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# Nyctea scandiaca

by Sheldon Dingle

From the air, Arctic Alaska seems monotonous and uniform — an endless study in shades of gray and white textures. All this is changed when viewed from skis or snowshoes. From the ground, the boreal forests are rugged and very much alive with a great variety of flora and fauna, and above the tree line even the tundra is abundantly populated with small creatures, most of them less than knee high to a man. When the snow and ice melt, the result is a greyish-green marsh-like land with myriad splashes of shallow water and patches of brilliant flowers.

Over twenty years ago, I had occasion to spend a couple of years traversing Alaska by air, dog sled, skis, snowshoes, and in hiking boots. I spent a great deal of time camping, either alone or with one companion, in the very isolated regions of that huge, rugged land. To a young, impressionable fellow with a vivid, poetic imagination, the long time-spans of deep silence and the awesome phenomenon of a truly primal wilderness provided many peak experiences.

One such experience took place in a stunted boreal forest during the never-ending twilight of early winter. In the gloom ahead of me I was startled to see a huge white bat, all wings and face, floating silently toward me at shoulder height. It had a sinister, human-like face, and thoughts of a pale Dracula teased the back of my mind. When this eerie apparition approached to within a few feet, however, the strange mood passed and I knew I was looking at an owl.

Now, dear friend, there is a certain owlness about an owl that precludes one's mistaking it for anything but an owl. During the years since that first sighting of the Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) I have observed a number of owls of various species and, though there were a few differences, they were

all obviously owls. No encounter with an owl, however, has so impressed me as that vision of the snowy white ghost floating silently toward me a few feet above the ground.

Owls are curious birds that have insinuated themselves into the imagination and lore of people all over the world. Of all birds they seem to be most human-like with their forward-facing eyes, their broad facial disks, their concentrated, studious expression, their chunky, upright bodies and rather sober habits. These remarkable characteristics that define the owlness of an owl are not magical or mystical, however. They are merely the consequence of extensive modifications that enhance the owl's efficiency as a nocturnal predator.

There are about 133 species of owls living today and one species or another can be found in nearly every part of the world. The Snowy Owl looks rather different but is closely related to the Great Horned Owl which is common all over North and South America except in the Arctic. North of the tree line the Snowy Owl replaces the Great Horned Owl.

In the far north there is an ebb and flow of the lemmings and the Arctic hares which are the chief prey of the Snowy Owls. The lemmings tend to overpopulate when the tundra conditions are good. This population explosion generally continues for four or five years by which time the lemmings have decimated the available food and their population crashes to a fraction of its former numbers. The Arctic hare population has a similar pattern of ebb and flow but on cycles of approximately ten years. When there are plenty of lemmings and hares and hunting is good, the Snowy Owl population tends to increase also. Occasionally, however, the population crash of the lemmings and of the hares coincides. This leaves the large population of owls

with very little to eat and causes what is called an irruption. When these lean seasons occur, the Snowy Owls move southward, way out of their normal range, and are sometimes seen as far south as the southern United States, northern India and China, the Balkans and Bermuda.

Of course, Snowy Owls are large, powerful birds and are capable of taking squirrels, ducks, gamebirds and other similar prey in addition to lemmings and hares. During the perpetual daylight of the Arctic summer there is an abundance and variety of such prey, and although the owl prefers to hunt at night, it does very well in the light of day.

The breeding cycle of the Snowy Owl is timed to take advantage of the more abundant food supply of spring and summer. The owls nest quite early, often while there is still snow on the ground. They lay their eggs in a shallow scrape in the ground, sometimes in the open but most often in the lee of a large rock. The size of the clutch may vary from three to thirteen eggs with five to eight being the average. The female alone incubates the eggs but the male is very helpful in feeding and guarding her. The young owlets hatch a day or two apart so the clutch consists of babies of very different ages and sizes. During lean years when there isn't enough food to go around, the youngest babies soon die and the two or three strongest owlets get all of the food. Thus the brood quickly becomes adjusted to the optimum size for the prevailing conditions.

Life in the wild is never easy and although the owl is itself a predator, its young are preyed upon by foxes and skuas and very few survive. Even the young that do attain independence have a very high mortality rate because the short Arctic summer allows them so little time to gain the hunting skills that are so necessary to survive.

Snowy Owls are not endangered but they are threatened. It is not a species of bird that would adapt itself easily to captivity (although in England the Little Owl [*Athene noctua*] has been successfully bred) so once it begins a downward spiral toward extinction, it is probably doomed.

In nature all birds are important and deserve man's respect and appreciation but in my own life there are certain few species that command a stronger than ordinary affinity. The Snowy Owl is one such bird. To me, at any rate, it is a hauntingly beautiful creature that often floats eerily toward me in the pale twilight of my mind's eye. This wonderful bird holds an important place in my repertoire of experiences as I am sure it does in the lives of all who have observed it closely.

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