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SNOWY OWLS SPENDING WINTER IN NATION'S CAPITAL

In recent weeks a large number of snowy owls, rare visitors from the arctic, have been reported in the vicinity of Washington in greater abundance than at any time since the winter of 1926-27. In the Capital, the welcome visitors breakfast and supper on starlings, says the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and in the country they are equally welcome because they eat quantities of small rodents.

These large white birds nest on the Alaskan and Canadian tundra. Some of them migrate southward as far as the northern United States nearly every winter. On very rare occasions they penetrate as far south as California, Louisiana, and Georgia. Unlike most owls, the snowy owl is diurnal--which is to say that they hunt during the day as well as at night. The attractive birds are unafraid and can be readily observed in the most congested cities, if they are present.

Alva Nye sighted the first snowy owl this winter at Seneca, Maryland, on November 27. The next one was reported from Harrisonburg, Virginia, on December 4, by Max Carpenter--a volunteer bird migration observer of the Fish and Wildlife Service. On the following day, Malcolm Davis, curator of birds at the National Zoological Park, noted one at Clinton, Maryland. Many additional owls have been reported sighted every week since the arrival of these first birds.

The oldest reports on snowy owl visitors in the District of Columbia date back to 1847 and 1858. In the winter of 1876 about 15 individuals were seen in the District. During the next 50 years only a few stragglers came so far south, but in the winter of 1926 more than 20 were recorded in Maryland and Virginia. This year, also, the Fish and Wildlife Service is keeping a register of the migrants.

For many years these northern visitors were believed to migrate into the south only during the most severe winters. More recently their arrivals have been shown to be correlated with the abundance of rodents upon which they feed in the far north. Chief among these arctic rodents are the lemmings, which go through periodic cycles of abundance about every four years. These mammals have remarkable powers of reproduction and increase rapidly over a very few years. Then, for reasons as yet imperfectly understood, their numbers are suddenly decimated, only to build up to another peak about four years later.

When lemmings are scarce, apparently only a small number of snowy owls rear young, but when food is plentiful, there is a corresponding increase in the number

of owls nesting and raising young. Thus at the time when the lemmings die in such great numbers over an area of millions of square miles, the owls are at their peak of abundance. Other animals, like arctic foxes, which prey on lemmings turn their attention to the remaining food animals present--such as field mice and other rodents. The foxes can't leave home when it becomes difficult to earn a living, but the snowy owls can, and do.

For want of food, large numbers of snowy owls are forced to fly hundreds of miles further south. Almost every four years one or two of these conspicious diurnal owls find their way south of the Mason and Dixon line. The comparatively large number of records already received by the Fish and Wildlife Service, however, suggests that the present flight may develop into one of the biggest in history in the District of Columbia area.

Reports reaching the Section of Distribution and Migration of Birds of the Service from its cooperative observers throughout the country indicate that the snowy owl flight is also occurring westward beyond the Great Lakes. These owls return to the Arctic in the spring if they aren't shot by curious gunners.

In order to obtain an accurate record of the extent and intensity of this natural phenomenon, the Fish and Wildlife Service would like to receive reports from persons who see snowy owls this winter.

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