowy Owls throughout Illinois. The huge extent of this most recent record 2011/2012 invasion of 133 sightings or detections in 34 counties in Illinois was, no doubt, bolstered by the ebird contributions of citizen scientists (in most cases experienced birders), other birding forums, the Christmas Bird Count database (a color photograph of a Snowy Owl graced the cover of the 112th CBC issue, LeBaron 2012) and the increased interest in owls bolstered by the media. The fictional Harry Potter's famous companion – Hedwig – a Snowy Owl perhaps stoked additional attention. The Snowy Owl irruption occurred – counter intuitively – in an almost snowless Illinois winter and during the third warmest winter on record according to National Weather Climatic Data ([\[ncdc.noaa.gov/\]\(http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/\)\). Illinois's irruption was “just part of the iceberg,” so to speak, being part of a continent wide Snowy Owl irruption, massive in scope across the North American continent west to east and as far south as Texas \(Dolan 2012\) and even as far flung as Honolulu, Hawaii, a first ever record for Hawaii \(ebird 2012\). For all of the participants who ventured out to witness this record irruption in Illinois and elsewhere – it was truly impressive. \(See Figure 1 and Table 1\)](http://www.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The first Snowy Owl recorded in Illinois during the 2011/12 season



was an aircraft strike of a bird at O'Hare International Airport on 11 November 2011. On 19 November at Montrose beach and fishhook pier in Chicago, Cook County birders observed two Snowy Owls having flown in off Lake Michigan. Before this and through the end of fall the stage had already been set for a major irruption. In Canada in southern Ontario by mid-November Snowy Owls were showing up at many locations with 14 Snowy Owls at Nittishi Point on 9 November being a peak tally in the massive fall movement (Bain 2012), and in southern Manitoba the owls were widespread. Just to the north, multiple Snowy Owls were noted in 27 Minnesota counties, 37 Wisconsin counties and 24 Michigan counties by the end of the fall season in the Western Great Lakes region (Svingen 2012), while a large irruption in the Dakotas was well underway. To the west of our state a juvenile male Snowy Owl was noted on 7 November, which was the

*Above: Snowy Owl.
Coles County. 9 February 2012.
Photo by Ron Bradley.*

*Snowy Owl at Montrose, Chicago,
Cook County. 7 December 2011.
Photo by Robert Hughes.*