

Green Scene: Watching Wildlife

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This winter there are excellent opportunities to see snowy owls around Boundary Bay in Delta. While watching wildlife can be an informative and enjoyable experience, it is also important to be sure the wildlife remains undisturbed during such times and able to carry on with normal activities.

Snowy owls are among our largest owls with a length of approximately 60 cm. While great grey owls are slightly taller, snowy owls are a much heftier bird and easily outweigh great greys with an average weight of about 2 kg. As is the case with many birds of prey, female snowy owls are larger than the males. Mature males are, as their name suggests, a snowy white but on females and juvenile birds, the white is interspersed with dark bars which provides excellent camouflage when the birds are on their nests.

This photo of a snowy owl (a female or juvenile) was taken at a distance from the bird, so that it was not disturbed. Kiyoshi Takahashi photo.



The normal habitat for snowy owls is the open arctic tundra where they nest each summer and will stay throughout the winter if food supplies are ample. Snowy owls are circumpolar birds which means they are found across all regions of the arctic. Their natural prey includes

lemmings and other small mammals. Lemming populations are subject to steep declines every four to seven years – this can create challenging conditions for the animals which depend on them for food. Like human refugees seeking to escape from drought, snowy owls have few options other than flying elsewhere in search of food when lemming populations crash in the arctic. Thus, the snowy owls arriving in Boundary Bay have flown extremely long distances and arrive here exhausted and starving. This is all the more reason to be sure these majestic birds are not bothered or approached too closely by curious humans. In the Fraser delta, these owls feed on voles, meadow mice and, sometimes, smaller waterfowl,

Good wildlife viewing and photography etiquette calls for taking care to ensure wildlife activities such as feeding or cleaning feathers are not interrupted. Approaching birds so closely that they take flight is far too close. Not disturbing wildlife is especially important in winter when birds have fewer daylight hours to search for food and have to deal freezing temperatures which increase their need for food. If birds, including ducks, are continually disturbed throughout the day by people who stray off trails or fail to keep dogs on leash, the birds may not have sufficient daylight hours to find the food they require to survive the night.

Snowy owls are not the only large birds that sometimes fly south this time of year. The winter months are typically the best season of the year to see great gray owls in local forested areas or rough-legged hawks over open fields such as those found at Colony Farm Regional Park. I was thrilled to recently observe a northern goshawk in our backyard. No doubt this bird was checking out the squirrels and smaller birds that frequently feed in our yard. As is the case with snowy owls, the appearance of these other birds of prey is typically indicative of scarcer food supplies further north.

One of the best places to get close views of raptors (i.e., birds of prey) is the Orphaned Wildlife (OWL) Rehabilitation Centre in Delta (www.owlcanada.ca). The volunteers of this non-profit group do an outstanding job of taking care of injured raptors and rehabilitate them for release back into the wild. Some of the birds brought in are unable to make a full recovery so they cannot be released. For example, some birds have reduced vision after an accident or a damaged wing that would make survival in the wild impossible. These birds are kept at OWL in pens available for public viewing where people can get close views. Having several species to observe at the same time facilitates comparisons between the species and can make for more interesting bird-watching than seeing the wild owls.

OWL, at 3800 – 72nd Street in Delta, is conveniently located close to some of the good viewing areas for snowy owls on Boundary Bay. During the winter months, it is open on Saturday and Sundays (but not on January 1) between 10 am and 3 pm and offers public tours. It is well worth a visit and is especially appealing for children.