



Snowy Owl eating freshly caught American Coot on rocky jetty at Winthrop Harbor, Zion, Lake County. 2 December 2011. Photo by Jerry Goldner.

Snowy Owls (*Bubo scandiacus*) staged a record irruption during the winter of 2011-2012. With Snowy Owls seen throughout the state, several people were able to procure regurgitated pellets. Pellets consist of undigested parts of a bird's prey, often comprising fur, feathers, exoskeletons and bones. Pellet contents have long been used to assess the diets of owls, which due to their nocturnal habits can be very difficult to do through observations (e.g. Cahn and Kemp 1930).

I received a small series of pellets from the irruption from the Chicago lakefront (six pellets, thanks to Jennifer Duncan, Steve Spitzer, and Jerry Goldner) and from Coles County in east-central Illinois (two pellets, thanks to Ronald Bradley), which I analyzed for their contents. A similar study conducted at Horicon Marsh, Wisconsin, during the 1960-61 Snowy Owl irruption, found that among five individuals, 73% of pellets

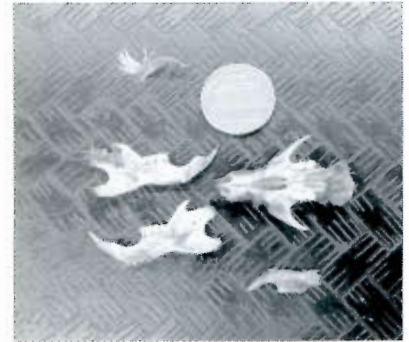
A Sampling of Snowy Owl Pellet Contents during winter 2011/12

By Joshua I. Engel

contained meadow voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*), 30% contained muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*), and 23% contained duck parts (Keith 1963).

Identifications of the rodents were made based on the molars found in the pellets using Hoffmeister (1989) and the Field Museum mammal collection as references. Three prey species were found in the lakefront pellets. One pellet – from Montrose Beach – contained the skulls of two brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*). Among five pellets collected between Northerly Island and 41st St. were eight meadow voles, two unidentified *Microtus* voles, and one American Coot (*Fulica americana*). The two pellets from Coles County contained no fewer than nine individual *Peromyscus* mice.

This study reveals just a small sample of the varied diet of Snowy Owls in Illinois during the 2011-2012 irruption. Other prey items, including eastern cottontail (*Sylvagus floridamus*) and Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*), were also reported. A study of a similar number of Snowy Owl pellets from coastal Washington during the same time period revealed a diet consisting entirely of birds, including Sanderling (*Calidris alba*), Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*), and Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) (Paulson 2012).



Rodent jaws and skull bones found in Snowy Owl pellet. Photo by Joshua I. Engel.

Literature cited

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Snowy Owl coughing up pellet. Montrose Point, Lincoln Park, Chicago, Cook County. 11 December 2012. Photo by Jerry Goldner.

Snowy Owl pellet found in Livingston County showing size. 3 March 2012. Photo by Ben Murphy.

