

A Snowy Owl wanders to Solano County

Joan M. Humphrey, 733 M Street, Davis, CA 95616

An irregular, irruptive visitor, the Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) has appeared in California only seven times in the last 110 years. While the overall state total of Snowy Owl records is also about 110, over 90 percent of these sightings occurred within the winters of 1895-1896, 1916-1917 and 1973-1974 (Roberson 1980). Most of these birds have frequented the dunes of Del Norte and Humboldt counties, but a few have wandered as far south as to Monterey County. Before 2006, the species was last noted in California during the winter of 1977-1978. In short, a Snowy Owl is definitely not a bird one would expect to see on an average daily outing.

Please share with us, then, our astonishment on the afternoon of 13 January 2006.

Accompanied by Betty Berteaux and Sami La Rocca, I was driving fast along Liberty Island Road in Solano County, headed south, about two miles from our shorebird-watching destination in Yolo County. I noticed an unusual, large, white bird flying low over the road in front of the car, being pursued closely by a male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*). The birds were flying from east to west. The scene looked like a typical territorial dispute between raptors.

My eye was drawn to the big, whitish bird. Not entirely white, it had some gray to black patterning. It was of greater length and breadth and much more massive than the harrier. I registered a rounded head, but most of the observation and memory came from the upper side of the outstretched right wing, which was closest to the car. It looked broad, deep and round with lots of wide, rounded feathers — an owl wing! As it cleared the right headlight of the car, I added up “great size”, “white color” and “owl” and understood what species the bird must be and its importance to birders. Thinking we’d be there a while, I quickly but gently parked the car as far off the road as possible, turned on the birding (=emergency) flashers, and double checked that the bird was still present by glancing over my shoulder. I muttered a stronger version of “Oh, my goodness” and asked, “Does anyone have a cell phone?”

We got out of the car. I put on my binoculars and tried to get my trembling wits in enough shape to use La Rocca’s cell phone to call the birding world. In shock, I had to suspend disbelief. After helping ascertain where on earth we were, Berteaux and La Rocca took their scopes and headed off to look at their life Snowy Owl sitting calmly on the ground in the green pasture about a hundred feet away. The harrier had already moved on. My first glance at the bird (Figures 1 and 2) facing us revealed a large, heavy-bodied owl, without ear tufts, that was not quite as white overall as its upperparts had looked in flight. The white head had black markings on

the forehead. The eyes were yellow; the beak, black. The white body feathers of the underparts were barred with black, most heavily on the belly region. The wings had black spots.

I stayed near the car so that my phone conversations wouldn't bother the bird. Making phone calls as I observed the owl was surreal (rather like watching a Harry Potter movie). Between phone calls, I also made a few trips down the road to peek at the owl through Berteaux's 30x Swarovski scope. How we wished we had a camera.

While we waited for reinforcements, the Snowy Owl mostly sat quietly and rested, yawning several times and closing its eyes with an upward movement of its lower eyelid. The owl flew from the pasture to sit on the road shoulder twice, coming as close as 40 feet. At least one of these flights was a response to disturbance, when cattle got too close to the bird. Similarly, the owl left the road shoulder and returned out into the pasture at one point due to a passing car. A Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) briefly came into the pasture, and by comparison showed that, despite the black markings, the owl hit the eye as a mostly white bird that, at a distance, could be mistaken for an egret. The edge of the road that was used by the owl was adjacent to a dredged ditch, the slightly raised edge of which was composed of uneven soil mixed with cattail roots and stems. It reminded me of highest storm tide leavings on a beach.

It was an anxious hour and fifteen minutes since the bird crossed the road until the next birders arrived at about 1500 h. The lead car drove in with several other cars right behind it. It took traffic control and a few grumpy birders to keep the cars off the portion of road used by the owl. My caution was vindicated when the snowy owl flew low over road, crossing to the east, and landed on a fence post. The large, well feathered feet, and black talons of bird showed up very well on the post. A pair of harriers tried to roust the owl but other than for some nice head swirling and head tipping motions it did not seem too fazed by the assault. At some late point in the day the owl briefly widened its eyes, stretched its head upwards, and looked alert as though a prey item was being considered. Not until the daylight was really gone however did it move off east towards the bypass as though seriously considering hunting. In many ways, it reminded me of the behavior of a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), taking it easy and sleeping during the daytime, waiting for sunset to become active.

