

# Conservation Corner

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This week I thought it would be timely to revisit a Conservation Corner creature that we first encountered in February of 2014. This winter these feathered “ghosts of the tundra” are once again appearing across the Midwest and many Iowans are enjoying the latest irruption of snowy owls.

As you may know, irruptions are simply increases in a species population outside its normal range. Snowy owl irruptions are closely tied to the lemming populations of the Arctic Regions. In math terms: abundance of lemmings = more owl babies = overabundance of juveniles = irruption. Since the young owls do not “own” any local hunting grounds, they head south in search of prey. Like many of our own kids, young snowy owls may disperse far away from their home territories.

The highest irruption of snowy owls in over 40 years occurred during the winter of 2011-12 when Iowans reported over 150 sightings. Smaller, echo irruptions occurred during 2012-13 and 2013-14. And while an average winter season yields 5 - 10 sightings, the numbers for 2017-18 have already surpassed 100.

A common misbelief is that starvation forces the snowy owls south in search of food. Banding studies, however, show that most of the owls are in fairly good health upon their arrival in Iowa. Alas, our chisel-plowed fields and concrete don't offer many choices on the menu, and life down south isn't always what they had hoped. But snowy owls, like other raptors, soon figure out that rodents do abound in our road ditches. Unfortunately, growing up in the Arctic has not taught them how to navigate in heavy traffic. So far this season, at least 15 snowies have been killed and 7 injured in car collisions. One more reason for quality prairie habitat.

To spot a snowy owl, just look around. After all, Iowa's landscape of mostly treeless plains and wide, open spaces is very similar to the tundra landscape of far northern Alaska, Canada, and Eurasia. You may find snowy owls perched just about anywhere – except a tree, that is. Look for them instead on road signs, fence posts, utility poles, rock piles, farm buildings, or simply on the ground.



If you do spot a snowy owl, give it plenty of space so it doesn't spend valuable calories and energy flying away. Also, if you do spot a snowy owl, please report the owl's location. Call our office or contact the Carroll County Naturalist, Matt Wetrich, at [matt@carrollcountyiowa.org](mailto:matt@carrollcountyiowa.org), 712-792-4614. Matt is keeping a state-wide map of sightings that may be viewed at [www.iowabirds.org](http://www.iowabirds.org).

I'll close with a few of Matt's thoughts. Take a look at a map of North America to see just how far away the Arctic Circle really is. Understanding how far the snowy owls have journeyed to find themselves in Iowa may help us realize the major ecological role we play in the success of creatures far and wide, including those whose parents are currently hunting under the glow of the Northern Lights.