



Pinfeathers

A play & learn page for future Payne County Audubon Chapter members

IT'S SNOWING SNOWIES!



Photograph by Norbert Rosing

- This year there has been a widespread **irruption** of Snowy Owls (*Nyctea scandiaca*) all across the U.S. (See *Feathers* "Connections" and article, p. 8.)
- These large owls mainly live in the Arctic, in open, treeless areas called **tundra**.
- Snowy Owls usually remain in the Arctic all year, but they sometimes **migrate** south into Canada and the United States, most often when lemming populations in the Arctic are either extremely high (too many young owls competing for food) or extremely low (must expand range to hunt food).
- When you see a Snowy Owl it's clear how the bird probably got its name: They're snow-white. Males are generally whiter than females. As males grow older, they get whiter. The females never become completely white—their **plumage** remaining brownish with darker markings.
- Snowy Owls have yellow eyes and black beaks. Feathers cover their legs and feet for warmth.
- In flight, Snowy Owls generally cruise low to the ground. Once they spot their prey, they approach it from the air, and snatch it up using the large, sharp **talons**, or claws, on their feet.
- Unlike most owls, which are **nocturnal** (active only at night), Snowy Owls are **diurnal**—they hunt and are active both day and night
- Snowy Owls perch on the ground or on short posts. From there they patiently watch for prey. Their favorite target is **lemmings**—small mouselike rodents—but they also hunt for other small rodents, rabbits, birds, and fish.
- An adult Snowy Owl eats up to five lemmings each day. Lemmings make up the main part of their diet. They also eat other small rodents as well as rabbits, birds, and fish.
- Snowy Owls have excellent eyesight, but they obviously can't see their prey when it's underneath snow or a thick layer of plants. To capture those meals, the owl relies on its other keen sense: **hearing**.
- Snowy Owl pairs usually mate for life. Female snowy owls lay from 3 to 11 eggs at a time, in a nest built on the ground. When there is plenty of food available, snowy owls tend to lay more eggs than when food is scarce.



(Continued on the next page)

YouTube Snowy Owl Videos

- Lemmings make up the main part of the Snowy Owls' diet, and lemming population numbers rise and fall naturally. Sometimes, if there is not enough prey around to feed baby owls, the adult pair won't lay any eggs at all until the supply of food improves.
 - The female Snowy Owl sits on her eggs until they hatch. The male feeds her while she keeps their eggs warm and safe. After about one month, the eggs hatch. Babies are covered in soft white down when they hatch. As new feathers replace the down, the birds become light brown.
 - The young leave the nest less than a month after they hatch. By the time they're about a month and half old, the young owls can fly well, but their parents take care of them for another ten weeks or more.
 - A pair of Snowy Owls defends their nest fiercely. They will even attack a wolf that gets too close.
 - Quick Facts: Snowy owls range in size from 20 to 28 inches. Their **wingspan** (from wingtip to wingtip) is 4.2 to 4.8 feet. In the wild, snowy owls generally live for about 9.5 years. In
- [Beautiful snowy owl video](#)
 - [Memorial to Hedwig from Harry Potter](#) to music from Mannheim Steamroller
 - [Snowy Owl video](#) set to music of Creed's "Higher"
 - [Snowy Owl hooting](#)
 - [Snowy owl making call sounds at the Dublin Zoo](#)
 - [Memorial to Hedwig from Harry Potter](#) to music from Mannheim

What have you learned about snowies?

Challenge yourself by answering the questions below. No peeking! Answers on page 10 of *Feathers*.

1. Where do Snowy Owls live most of the time?
2. What is an irruption?
3. What color is an adult male Snowy Owl's plumage? What color is the adult female snowy owl's plumage?
4. Have Snowy Owls ever been found in Oklahoma?
5. Are Snowy Owls nocturnal or diurnal. Explain.
6. What is the snowy owl's main food source?
7. How does the Snowy Owl find prey under the snow?
8. Why are a Snowy Owl's feet and beak covered with feathers?
9. How many eggs do female snowies generally lay? What regulates this number?
10. How long do adult Snowy Owls care for their chicks after they have left the nest?