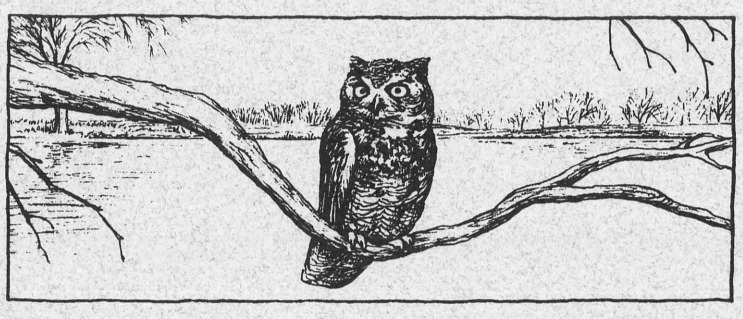
STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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SNOWY OWLS: A Case of Animal Magnetism

-- Mark Spreyer

Over the years, I've had some memorable experiences working with raptors. While doing research in a Minnesota bog, I watched a male great gray owl pass a dead mouse to his mate while both were in mid-air.

I've seen a female peregrine falcon feed her chicks on a building ledge at the corner of Adams and Wacker in downtown Chicago. At the time, this was the first peregrine nest anywhere in Illinois in thirty-seven years.

To this list, I now add caring for a disabled snowy owl here at Stillman.

Bubo Basics

It is hard to misidentify a snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*). As its common name suggests, an adult male can be almost entirely white. Females and juveniles are marked with dark flecking or barring. Be careful, there are darker males and paler females that are virtually alike in appearance.

For such a large owl, its eyes are rather small. What they lack in size they make up for in color. The irises are a conspicuous golden hue. In contrast, snowies have tiny inconspicuous ear tufts.

I bring this up because I recall looking at a tray of museum specimens nearly thirty years ago. On the tray were great horned owls (*Bubo virgianus*) and snowy owls collected in northern Canada.

Arctic great horned owls are quite pale in color. With the exception of the horned owls larger ear tufts, I remember thinking that these two species have much in common. Back then, snowy owls were classified in their own genus.

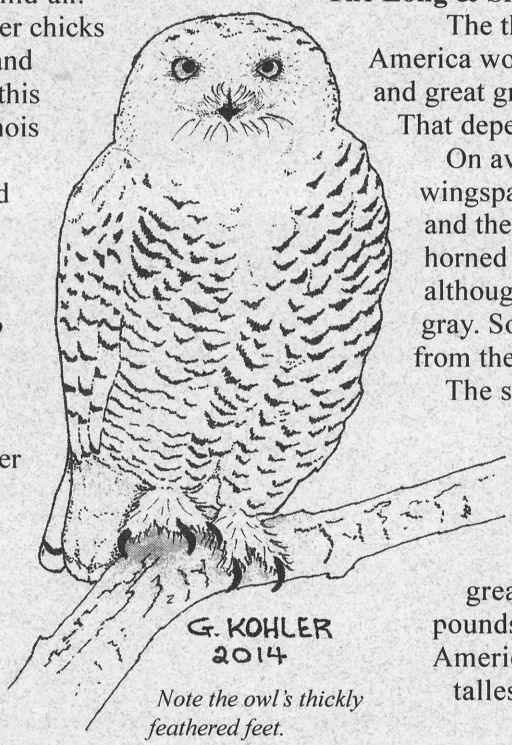
Genetic analysis has shown that these two big owls are closely related and both are now put in the *Bubo* genus.

The Long & Short of It

The three largest owls in North America would be the snowy, great horned, and great gray owls. So which is the biggest? That depends.

On average, the great horned's wingspan is less than both the snowy's and the great gray's wingspan. The horned also weighs less than the snowy although it weighs more than the great gray. So let's remove the horned owl from the largest competition.

The snowy owl weighs in at four to five pounds. However, the snowy is only 23 inches from head to tail. The great gray owl (*Strix nebulosa*) stands 27 inches tall. Even so, the great gray weighs in at roughly 2.5 pounds. So, the heaviest owl in North America is the snowy owl but the tallest owl would be the great gray.



Note the owl's thickly feathered feet.

