

A Rare Bird Indeed

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The Snowy Owl (*Bubo Scandiacus*) as owls go, is a rarity amongst rarities. "Uncommon" is the word used by the field guides. Owls are generally nocturnal and reclusive. Hiding in holes or blending into the bark, owl's feather patterns create the ultimate camouflage. So when the large white bird visits us from the Arctic it is an event. An event that travels at the speed of the internet. An event that creates controversies through out the birding world.

Without snow in this their southern region, Snowys stick out like a sore thumb. They can be found perched on fence posts, dunes, or any high point overlooking a broad hunting area. Feeding on rodents, rabbits, and a variety of waterfowl, daytime hours may find them sitting for long periods of time doing absolutely nothing.

Tips for Enjoyable (and Responsible!) Snowy Owl Viewing

Presented by Black Swamp Bird Observatory & Kaufman Field Guides

Snowy Owls are uncommon and irregular winter visitors from the Arctic. They favor open areas that look most like the tundra, and are often seen perched on the ground or on barns, buildings, or utility poles. These special visitors are in unfamiliar surroundings and are often stressed and hungry. Typically these owls hunt at night and rest in the daytime. Approaching too closely can make them fly, depleting critical energy reserves. Our actions should not add to their stress in any way.

- ◆ Keep quiet and maintain a respectful distance at all times. If the owl reacts to your presence, you're too close!
- ◆ Never approach or harass an owl with the intention of making it fly
- ◆ Do not attempt to call, lure, or bait an owl to get it to come closer
- ◆ Be respectful of private property boundaries and nearby residents
- ◆ Be respectful of fellow observers
- ◆ Do not create a hazard to yourself and others by stopping on or along roadways
- ◆ If you witness someone harassing an owl, contact the local authorities
- ◆ Be an ambassador. Help educate beginners on how to enjoy these magnificent birds responsibly!
- ◆ Remember: no picture or closer view is worth jeopardizing the welfare of the owl or your reputation in the birding community!



photo: PJ Singh.

This year Snowy Owls have been spotted in several places in the metropolitan area including the Hudson Valley. Their sightings have not been without scrutiny that may occur around any rare bird sighting. Do we tell or do we not tell? Has become the question.

When a Gyrfalcon, another uncommon visitor from the Arctic, was spotted in the Palisades Interstate Park last winter, word went out in a nano-second and crowds descended on the lookout. With easily a million dollars of optics, cameras, scopes and binoculars, two questions could be heard over coffee in flourishing café, "Did you see it?", from the birders and "Did you get it?" from the photographers.

The bird's rarity like the owl's creates instant fame and, in the case of the Gyrfalcon, which was a pretty far distance in a tree, a call went up of "foul!" accusing several photographers of flushing the bird when they got too close. The Snowy's habit of just sitting adds to the potential flushing problem. Stories of "leap-frogging" a Snowy in the New Jersey Meadowlands two years ago stated that the bird had to keep flying off, expending energy and interrupting hunting, to keep a distance from the encroaching crowd.

With the advancement of iphones, long lenses, digital imagery, and social media, the objectifying of nature is entertainment and big business. While the "experience of seeing" a Snowy Owl is important to one, "capturing an image/s" of the bird is important to another. With two not so distinct positions one might say that everyone should have the chance to enjoy nature and all her bounties. So, what happens when a few spoil it for the masses? While there are those who say there are limits to that enjoyment. So, who sets those limits?

The creation of protected areas in parks and on public lands can help set specific rules and guidelines for bird watching. There are good reasons to

stay on trails and avoid sensitive areas. However, formal parks can also stifle important connections especially in children. There is something to be said for catching frogs and turning over rocks. Creating an appreciation of nature as well as developing ethical interactions between humans and animals is the key

By its habit of just sitting it may not be as entertaining as other birds of prey. Amongst all the rare species sightings which can be a fleeting and frustrating hunt for the dedicated, the spotting of a Snowy Owl presents a possible once in a lifetime opportunity.