

*January 20, 1992. Lake County. Richard Myslinski observes crows mobbing a large white bird on top of a light pole by a "mega-strip" mall named Gurnee Mills. The bird, with large yellow eyes and light brownish barring, is seen later that day huddled on a snowy wisp of a rise in a corn stubble field oblivious to the traffic 50 feet away.*

---

*January 25. Waukegan. A city worker, stopped at a light during a snowstorm, notices a large white bird "flopping around" inside the second floor mezzanine of an old abandoned hotel.*

---

Scenes like those were played out again and again during the winter of 1991/92 as Illinois birders, lucky enough to spot the white phantom of the north, witnessed the state's second largest winter invasion of Snowy Owls (*Nyctea scandiaca*). For them, the experience was more than just checking a bird off on a list. Rather, the image of a feathered nomad encountered in an area much to the south of its normal wintering range and often in bizarre circumstances will remain a vivid memory.

Adult male Snowy Owls are pure white with little dark flecking or barring. Males usually have more white space between their finer barring, while the much larger females have thicker, heavier barring. The bars nearly touch giving the female a sooty appearance; however, separating species by this method can be difficult, especially when observing immatures (Josephson, 1980.)

Called Ook Pik Juak (snowy bird) by Eskimos, Snowy Owls rely on lemmings, other rodents, and birds such as ptarmigan, plovers, and buntings to sustain themselves and their young. Populations of lemmings

naturally fluctuate, which then affects the Snowy Owl population.

When lemmings are abundant, the nesting clutch size of a Snowy Owl might be 12 or 13, much larger than the normal five to seven egg clutch size. The snowy's nest is usually placed on a hillock or rise in the tundra. Many of the young fall prey to Arctic foxes or jaegers.

When the lemming population crashes, Snowy Owls often wander far south of their normal Arctic wintering area. During invasion years, snowies appear in fields and on shores and harbors sometimes as far as the central to southern United States. Snowy Owls are opportunistic during these invasions, often feeding on sea ducks, rats, squirrels, rabbits, and city pigeons. Their quest for food can lead them to some desperate circumstances and also explains why they are found during invasion years in some strange places.

The Illinois invasion began 8 November 1991 when Dick Young spotted a Snowy Owl in front of his school bus. It ended 9 April 1992 when someone spotted a Snowy Owl perched

on a light post by a United Airlines terminal at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago.

The bulk of Illinois' Snowy Owl invasion occurred in November and December when 32 of the 46 Snowy Owls seen were recorded. In January, 12 Snowy Owls were recorded in Illinois. Observers reported one Snowy Owl each in the months of February, March, and April. The March sighting could have been a previously-seen bird at Montrose Harbor in Chicago, according to Kanae Hirabayashi, a Chicago area birder.

Richard Biss, who operates the Chicago Audubon Society rare bird alert, and Hirabayashi spent many hours helping me eliminate possible duplicate sightings of Snowy Owls along Chicago's lakefront.

This invasion is surpassed only by the winter of 1980/81 when 59 Snowy Owls were recorded throughout the state (Kleen, 1981.) Other high flight years have occurred in the state but the numbers and extent of these invasions were not thoroughly documented (Bohlen, 1989.)