After an anxious hour's search the following morning, many observers congregated along the same road 3.5 miles north of where the bird had been found the previous day, in similar habitat: green pasture with cows and some wooden fence posts. The bird was further from the road on 14 January than it had been the day before. In a morning rain shower, the Snowy Owl perched on the white-painted fence post of an uninhabited barnyard. Later in the day it flew south into open pastures and fields. At one point the owl was hassled by two Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) acting in tandem. At last light the owl was seen actively foraging.



Figure 1. Snowy Owl along Liberty Island Road, Solano Co., 14 January 2006.
photo by Robert Lewis

Sadly, the bird could not be found on January 15. Perhaps the unseasonably warm, spring-like weather with cloudless skies and a full moon encouraged this cool-weather visitor to wing its way back northward.

There are only two prior records of the Snowy Owl in the Central Valley. One shot near Gridley, Butte County, on 17 November 1916 (Bryant 1917) is currently a specimen (of a first-year male) in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley (San Miguel and McGrath 2005). The second record was of a bird captured alive by California Department of Fish and Game personnel in the Yolo Bypass, Yolo County, on 4 January 1967. The owl, a male, died within a few hours, apparently as a result of eating water birds infected with fowl cholera (Roberson 1993; B. Kimball, unpublished records of Sacramento Audubon Society). By an odd coincidence, the Snowy Owl reported here was found only about 1-3 miles to the west of the location where the 1967 bird was picked up. The records from 1916 and 1967 occurred during winters that produced multiple records of Snowy Owls in Oregon and northwestern California (Roberson 1980). The Solano County bird was the only Snowy Owl found in California during the winter of 2005-6, but a number of Snowy Owls were found in Oregon this past winter (e. g., see Keefer 2006). Aware of these Oregon sightings, I was one of many birders hoping that a Snowy Owl would reach California, visualizing it along the northern coast. Finding one in Solano County was a surprise to all.

LITERATURE CITED

Bryant, H. C. 1917. The Snowy Owl again invades California. *California Fish & Game* 3:37-38.

Keefer, B. 2006. "Arctic tourist on the wing -- Snowy owls have turned up in scattered locations around Oregon this winter." *The Register-Guard* (Eugene, OR) January 7, 2006. web site: <http://www.registerguard.com/news/2006/01/07/a1.snowy.0107.p1.php?section=cityregion>.

Roberson, D. 1980. *Rare birds of the West Coast*. Woodstock Publications, Pacific Grove, CA.

Roberson, D. 1993. Fourteenth report of the California Bird Records Committee. *Western Birds* 24:113-166.

San Miguel, M., and T. McGrath. 2005. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 2003 records. *Western Birds* 36:78-113.

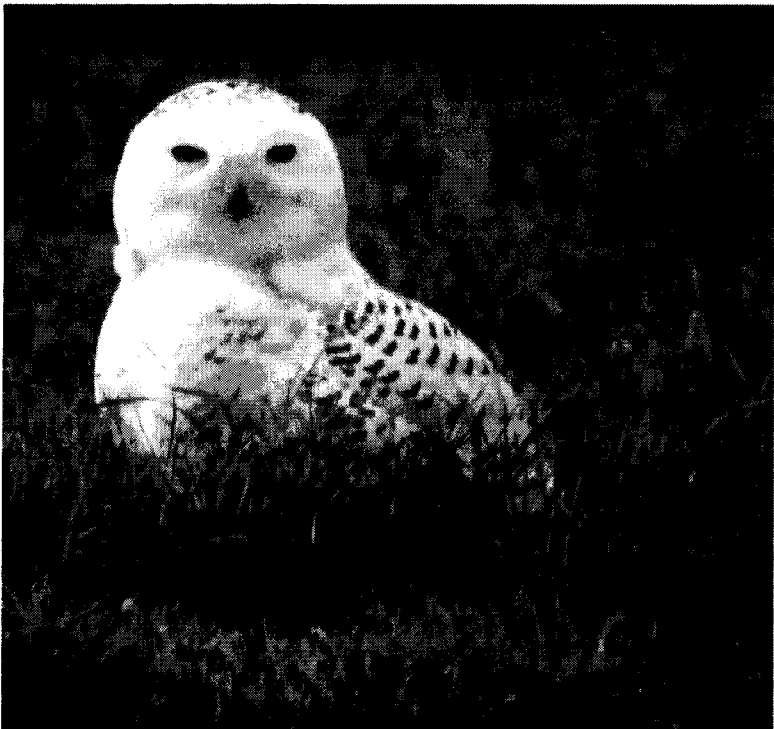


Figure 2. Snowy Owl along Liberty Island Road, Solano Co., 13 January 2006.

photo by Chris Conard