



The Snowy Owl

Scientific Name: *Bubo scandiacus*

About the Snowy Owl

Each year as winter sets in and the arctic sends its cold blistery winds south, you can be sure arctic migrants are close behind; one notable visitor is the majestic **Snowy Owl**. The scientific name is *Bubo scandiacus*.

We know snowy owls breed in the arctic and migrant south each winter, but where can they be found when they arrive? These birds prefer hunting habitats that mimic their arctic summer grounds, so they are most comfortable in open fields and along frozen shorelines. You can spot snowy owls driving along Highway 91, Fairgrounds Road, Highway 26 or on rural roads that are surrounded by extensive farmland. These owls are quite comfortable on the ground but don't forget to look up, because they love sitting on telephone poles, barns, houses, hay bales and even trees! From these heights they use their phenomenal eyesight to spot their prey. Field mice, meadow voles, lemmings, weasels, hares, and rabbits make up their mammalian diet and ducks, gulls, and grebes make up their avian diet.

Snowy owls are Canada's largest owl, weighing around 4lbs, with a wingspan of 1.37m or about 4 ½ feet. Telling male from female can be challenging especially when they look alike! Basically, male adult snowy owls are white. The whiter they are, the older they are. Female adults will show dark barring all over when young and the barring will fade as they age. The top of a female's head will show barring as well, as a male's head will be white. Female snowy owls are also larger than male snowy owls, a condition known as reverse sexual dimorphism. Juveniles have extensive dark barring all over their bodies and can be confused with young adult females. Young and old, they all share the same piercing yellow eyes.

Snowy owls show up each year in varying numbers and every several years make a large appearance called an **irruption**. An irruption occurs when high numbers of snowy owls migrate south for the winter. When prey populations are high, owl broods will match resulting in more owls making the trip to their wintering grounds. Here is a link for more information about snowy owl irruptions: <https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/what-is-an-irruption/>.

Contrary to a popular myth, snowy owls are not starving when they reach their wintering grounds. Years of research into their body conditions have shown plenty of animals with above average body fat, also known as subcutaneous fat stored in their chest and wings.

Snowy owls are solitary birds that sit a lot and hunt alone during the day and night, so they are both diurnal and nocturnal. This makes capturing a picture of them much easier, especially when they are fairly calm around traffic.

[Tips to help you photograph the Snowy Owl:](#)

Please ensure personal safety and the surrounding area when looking for owls or any bird while driving. Busy highways are not the safest place to track and take pictures; rather, quiet side roads are preferred. Remember to use your signals and pull over as not to interrupt flow of traffic. On this note of safety, there are ethics for birding as well; the welfare of these owls is paramount if we want them to propagate. Spooking them or habituating them to food could lead to accidental fatalities. Take caution when walking onto a field, that field is owned by someone who may not want you treading on their property, so please show respect to property owners too. Unlike hawks and falcons, snowy owls are really chill birds and will likely sit long enough for you to snap a picture of a lifetime!

[Wild About Winter program series:](#)

Georgian Bay Wildlife in partnership with Clearview Township, has launched a 4-week series for local families and area residents to learn more about birds and wildlife in our region. Learn more: www.discoverclearview.ca/wild-about-winter