



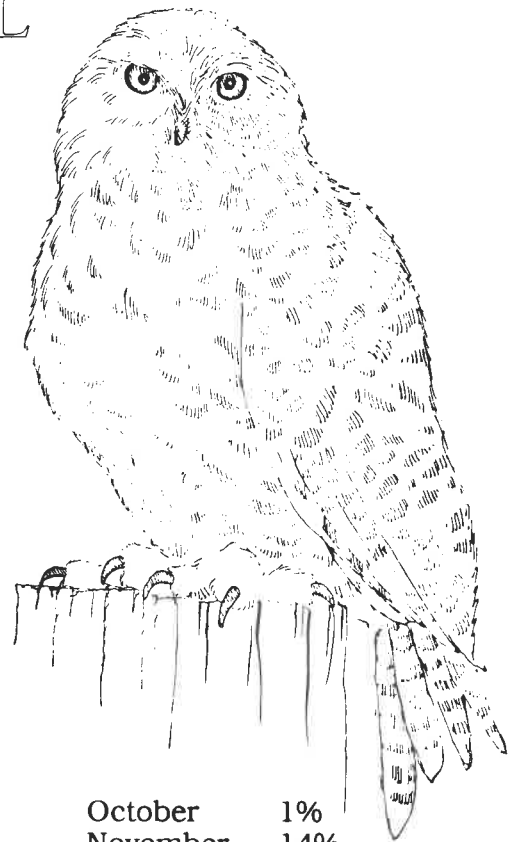
Status: Irregular Winter Visitor

SNOWY OWL

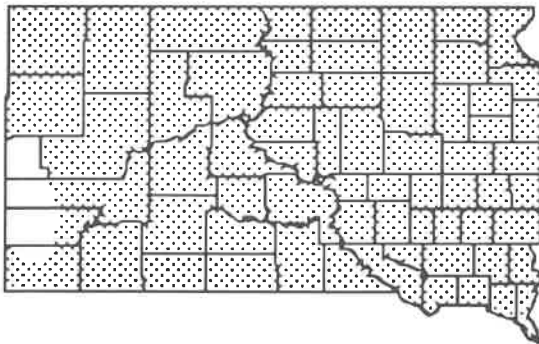
(*Nyctea scandiaca*)

Description

The snowy owl is a large white owl about 23 inches (58 cm) in length. It has no ear tufts and the eyes are yellow. The white plumage is often marked with dark bars. The extent of the black markings is variable, making some individuals significantly whiter than others.



Distribution



The snowy owl is an irregular winter visitor to South Dakota, except in the Black Hills, where it has not occurred. Some years it is much more common than others. As shown below, this species is most frequently seen in the state during the months of December and January.

October	1%
November	14%
December	25%
January	36%
February	18%
March	6%
April	1%

Table 1. Percent of Reported Sightings of Snowy Owls in South Dakota by Month (Total exceeds 100% due to rounding.) Taken from The Birds of South Dakota.

Natural History

The snowy owl's summer range is northern Canada and Alaska. It is a bird of the open tundra. Snowy owls nest on the ground and their chief food is *lemmings*. They hunt mostly during the day, but can also hunt at night. These owls usually remain in Canada and Alaska during the winter months. When this species is common in South Dakota during the winter, usually the *lemming* populations are low in Canada and/or Alaska. The species' preferred winter habitat is around marshes, lakes and lowlands. The birds are frequently found near wildlife refuges, where they feed on injured waterfowl. In South Dakota these birds often perch atop utility poles or hay stacks.

Snowy owls nest on low mounds or rocks. The eggs are white and the clutch size is normally 2 or 3 eggs. Males feed the incubating female. Adults perform

distraction display, which means they try to distract or lead potential predators away from the nest.

Conservation Measures

Owls, and all other birds of prey, are protected by law. It is illegal to harm them or to disturb their nests. It is also against the law to have in your possession any artifacts from birds of prey, such as feathers, talons or preserved specimens. Injured hawks and owls should be reported to the S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Officials will see that birds that can be saved will be cared for at rehabilitation centers such as the Oahe Wildlife Center in Pierre or the Reptile Gardens Raptor Rehabilitation Center in Rapid City. The Oahe Wildlife Center is a non-profit organization that also provides to schools educational programs with living birds of prey and color slides (see below for details).

Glossary

Lemmings - small Arctic rodents with short tails and fur-covered feet. They exhibit a 3 to 4 year population cycle dependent on availability of forage plants.

References

SDOU, 1991. The Birds of South Dakota, NSU Press, Aberdeen, SD 57401.
National Geographic Society, 1987. Birds of North America, Mead Paper Co., New York, NY.
Ehrlich, Dobkin, and Wheye, 1988. The Birder's Handbook, Simon and Schuster, Inc. NY, NY.

Selected Resources For Teachers

Oahe Wildlife Center, Pierre, SD. This non-profit center is run by Dr. Virginia Trexler-Myren, a veterinarian who provides wildlife rehabilitation as well as educational programs at schools. These living bird and slide show programs are free locally, but may cost a small amount away from the Pierre area. For information call 605-224-2984.
Reptile Gardens, P.O. Box 620, Rapid City, SD. This commercial tourist attraction provides group rates for class visits and educational outreach programs on raptors and reptiles from November 1 through March 1. For information call 605-342-5873.

Written by:

Dr. Robert Buckman, Professor of Biology, Dakota State University, Madison, SD 57042. © 1996.

Reviewed by:

Dr. Dan Tallman, Professor of Biology, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD 57401.

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