

Snowy Owl Viewing – Observe without Disturbing

Snowy Owls are magnificent birds, and attract considerable attention when they visit New Hampshire in the winter. Enthusiastic observers and photographers need to remember that these birds are already stressed by hunger and cold temperatures, so it is important to **resist the temptation to get too close for a clearer look or better picture.**

Snowy Owls, often inexperienced young birds that hatched the previous summer, wander south during the winter months when food is scarce in their Arctic habitat. The southward journey and cold temperatures require a lot of energy, as does finding prey in unfamiliar territory. Human disturbance can add significantly to their energy demands. The effects of disturbance can be obvious – causing a bird to “flush” or leave its perch – or invisible – making a bird too nervous to leave the safety of a high perch to pursue prey, or increasing metabolism and stress hormones. While a single incident may not be life threatening, the cumulative effect of repeated disturbances, which are likely to occur when an owl perches in highly visible, public locations, reduce the likelihood that they will survive to return north to breed.



Observers and photographers should practice good ethics by keeping a respectful distance from any bird. In general, **if the bird reacts to your presence, you are too close.** When the bird starts staring at you, you’re close enough and it’s time to **back up.** For birds on the ground this is about 100 feet. Flushing the bird is direct interference with its roosting and foraging behavior, and deprives others of the opportunity to observe the owl.

An automobile makes an excellent blind, so watch from your car if possible. If this isn’t practical, approach the owl with the wind in your face. Owls take off into the wind, and if the bird chooses to fly while you are approaching it will not want to fly toward you. Always give the bird room and back up as soon as it responds to your presence.

Don’t get carried away by excitement – always respect private property and area-closed signs. Snowy Owls at the coast often roost in fragile dune habitat, which is closed to foot traffic.

It is possible to love owls to death. Flushed birds have collided with stationary objects and once airborne they attract the attention of crows, gulls and hawks, which will pursue and harass them, reducing opportunities to hunt. Be responsible, and give owls the privacy they need.

Seeing a Snowy Owl is a rare privilege. Set a good example for others by following and sharing these guidelines, and have a wonderful Snowy experience!



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