If you see a 14 or smaller number after your name, this will be your last newsletter until you renew. If you didn't receive our annual membership letter, just use the form on the back of this newsletter or visit stillmannc.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." We need your support. Thank you.

STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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This brings us back to wing size. Here things get interesting. Some sources say the great gray has a larger wingspan. Others say the snowy's wingspan is greatest. One popular field guide reports the same average wingspan for both species. In general, most wingspan figures fall between 4.5 and 5.5 feet.

I've seen both owls in flight and have held both birds. I know the great gray has bigger wings. Lucky for me, a researcher by the name of David Johnson came up with another way to measure wings.

He traced the wings to determine the combined surface area. By taking into account both the length and width of the wings, the great gray is number one. In fact, the great gray's wings are 25% larger in surface area than the snowy's.

Esotropic Eccentricities

Enough about how we look at owls, how about how they look at us? When it comes to snowy owls, it appears that many are looking at us with slightly crossed eyes.

Don't believe me? Go online and search for snowy owl photographs. I would guess that around 40% of the owls will look cross-eyed. The technical term for this condition is esotropia.

As I investigated this, I thought of other animals that sometimes sport crossed eyes such as opossums or Siamese cats. All of these animals couldn't be having difficulties with their vision, could they?

No. Research on cats and owls shows that the brain and other internal physiological structures help to present a clear image to animals with esotropia.

Arctic Irruptions

Given where they live, this image may be a nervous hare, lemming, or ptarmigan. These are the types of animals that share arctic habitats with the snowy owls, The lemmings should be nervous. A snowy can eat as many as 1600 in a year.

Lemmings play a role in snowy owl reproduction. During courtship, the male brings lemmings to the female. If he brings fewer rodents to her than normal, she lays fewer eggs. Imagine that, a species that limits its reproduction based on available natural resources.

Snowy owls breed in open tundra from near the tree line to the edge of the polar seas. They can be found everywhere from northern Greenland, Scandinavia, and Russia to northern Canada and Alaska.

Their winter range does vary. In N. America, they will drift south across Canada and into the upper United States. Until recently, you would have a 50-50 chance of seeing a snowy owl in Illinois during the winter..

We use the term irruption to explain the intermittent appearance of many snowies in some winters. We used to say these irruptions of snowies were driven by the lack of available food up north. This was a "glass half empty" approach.

Remember what I said about the snowies laying fewer eggs in response to a limited food source? Well, the reverse is also true. If he deposits piles of dead lemmings, she lays more eggs.

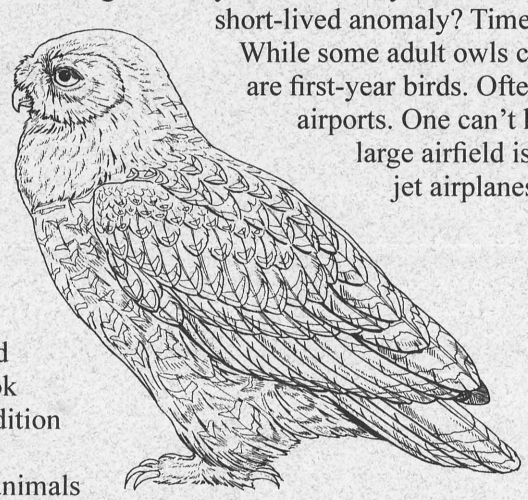
The current "glass half full" theory is that we see snowies during a northern Illinois winter after a bountiful springtime owl breeding season. Truth be told, both theories probably play a part in explaining snowy owl irruptions.

As I type this in December, snowy owls are being reported everywhere from DeKalb county to Montrose Harbor. Here's the funny thing. This has been happening now year after year after year. Are snowy owls becoming annual migrants or is this just a short-lived anomaly? Time will tell.

While some adult owls can be seen here in winter, most are first-year birds. Often these arctic migrants show up at airports. One can't help but think the open terrain of a large airfield is reminiscent of the tundra. Of course, jet airplanes are rarely seen on the tundra.

This is where Stillman's snowy owl ran afoul of humans. She had come south last winter and was hunting at O'Hare when, as far as we can tell, she got caught in the backwash of a jet engine.

