

SNOWY OWL PREYS ON A BONAPARTE'S GULL

Peter J. Martin

2079 Hillside Ave, Bellmore NY 11710

Late afternoon on a winter weekend is often a good time to observe Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) behavior in the Jones Beach area. There is minimal human disturbance and you can observe an undistracted bird's behavior from a distance over a period of time.

On 10 February 1992, I was observing a bird sitting on the primary dune about 50 yards from the ocean and Jones Inlet. For a half hour the bird had been perched, preening and surveying its surroundings. It defecated once and endured the fairly persistent harassment of two Great Black-backed Gulls for a few minutes, then, just at sunset the bird took flight, heading low out over the ocean. I was a little surprised as I had noticed no disturbance and had never previously seen a Snowy Owl fly far out over the ocean, although I've seen them cross the inlet to Point Lookout, usually attracting the attention of some gulls. This bird proceeded just out of sight, but returned within two minutes to once again perch on the same dune. There were numerous Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) feeding on the ocean and inlet and they did seem to casually give way as the owl passed, but the owl never seemed to deliberately approach or actively pursue a bird. Also, on another occasion I saw a single Bonaparte's Gull adroitly avoid over a dozen passes by a Peregrine Falcon over the ocean, so it did not occur to me that the owl might be hunting. However, after a few minutes on the dune, the owl again flew out low, directly over the ocean. Just after it passed out of sight, I saw it returning, but now it was carrying the limp body of a Bonaparte's Gull in its talons. It landed on the same dune, briefly mantled its prey and began to eat the gull. I watched this until dark and then left without disturbing the owl. The next day I didn't see the owl at this site, but did examine the remains of a Bonaparte's Gull there. Over the next few weeks I observed this same bird in the general vicinity but did not witness any similar behavior. I also did not witness as heavy a concentration of gulls feeding at dusk either. I did find one Bonaparte's Gull carcass on another dune without any mammalian tracks visible.

During the winter of 1992-93 there was a similarly plumaged bird present and I did find two Bonaparte's Gull carcasses on dune crests, but I did not see any hunting behavior.

In this area, I have seen a Snowy Owl actively pursue a rabbit and one

with a rat, but I have never seen one pursue birds. I have never examined their pellets closely and have rarely found a pellet that I thought was from a Snowy Owl. Snowy Owls feed on rabbits and rodents on their winter ground, but do feed on ducks and geese on the tundra breeding grounds (Walker 1974) where I imagine the prey is more concentrated and vulnerable. Bent (1938) states that food items vary and that birds are an important food source. My feeling is that this owl was opportunistically taking advantage of the high concentration of Bonaparte's Gulls engaged in feeding in a low light situation, and that by staying low was able to surprise and capture a bird. The owl's behavior seemed too deliberate for me to believe it was going for a sunset flight and happened upon a floating gull carcass.

Terres (1980) mentions small gulls among the prey items of the Snowy Owl, but does not give the species.

LITERATURE CITED

- Bent AC. 1938. *Life Histories of North American Birds*. Dover, NY 2:358.
Terres JK. 1980. Snowy Owl. In: *Audubon Encyclopedia of North American Birds*. NY, Knopf, p 672.
Walker LW. 1974. *The Book of Owls*. NY, Knopf, p 67.

