



**Press Release**

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**Marion County Conservation Board**

**Snowy Owls, The Arctic Wanderers on a Food Driven Journey**

Snowy Owls are appearing all over the State of Iowa. At least 100 sightings of these arctic wanderers are being reported. Although it's not all that unusual to have these owls appear in Iowa on occasion, this year has gotten the feathers ruffled of birders, hunters and landowners.

Snowy Owls are an Arctic resident, live where there are not many trees and human occurrences are minimal. Normally, arctic temperatures are cold, along with snow and ice, and their light colorations blend in their frigid environment and are considered a "diurnal" owl. Their plumage is inches thick, with layers and layers of down and specialized feathers covering their legs and feet. Their hunting habits in their environment is much like the strategies that our Iowa owls have, powerful feet and talons being their choice of hunting tool, exceptional hearing and eyesight. Their main food is a small rodent called a "lemming". When populations of the lemming are high, reproduction of the snowy owls can be high and survival strategies are good. When the lemming populations are low, such as this year, competition strategies kick in, they begin moving southward hundreds and even thousands of miles from home leading them on a food driven journey. The Snowy Owls behavior puzzles many onlookers. They conserve energy over the course of a day, preening and resting. In their home environment, they would be camouflaged and, again, human interaction would be very minimal. They tend to stay put, appearing to not be afraid of us until they feel threatened. They may, or may not, be afraid of people, but they really have not ever dealt with two-legged, upright predators.

Marion County residents have reported two snowy owls. One, was a car strike and, one, was retrieved extremely hungry, an abrasion on the foot and some other concerns. Most of the reports coming in around Iowa from licensed rehabilitators are receiving birds extremely emaciated. (Their weight being one-half of what it is supposed to be). Males should weigh around 3.5-4 pounds and females around 5

pounds. They are hungry birds finding themselves around roadside ditches where hunting for rodents may be easier, but totally unaware of the danger that lurks along car travelled roads.

Some Marion County residents may remember when Gladys Black, our well known ornithologist and educator and licensed rehabilitator, received "Nikki", an injured snowy owl found in Clarke County by a hunter. That was 30 years ago. Nikki was publicly recognized and considered a miracle bird by many. Gladys nursed the owl every few hours with bites of rabbit, night and day. When it was time for Nikki to be released, a kind person with a Leer Jet headed for a Canada fishing trip, loaded up Nikki and took it back north. The small community held quite a celebration for the Snowy Owl's return and even held a parade.

**This is a very strange winter, and should probably only expect the unexpected. Having a rare opportunity to see such a beautiful bird as this is a memory not easily forgotten.**