

NORTH AMERICAN WILDLIFE

SNOWY OWL

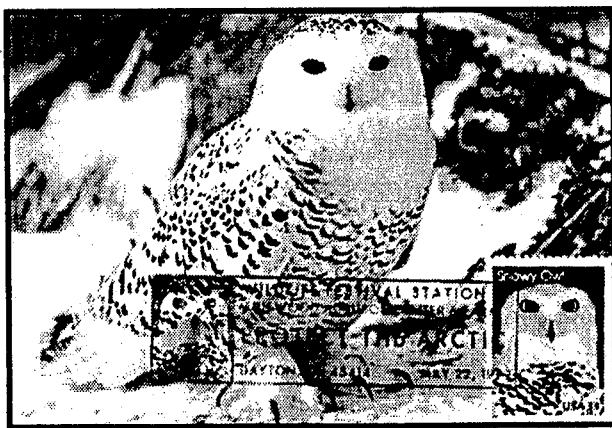
(*Nyctea Scandiaca*)

By George Constantourakis

The Snowy Owl belongs to the family of "Typical Owls" (*Strigidae*). One of the two families of the order of Owls, the other family is that of "Barn Owls" (*Tytonidae*).

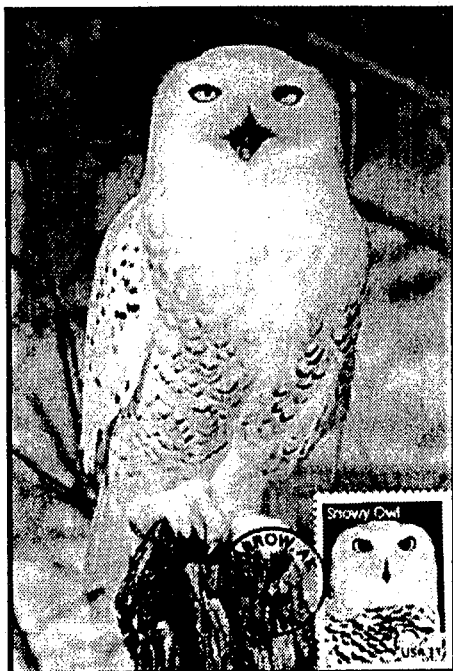
Range & Habitat: The range of the Snowy Owl is circumpolar e.g. throughout the Arctic. It covers the northern parts of the "Nearctic Region" of North America & Greenland and the "Palearctic Region" of Europe & Siberia. (Ornithologists recognise six such major Regions in the world). In the "Nearctic Region" the Snowy Owl breeds from Hooper Bay, Alaska in the west, to the tundra of northern Alaska (see: *Figures 2 and 3, cancellation of Barrow, Alaska*) and Canada, to Baffin island, and then along the coast of Greenland, mainly along the eastern coast up to Scoresbysund (Ittoqqortoormiit). The Snowy Owl is partly a sedentary bird. Southward movement in winter is erratic depending on food supply, and reaches southern Canada and northern United States and occasionally as far south as the central States. (see: *Figures 1 and 4, pictorial cancellation of Dayton, Ohio*).

Description: The Snowy Owl is a large bird 20-27" (51-68cm) and has yellow eyes, a hooked beak covered with cere at the root, and lacks ear tufts. It has a densely feathered coat that also covers its feet to the talons. (see: *Figures 1, 2 & 6*). The Snowy Owl has acquired its name because of its coloring which is almost white, when it



