

## : Bird Brief :

### **Snowy Owl** (*Bubo scandiacus*)

**ORDER:** Strigiformes (2 Families)

**FAMILY:** Strigidae (254 Species)

Finding and observing a Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) is a truly awe-inspiring, magical, thrilling moment to experience! Many bird watchers begin looking for this owl in November along the lakefront. Common hotspots in Milwaukee are the Lake Express Car Ferry, Jone's Island ship piers, and the marinas. Snowy Owl enthusiasts will travel many miles to see them during the winter. You may be encouraged that you are on the right track to find this bird if you see several bird watchers huddled near one another taking photographs and observing through long lenses.

One day I was patiently looking for a Snowy Owl on the large floating icebergs while driving under the 794 bridge on Jone's Island, as I often do several times a week. This particular day was cold and drizzling. As I watched for movement from this camouflaged bird, I suddenly saw the snowy owl and noticed a peculiar behavior. I worried that the bird may be injured because it kept repeatedly spreading its wings then preening after folding the wings back near the body. This continued for several minutes. I initially thought the owl was stuck on an object or caught between icebergs. Then, to my surprise the owl spread its wings once again and took flight south over the ice covered lake. It finally dawned on me that I witnessed this owl taking a bath in the rain and I felt such joy having had the opportunity to see such a simple behavior on the very cold winter day. I will never forget that once-in-a-lifetime experience.

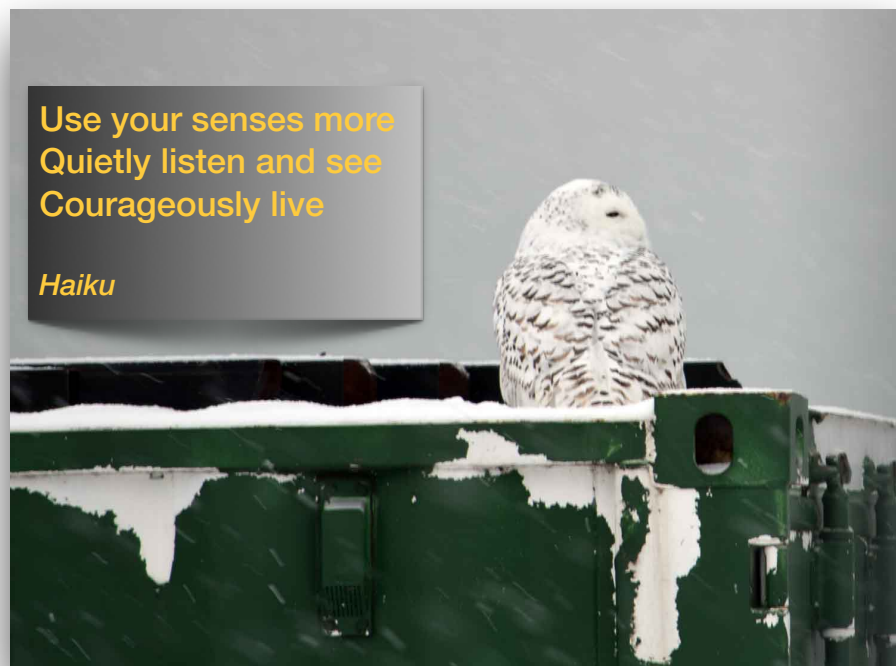
Snowy Owls prefer vast open landscape with a healthy population of lemmings during the breeding season and more diverse furred and feathered meals during the non-breeding season. Sexual dimorphism is reversed, meaning the female is about 20% larger than the male. Plumage markings greatly overlap between the male and female. So, sexing can be extremely difficult. The powerful **zygodactyl** feet with their long sharp talons are designed to capture small lemmings up to large birds like geese. The four-toed feet are able to capture squirming prey efficiently because the outer toes can move from back to front, front to back, and to the sides allowing for a successful grip. Many Snowy Owls remain in the Arctic during the non-breeding or winter months, some migrate even *farther* north, and others migrate as far south as Florida and Texas. They can endure temperatures as cold as -90°F and can hear prey movement under nearly 12" of snow. Irruptions, or migrations away from regular ranges, can occur for numerous reasons, such as large offspring production from the previous summer, diminished prey, and early heavy Arctic snowfall.

Snowy Owls form monogamous seasonal pair bonds. The male performs



an undulating aerial flight followed by a ground mating dance while carrying a lemming in his beak, and then he presents the lemming as a gift to the female. The female makes a scrape nest on a small hill for good visibility and is able to modify the clutch size based on food supply; laying more eggs when lemmings are plentiful, and less eggs when prey is scarce. With this said, Snowy Owls are nomadic, meaning they will travel great distances to find a rich supply of lemmings and are thus, flexible for breeding location selection. The male Snowy Owl provides most of the food during the early weeks of the nesting period. Incubation is over 30 days and chicks start to leave the nest after a few weeks.

I hope you have the opportunity to experience seeing and observing a Snowy Owl, and that you get to share it with someone in the future.



#### References:

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