

OBSERVATIONS ON A SNOWY OWL AT GREAT GULL ISLAND

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Although many wintering Snowy Owls (*Nyctea scandiaca*) have been observed for short periods, there is seldom an opportunity to watch the behavior of an undisturbed individual for the greater part of a day. On 20 November 1980, we were able to do this on Great Gull Island, Suffolk County, a research station of the American Museum of Natural History at the entrance of Long Island Sound, about seven miles east northeast of Orient Point, Long Island. The island is half a mile long and one tenth of a mile wide, and is covered with thickets of bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), open weedy stretches, and the cement earthwork remains of an old fort. The House Mouse (*Mus musculus*) is the only resident mammal.

November 20 was calm and clear. We discovered the owl in mid-morning and watched it at frequent intervals from an observation tower until it left the island at dusk. It was perched near the edge of an extensive cement pavement in the high central portion of the island, from which it could survey all around. It had very little barring, and resembled immature males in the American Museum of Natural History collection.

The bird stayed in the same spot all day and was motionless for long periods. Its eyes were narrowed to horizontal slits, but we never saw them fully closed. On several occasions it was roused by interactions with other birds. When a Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*) flitted to the pavement from a bayberry and hopped within a few yards of it, the owl stretched its neck out and watched intently but made no attempt to capture it. It turned its head to follow a flock of Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) that swept by several times. Snowy Owls are capable of catching passerines in flight (Forbush, 1927, p. 235), and Gross (1944) reports them taking songbirds in Maine and New Brunswick.

None of the passerines seemed to notice the owl, but at about noon two adult Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) appeared and harassed it for approximately 40 minutes. They circled above it, calling loudly, then dove at it in turn, sometimes coming as close as five or ten feet. The owl faced them continuously, crouching and gaping its bill as they swooped down. The gulls eventually left, but

returned several times during the next few hours. Gulls will often attack birds of prey; Peterson (1948, p. 117) reports a Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) being mobbed and killed by a flock of gulls.

In late afternoon the owl became increasingly active, and by 1600 hrs. it was raising and lowering its head, preening, and stretching its wings over its back. At this time we also noticed that the owl's eyes had opened wide. At about 1600 hrs. it took a short hop-flight of a few yards and at 1635 hrs., just as the sun set, it took off again and flew to an observation blind on the north side of the island. Soon afterwards, the bird crossed low over the island to a blind on the south side where it stayed until the sky was fairly dark. The moon was full, so visibility was good. At 1700 hrs. it took off again and flew south over the water. About 500 feet from shore it stopped, hovered about 20 feet up, and plunged down close to the surface. There was a duck in the water just below, which dove as the owl came down; it may have been a Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) as there had been some feeding there during the day. The owl, unsuccessful, flew west and hovered briefly over a lobster-pot buoy. Then it flew off low over the waves towards Gardiner's Island, five miles to the south, and we lost it in the dusk. Snowy Owls are known to take ducks along the coast in winter (Forbush, loc. cit.) and also on the breeding grounds (Gross, 1944).

Snowy Owls can hunt by night or by day. Fogden (1973, p. 92) states that they are diurnal by necessity during the Arctic summer, but prefer to be crepuscular; our observations seemed consistent with this; Karalus and Eckert (1974, p. 189), however, report the species hunting by day during a southward irruption.

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