

tracks or can be found either perched atop a utility pole along the grid of country roads which criss-cross the agricultural fields in the area, or sitting far out in one of the corn or soybean stubble fields, at times more conspicuous and noticeable than others. After a quick lunch we began looking for our last owl. No, I didn't miscount. I omitted the Barn Owl part of the story. He was somewhere in northern Illinois, and we did find it in its usual roosting location in which we were able to observe it without flushing or otherwise disturbing it at its daytime roost. I am hoping he returns to breed, so I will not divulge his location.

Finding a Snowy Owl proved to be a bit more problematic than we had anticipated, especially given the large irruption occurring in Illinois that winter. I had previously seen it several times at the LaSalle County location on field trips with others, but always in a different location. This time would be no different. After several passes without luck we decided we would have to expand our search area. We figured east was our best chance as wind turbines dominated the areas south and west. To the north was La Salle Lake which was inaccessible. During our search we had crossed paths a few times with a young couple also looking for the Snowy as well, only they had no optics. We invited them to tag along. After many trips down all of the roads where the owl had been seen (and many where it hadn't), we were beginning to fear that we were not going to be able to find the bird here today, and began thinking of alternative plans and locations as to where we should go to look for another Snowy Owl. We had actually thought that this winter, a Snowy Owl would be one of the easier owls to find and we had been worried more about finding a couple of the other, more common owl species. As usual during a Snowy Owl search out in open fields, we had several sightings of the much more common "White Bucket" subspecies of the Snowy Owl (*Bubo plasticus pailii*), including one very distant one that we all had almost

sworn was the bird, until a long walk down the railroad tracks with spotting scopes in tow brought us close enough to see that the white blob was unfortunately not alive. After a few more farmer "White Bucket" owls, and a couple more sightings of the even more common subspecies of Snowy Owl, the "White Bag" form (*Bubo plasticus grocerii*), slightly fluttering on corn stubble, we were very close to leaving LaSalle County. Heading east for the last time, another white blob about a half mile out into another ag field, near the edge of where a corn stubble field met a soybean stubble field, caused us to stop one more time. This was near a house with a very friendly, large dog, much in need of vigorous belly-rubbing and attention, who joined us as we set up our scopes one more time. Apparently, this friendly dog was our Snowy Owl good luck charm, as looks through the scope quickly assured us that we had indeed finally found our much sought-after Snowy Owl, only about a mile from where we originally began our search. It is amazing how these large, white birds can camouflage themselves and disappear into vegetation as short as corn stubble, just below slight rises or dips in an otherwise mostly flat agricultural landscape. We had passed right by the bird two hours earlier a couple of times! After some high fives and a couple of photos we said goodbye to the young couple and our furry, friendly good luck charm and began our long ride home. It was nice being able to share the Snowy Owl with the young couple, as without a scope, they either would not have located the bird, far out in the ag field, or would not have gotten the good look that they had with our scopes.

We had a new record but there was still a little more work to be done on the way home. The record for total raptors, including owls, in a day was 15. We had our eight owls and had also seen Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, and Bald Eagle. We needed three more hawks to tie the old record. While looking for the Snowy we saw what may have been a distant Rough-

legged Hawk but couldn't positively ID it. We went back to relocate it with no luck. We then followed the Illinois River east toward Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area, hoping to add a few new hawks along the way. However, we arrived at Goose Lake without any new raptors. We proceeded up to the rooftop observation deck at the back of the Goose Lake Prairie Visitor's Center still hoping a Rough-legged Hawk or Merlin would possibly pass by. Unfortunately, no more hawks were to be found... but there were more raptors here! We watched as several more Northern Harriers began coursing the surrounding prairie and wetlands and as the sun began to set, two more Short-eared Owls appeared and began to hunt and interact with the harriers. Amazingly, while watching the Short-eareds hunting, Pete spotted a barely visible, distant Snowy Owl through the tall, dense prairie grass, perched on the ground next to the edge of a narrow strip of wetland vegetation. It eventually wound up making a couple of long flights over the prairie, then flew off to one of the even more distant high tension, utility towers to the south near Pine Bluff Road and landed on top of the tower over 100 feet off the ground. We finally called it quits when we could no longer see the Snowy.

Mission accomplished! We ended up recording a total of 15 owls heard or seen, though the only species that we didn't actually see were the calling Barred Owls. We also had a total of 12 raptor species. Hopefully in the future there will be more chances for eight-owl days. However, I have a feeling that finding more than eight species of owls on any one day in Illinois will most likely never be possible... but who knows what surprises a future Boreal, Northern Hawk, Burrowing... or dare I say Great Gray Owl might have in store for the lucky owl lovers who may try another Big Owl Day in the years to come.

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