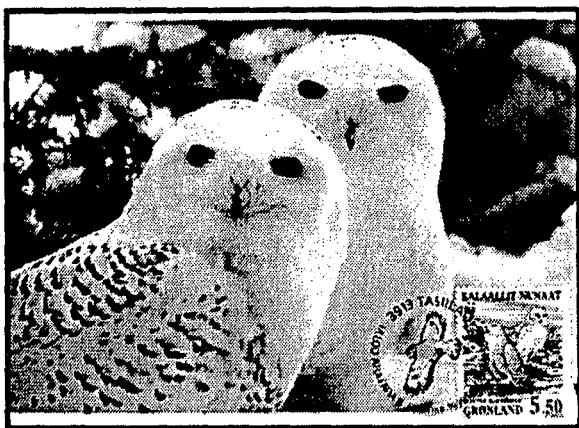
(Figure 1) On card Snowy Owl lightly barred with feathers covering its feet to talons. Cancel: Dayton Ohio, (southernmost place of occasional wintering May 22, 1999, pictorial cancellation (triplee). Card: by Photo Decor Ltd nr. 719.

(Figure 2). On card Snowy Owl almost white in color, with feathers covering its feet to talons. Cancel: Mar. 12, 1999, First Day regular; Barrow, Alaska (breeding place of northern Alaskan tundra).



(Figure 3). On card a painting by Edward Lear of a pair of Snowy Owls, the female is barred while the male is almost pure white. Cancel: Mar. 12, 1999, FD regular; Barrow, Alaska (breeding place of northern Alaskan tundra). Card: by Green Wood, 1992.

(Figure 4). On card a painting by John James Audubon showing a pair of Snowy Owls, the male is almost pure white while the female is barred. Cancel: Dayton Ohio, (southernmost place of occasional wintering) May 22, 1999, pictorial cancellation (triplee). Card: by Editions du Chene, Paris.



(Figure 5) On card a pair of Snowy Owls, the male is pure white while the female is lightly barred. Cancel: Tasiilaq, Feb. 8, 1999, First Day pictorial cancellation. Card: by Running Press, 1989.



(Figure 6) Both the card and the stamp depict a Snowy Owl standing Cancel: Tasiilaq, Feb. 8, 1999, First Day pictorial cancellation. Card: by Photo Decor, nr. 719



(Figure 7) Both card and stamp depict a Snowy Owl in flight. Cancel: Tasiilaq, Feb. 8, 1999, First Day pictorial cancellation (triplee). Card: by Post Greenland.

is fully grown. The white color results from the fact that the feathers have very little pigment. However some show dusky bars on white plumage, females more than males.

(see: *Figures 3, 4 and 5 for contrast of plumage between a male and a female Owl*). Pure white adults tend to winter on their Arctic breeding grounds and are seldom seen in the south. On the other hand, vagrants to the south tend to be lightly to heavily barred. (A few years back in mid winter I actually saw a lightly barred Snowy Owl on a top of a tree overlooking a large open field near the Ottawa river).

The Snowy Owl is primarily a nocturnal predator of the Arctic and like other owl species it has a good night vision. However, during mid-summer as the midnight sun shines in most parts of its territory, the Snowy Owl has developed an ability to hunt in daylight. This clearly distinguishes it from any other owl species.

In winter the Snowy Owl feeds on arctic hares, ptarmigans, and occasionally on other birds. The Snowy Owl either swallows its prey whole or it tears it in to smaller pieces which it then swallows. In the summer its food consists almost exclusively of lemmings, which are small rodents. Usually every four years the lemming population declines, then the Snowy Owl makes large migrations to the south in search of food.

The Snowy Owl nests in hollows on plain ground or on tufts that are sheltered by a fieldstone or rock. From mid-May to early June the it lays four to seven oval white eggs. The eggs are brooded by the female for 32 to 37 days while the male keeps watch. The nestlings are white and are fed by both parents. After about 35 days they are fully fledged (see: *Figure 8*).

Voice: In general the Snowy Owl is a rather silent bird. The male's voice is a gull-like scream, while the female makes a hoarse bark-like sound. Its warning signal sounds like a clattering. Similar Species: White phase of Gyrfalcon, and arctic subspecies of Great Horned Owl.



(*Figure 8*) On card Snowy Owl nesting and on stamp with four nestlings. Cancel: Tasiilaq, Feb. 8, 1999, First Day pictorial cancellation. Card: by Post Greenland.