

Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*



Folk Name: Arctic Owl, White Owl

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Casual

Habitat: Open fields, airports

This magnificent, virtually all-white owl is an inch larger than the Great Horned Owl, and it also has large bright yellow eyes. It breeds in the Arctic tundra and generally winters in areas far to our north. Snowy Owls have been described as both “nomadic” and “irruptive,” and periodically, large flights push southward out of Canada and move into the United States. These continent-wide irruptions can be triggered during years of very low rodent populations on their breeding grounds. The Snowy Owl is a very rare visitor to the Carolinas and is an extremely rare winter visitor anywhere in this region.

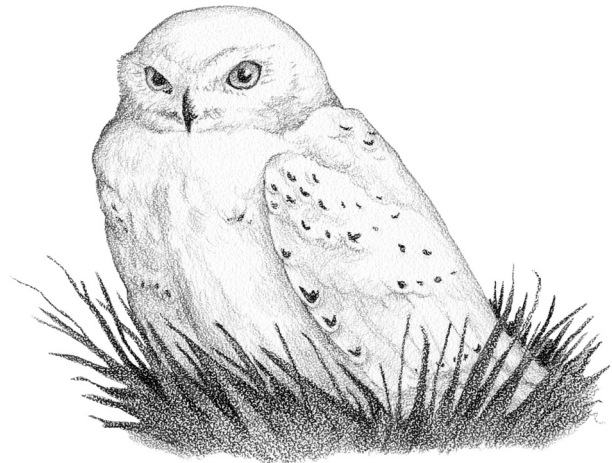
“This beautiful, ghostly creature of the Arctic tundras seems more of a wraith than an actuality, as it drifts in silently on the wings of winter.”
—*South Carolina Bird Life*, 1949

“So striking is the appearance of this unusual owl, its arrival in the neighborhood is generally the signal for some man to rush out with a gun to shoot it.”
—*Birds of North Carolina*, 1942

Ornithologist Leverett Loomis provided our first report of a Snowy Owl from the region. He found one in Chester County, writing: “During the early part of December 1886, I saw an individual several times under circumstances that dispelled all doubt from my mind as to its identity.” Forty years later, Elmer Brown reported the second Snowy Owl in the region. A female was killed by J.G. Chandler on December 2 or 3, 1926, near Barber in Rowan County. It was mounted for Chandler’s personal collection.

Maurice Stimson reported a Snowy Owl collected in Statesville on January 6, 1931:

Mr. Flake Summers brought to me a handsome Snow Owl. ...Mr. Summers shot this bird in an open field sitting on a stump, about noon of January 6th. I asked him about the position he found the bird in. He said at first he thought it was a large white piece of paper being blown about by the wind, but after watching it for a few minutes he saw that it was some kind of bird hunting back and forth over the fields. It was in prime condition not a feather was stained or out of place when he brought it to me a perfectly beautiful thing. It measured exactly



2 ft. and the wing spread was 5 ft. 4 in. We sent it at once to Mr. Geo Chandler at Barber Junction N.C. He has been mounting birds for 35 years and I am sure he will do a good job of it.

That same month, a second Snowy Owl was shot and killed on the Barringer Farm in Charlotte. This farm was located on what is today Revolution Park and Golf Course near the center of the city. Osmond Barringer, who shot the bird, was a prominent Charlotte businessman, local farmer, and one of the first Presidents of the Mecklenburg Audubon Club in the early 1940s. Barringer was known around the state for his flamboyant personality and for a variety of news-making antics, including driving a car to the top of Grandfather Mountain—before a road had been built there. Barringer had his owl specimen mounted, and in the 1950s, the mount was donated to the Charlotte Nature Museum. It is believed this same owl later became part of the collection at Discovery Place and was subsequently donated to the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department.

It took 50 years for another Snowy Owl to appear in the region. On November 14, 1981, an immature male showed up on the top of a building in Whitmire, SC. This bird became sick and was captured on 24 November, but it later died. The specimen is now in the collection at Clemson University. The town of Whitmire is only about 20 miles from Chester, where Loomis found the first Snowy Owl 95 years before.

Most recently, individual Snowy Owls were reported in the region in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2017. Each of these may have been associated with what was described as “a historic and news-making southward irruption” or “a snowy-owl bonanza, thanks to a stubby-legged Arctic

rodent: the lemming.” South Carolina’s famous naturalist Rudy Mancke confirmed a Snowy Owl showed up in Kershaw County in February 2012. This bird later died. Another Snowy Owl was photographed at the Koopman Dairy Farm (Meredell Farm Road) in Randolph County, on December 3, 2013. Daniel Toweill, an experienced birder and wildlife photographer, reported seeing a Snowy Owl near the tarmac of the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport on February 2, 2014. He saw the bird from his airplane while he was on the runway and described it as “unmistakable.” Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to get

his camera from his carry-on bag. Toweill later submitted a detailed Rare Bird Report form providing details of this sighting for review. On December 4, 2017, a wildlife officer picked up a Snowy Owl along a roadside in Anson County. It was sent to the Carolina Raptor Center where it died from aspergillosis the next day. Another owl was found the same month in Guilford County and also received treatment at the Carolina Raptor Center.

In *The State of America’s Birds 2016* report, scientists warn that the North American population of the Snowy Owl is now in steep decline.