She was taken to the talented staff at Willowbrook Wildlife Haven. Her injuries were such that the tip of one wing had to be amputated. Of course, there is no wheelchair access in nature. So the staff at Willowbrook placed this disabled owl with us.



Snowy owls can often be spotted perched on the ground. Also, unlike other owls, they are likely to be seen during the day.

Polar Attraction

J.K. Rowling was not the first to recognize the incredible appeal of the snowy owl, not by a long shot.

One of the oldest illustrations of a bird that can be identified to species is a drawing of a snowy owl family, two adults with an owlet, that was scratched on a wall in a French cave at least 20,000 years ago.

This cave was used by early humans as a sanctuary, and it is believed that these birds symbolized religious or magical powers.

Last millennium, when I was a kid, I kept my school supplies in a cigar box. Nowadays, I store some of my raptor handling equipment in a cigar box. Can you guess which brand of cigars? That's right, white owl. Their iconic snowy owl image was first used in 1887.

Is it the bright plumage, the golden eyes, the overall size? Whatever it is, these birds have a serious case of animal magnetism. Given where they come from, this only makes sense. After all, where do compass needles always point? Could snowy owls be anything other than magnetic?

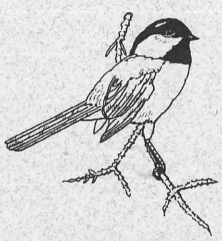
PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL 847-428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than five people have called two days prior to a program, the activity could be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

NEW YEAR'S DAY WALK

It's time again for our annual New Year's Day walk along Stillman's trails. Over the years, we've seen everything from bluebirds and shrikes to the remains of coyote kills. If you like winter, don't like football, or just want to greet 2015 outdoors; this is the walk for you.



Date: Thursday, Jan. 1
Time: 10:00AM
Age: 10 years and up

THURSDAY TREKKERS

Join us outside for a healthy hour-long walk around a lake, through the woods, and who knows where else? Why not add Stillman to your list of exercise options? Come prepared to hike the trails with sturdy winter boots.

Dates: Thursdays, Feb. 5, March 5, and April 2
Time: 9:30AM
Fee: None

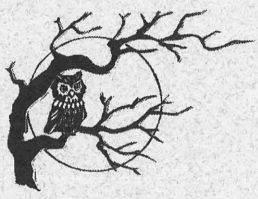
SCAT & TRACK

Susan Allman will show you how to recognize the different types of scats and tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow, we'll still go out to get nature's poop together, so to speak. Remember to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 25
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

OWL MOON NIGHT HIKE

After an indoor program on owls, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's great horned and screech owls. You'll be able to enjoy the winter landscape under the nearly full moon. Space is limited so call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations. Don't forget to dress warmly.



Date: Saturday, Jan. 31
Time: 6:30PM
Age: 8 years and up
Member's Fee: Free
Non-member's Fee: $5.00

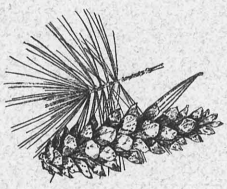
RAPTORS for PHOTOGRAPHERS

Stillman is offering our third annual winter raptor photography day. Now's your chance to get a close-up of a peregrine falcon, broad-winged hawk, red-shouldered hawk plus great horned, barn, barred, and screech owls. We will bring the birds out in the afternoon light to increase your chances of getting that perfect image.
Drop by anytime between 3:00 and 4:30PM.

Date: Saturday, Feb. 7
Time: 3:00 - 4:30 PM
Fee: $20/person

TREE IDENTIFICATION

Learn how to identify common trees such as cherry, maple, pine, and cedar. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions.



Date: Sunday, Feb. 15
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None

WOODCOCK WATCH

In past years, the woodcocks have put on quite a show. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Bring your binoculars and come join the fun!

Date: Saturday, March 28
Time: 6:30PM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up

Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available during the week, by reservation, to school classes. We also offer off-site raptor programs for schools and community organizations. For more information or a brochure that describes the programs and fees, just call us at 847-428-OWLS (6957) or check our website at: www.stillmannc.org

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

❑ **Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.**

You can also join online, just visit stillmannc.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." Volunteer opportunities include teaching classes, clearing trails, and fundraising.

Name_____

Address_____

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Telephone_____ **Email**_____

Kingfisher	$1000.00___
Monarch Butterfly	500.00___
Goldfinch	250.00___
Sugar Maple	100.00___
Goldenrod	50.00___
Trillium	30.00___
Student/Senior	15.00___

Thank you for your donation.

Please mail with your check to:

Stillman Nature Center, 33 West Penny Road, South Barrington, IL 60010-9578

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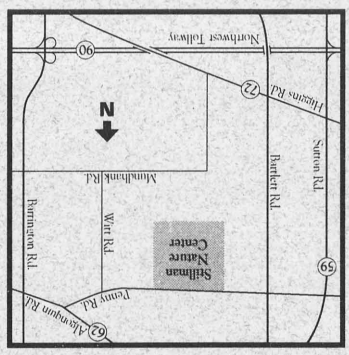

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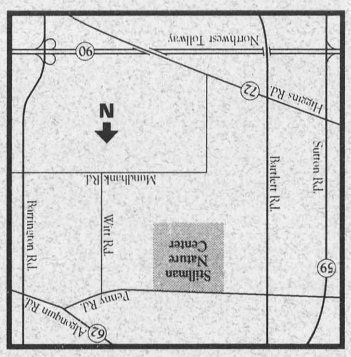

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Stillman Nature Center
2015 Program & Activity Schedule

January 1, 10:00am	New Year's Day Walk
January 25, 2:00pm	Tracks & Scats
January 31, 6:30pm	Owl Moon Night Hike – Fee: Member's: Free, Non-members: $5/person
February 5, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
February 7, 3:00pm	Raptors for Photographers – Fee: $20/person
February 15, 2:00pm	Tree ID
March 5, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
March 28, 6:30pm	Woodcock Walk
April 2, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
April 4, sunrise	Woodcocks & Coffee
April 5, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
April 24, 7:30-8:30pm	Friday Night Campfire – Fee: $2/person
April 26, 8:00am	Bird Walk
April 26, 2:00pm	Wildflower Walk
May 3, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
May 3, 2:00pm	Wildflower Walk
May 7, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
May 10, 1-3pm	Mother's Day with Birds of Prey – Fee: $10/car
May 17, 8:00am	Bird Walk
June 4, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
June 7, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
June 14, 8:00am	Bird Walk
June 21, 2:00pm	Pond Study [aka DADS & TADS (poles)]
July 2, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
July 5, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
July 19, 10:00am	Prairie Ramble
July 26, 2:00pm	Bugs & Butterflies
August 2, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
August 6, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
August 30, 8:00am	Bird Walk
August 30, noon to 3:00pm	Solar Observing

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September 3, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
September 13, 8:00am	Bird Walk
September 18, 7:00 to 8:00pm	Friday Night Campfire – Fee: $2/person
September 27, 2:00pm	Tree ID
October 1, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
October 3, 3:00pm – sunset	The Big Sit
October 4, 9:00am to noon	Bird Banding
October 11, 8:00am	Bird Walk
October 18, 1:00 – 3:00pm	Raptor Sunday - Fee: $10/car
October 25, 2:00	Bird Feeders
November 5, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers
November 8, 8:00am	Bird Walk
December 3, 9:30am	Thursday Trekkers

Ongoing volunteer workdays the 2nd & 4th Friday of each month: 9:30am.
No experience necessary—we provide the tools.

Unless otherwise noted, all programs are free of charge and open to the public.
For more information, please call 847-428-OWLS(6957) or stillmannc.org.
Programs may be subject to change.

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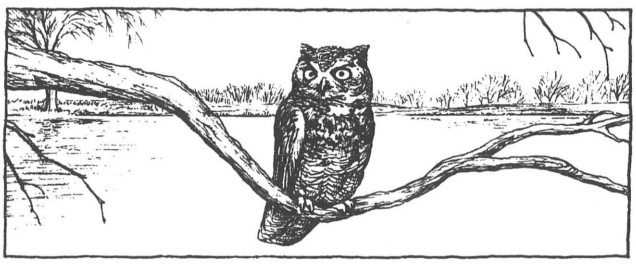

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