

DeKalb County 5 May 2012. Finally, the latest departure date for Illinois was recorded on 14 May 2012 when Kristin Ellis noted and documented (on file with IORC) a Snowy Owl along an airport taxiway at Rockford International Airport in Winnebago County (one of three detected there during this irruption).

### Prey items

During this irruption period in Illinois, Snowy Owls were observed feeding on or there was food content evidence from Snowy Owl pellets for: Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*), American Coot (*Fulica Americana*), Brown (Norway) Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*Ictidomys tridecemlineatus*), Meadow Vole (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*), Deer Mice (*Peromyscus sp*), and Eastern Cottontail Rabbit (*Sylvagus floridanus*). In addition Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) was believed to be another prey item though not confirmed. For further information see Josh Engel's report in this journal on the Snowy Owl pellet contents from this 2011/2012 irruption.

Snowy Owls away from their breeding grounds can become very versatile feeders. During a 15-year winter study at Boston's Logan Airport Norman Smith (1997) observed Snowy Owls as very opportunistic feeders, having fed on prey items from geese, ducks, cormorants, rails, pheasant, other owls (including Snowy Owl), shorebirds (including American Oystercatcher and Upland Sandpiper), gulls, muskrat, striped skunk, fish, and even a Great Blue Heron! David Parmelee (1992) noted that John James Audubon also observed Snowy Owls eating fish at water holes.

### Winter Territories

Normally without color marking or radio tracking it is nearly impossible to determine an owl's wintering territory. However, during this irruption two Snowy Owls were able to be tracked largely due to the owls



being the only individuals in their respective counties. In Coles County, Ron Bradley (in lit.) over the course of eight weeks (2 January through 24 February) was able to determine that a male Snowy Owl (nearly pure white) ranged over nine miles of hunting territory near Mattoon, Illinois. In McHenry County, Jim Kriss and Karen Lund (pers. comm.) determined that a Snowy Owl ranged over five miles from Huntley to near Union, Illinois over a period of 13 weeks (19 February through 11 May 2012).

### Mortality and Casualties

There was a 6 percent, or eight, known fatalities during this irruption: two of these were road kills from vehicle collisions, two were kills from aircraft strikes, three from starvation and another from starvation and poisoning. Linda Breuer, director of Barnswallow, a wildlife rehabilitation center near Wauconda, recovered an owl in Lindenhurst, Lake County on 30 November 2011, in an open suburban neighborhood with dogs, playgrounds and fences. The owl had apparently been in the area for nearly three weeks amusing families and dogs until someone became really concerned and called Breuer. The

*Snowy Owl being harassed by Northern Harrier. Sidney, Champaign county. 9 February 2012. Photo by Bob Schifo.*

owl was infested with feather lice and suffered from emaciation, being less than 50 percent its estimated, normal body weight, and suffering from advanced rodenticide poisoning. Despite critical supportive care, the owl died after two and 1/2 days (Breuer in lit.). One of the aircraft strikes resulted in a banded specimen found by the operations personnel at Rockford International Airport, Winnebago County, on 23 March 2012 found 20 feet off the runway after being struck by the lower left flap of an aircraft wing (FAA Wildlife Strike Database, <http://wildlife-mitigation.tc.faa.gov/wildlife/default.aspx>). Daniel and Barbara Williams (in lit.) were involved in the recovery of this female specimen which was hatched prior to 2011; it will eventually be housed in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Cook Co. The owl was banded by Travis Guerrant of Addison, Illinois, in Boone County on 21 March 2012, two days prior to its demise, not too far from the Rockford Airport. Another mortality was of an owl identified by its remains found in the right landing gear and specimen evidence off a runway after an aircraft strike, the first to occur during the irruption at O'Hare International airport on 11 November 2011.

### Remarkable Rescues and Rehabilitations

Perhaps the most amazing Snowy Owl story (Mistretta 2012, LuAnn LaSusa, & Karen Lund, in litt.) during this irruption in Illinois occurred when at night on 30 November 2011 a Snowy Owl, perhaps hunting or startled, flew up and collided with a vehicle and was literally pinned to the grill of a SUV Ford Escape going nearly 55 mph near Hampshire on an open country road (Melms Road) in Kane County. Unknown to the driver