

Northern invasion

A WINTER WONDERLAND OF HAWKS AND OWLS.

Erin Parker

Winter in Wisconsin is not for the faint of heart. The landscape seems quiet, tucked beneath snow or ice cover. Darkness comes early and stays late, adding a further challenge to outdoor adventures.

However, Wisconsin winters are also an opportunity to engage with some unique wildlife that sees our frosty fields and icy lakefronts as the perfect winter habitat. Snowy owls, great gray owls, northern hawk owls, and other raptors more closely associated with the tundra and boreal forests, occasionally make their way south during the winter months where they hunt for prey as diverse as rodents, rabbits and ducks. A “northern invasion” of predatory birds seems unlikely given that

most of our summer avian inhabitants have flown for much warmer, insect-rich climes months ago.

An irruption year, when many of these northern species are observed, is most likely related to prey like lemmings in their northern tundra habitats. The southward movements of these birds may happen either in years when their prey populations dip, or because they successfully raised many young in prey-species-rich summers and those fledglings need to roam fur-



It is important to take great care in viewing snowy owls and help make sure the bird's safety is not placed in jeopardy.

GREGORY K. SCOTT

The rough-legged hawk breeds in Arctic tundra and taiga regions around the northern hemisphere and may be seen in Wisconsin during irruption years. The name “rough-legged” refers to the feathering that extends down the legs to the base of the toes — a helpful adaptation for staying warm in frigid weather.



ther to find food for the winter.

These striking birds from the north attract attention from wildlife viewers, photographers and other outdoor enthusiasts. This can cause problems for these birds when admiring watchers get too close.

How do you know if you’re stressing out a bird you’re observing?

According to Diane Visty, the Raptor Program manager at Schlitz Audubon Center in Milwaukee, “Birds telegraph their comfort level by behavior changes. Are they sitting comfortably fluffed on a branch? Watch for them to change their stance. They will get taller, narrower and slick down their feathers. Their heads will be darting back and forth quickly identifying best routes for escape, and finally, a downward crouch with wings slightly open getting ready to launch, are all signs that you have pushed this bird who is hungry and in a strange location to expend its depleted reserves on escaping from you. Each time this happens the bird, that is so beautiful you want to take its picture, has a reduced chance of survival.”

Ryan Brady, a research scientist with the Department of Natural Resources agrees.

“When flushed, birds directly utilize energy they otherwise wouldn’t, which can be important during difficult winter weather or when a bird has migrated into unfamiliar territory,” Brady says. “Flushing them also forces them to move from a place they wanted to be. This may expose them to predators — yes, some things eat owls — and /or force them to hunt from a less productive perch.”

While owl irruption years can be unpredictable, several of the previous winters have brought high numbers of snowy owls, in particular, into Wisconsin. These birds, in turn, brought birders and photographers out in large numbers in some areas.

The cumulative effects of flushing the same bird over and over again are the most troubling. Each flight expends energy that the bird would be using to keep warm, attracts the unwelcome attention of predators, and can reduce a bird’s chances of successfully capturing prey by scaring away the smaller animals they depend on for calories.

Visty explains: “Consequences for the birds if they are repeatedly flushed is death. It is just that plain and simple. It is a hard life for these birds. They are in unfamiliar habitat looking for food. The winter weather is unusually harsh,

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snow is deep and temperatures are well below freezing. Flying is the most energy demanding exercise on the planet and then add to that they are warm-blooded and have to keep their bodies stoked and warm and you can understand that they are living on the edge. Every time they take to the air it is a calculation on whether it is necessary or not. Will the outcome of the flight bring them a meal with much-needed calories or a warmer roost? It would be best if the birds made the decision to fly on their own, without being forced into flight just because we want to get closer to them.”

The use of social media, Listservs and apps in the birding community makes sharing the specific locations of these birds faster and easier, and means that larger numbers of people can come out to see them. There were enough perceived disturbances to the owls over the last few winters that the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology felt that more education needed to be done — that people wanted to enjoy and appreciate these fascinating northern visitors, and were harassing them accidentally in the process.

Kim Kreitinger, the president of the society, said: “Recent debates over posting rare bird locations, baiting and the general question of harassment, caused WSO to update its guidelines and address those concerns. Our hope is that this revised Code of Ethics (wsobirds.org/about-wso/code-of-ethics) helps the Wisconsin birding community make better-informed decisions while in the field and promotes stewardship of Wisconsin birds.”

The revised Code of Ethics now includes the following updates:

- Information to help one recognize the signs of stress and suggestions on how to minimize stress while observing a bird;
- A list of special considerations when observing or photographing raptors, owls or rare birds;
- Proper procedures for dealing with illegal activities involving wild birds;
- Suggestions for increasing goodwill amongst the birding community.

Visty adds, “Every photographer’s goal is to get the best shot possible. If you disturb the bird your opportunity is gone forever. My first rule when taking photographs is to keep your distance. This is true always with birds, but especially in the winter with these ‘northern invasion’ species of hawks and owls that do not see humans every day. Secondly, if at all possible, stay in



The short-eared owl hunts day and night, mainly at dawn and dusk in winter. It flies low over open ground, locating prey by ear.

DENNIS MALLEG



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The great gray owl is listed as a species of Special of Concern in Wisconsin and prefers lowland coniferous forest dominated by black spruce, white birch and green ash.

hiding [such as in] your car to further reduce stress on these migrants. Doing this provides for the ability to capture a greater amount of natural actions made by the subject and more interesting photos. Finally, if you have to get out of your car, be quiet and move as little as possible.”

Irruptions are not predictable events, and this winter is no exception. If you go searching for owls among the snowy cornfields, remember to keep their well-being in mind. Drones, used to take aerial photos, can scare birds into flight.

Baiting birds, by using mice or other rodents to draw the raptors in close for photographs, can cause them to land on roads and lose some of their fear of people. Admiring the birds from a distance through binoculars or scope, where the bird is not reacting to your presence, is the best option.

Interested in seeing these beautiful winter birds from a safe distance?

Milwaukee’s lakefront and snowy fields, like those found at the Buena Vista Grasslands, provide good owl-spotting locations. Owls and other raptors can

hunt ducks and mammals while watching out for threats in open areas that mimic their natural tundra habitat. They are often more active at dawn and dusk. Many birding clubs and organizations such as Audubon and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology offer field trips to places likely to host winter owls.

Visty says, “Having the opportunity to actually see one of these rarely-spotted raptors always takes my breath away.”

Erin Parker is the communications chair for the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology.