

I took it to Journal Sept 11 - 44

4 negatives  
Left 2.

GREAT WHITE OWL, SPIRIT OF THE NORTH

by

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The subject of animal behavior is intriguing, including that of the human being. The lower animals seem to differ in temperament and character as much as the higher animals do. To get the real mental measure of an animal and make the correct deductions is difficult and takes a long acquaintance and watching. Snap judgment never brings an accurate answer, and leaves one only more bewildered. Why does an animal do this instead of that? Be very sure every animal has a reason, and within his mental scope, environment and needs, he has adapted himself to exist and live as well as he can. I didn't say peaceably, for there is war among wild animal clans with fang and claw also - very much ALSO.

We were walking along on the gnarled and humpy Arctic tundra hunting the nest of the snowy owl, *Nyctea nyctea*. The stunted and twisted willow and other plants twined and tangled together pulled and held our feet back as we bent against a heavy wind that blew our hair and even our breath straight back. But it was a fine, clean wind that penetrated all through us, invigorating and inviting adventure. For you can't go to the Arctic land without adventure.

It was summer in this so-called barren land, but patches of snow lay in the hollows between the sandy, sedge-topped hummocks and the wind whistled and curled the short rank grass on the tips. Pausing for breath on one of the hummocks and looking out over the wimpled tide flats, we saw little sharp-winged, dusky-brown jaegers skimming the billows with confident abandon, turning and curving as they hovered the surging seas and were swallowed from sight by the crests, only to reappear and away again like spirits. The sun gilded the angelic-bodied glaucous-winged gulls riding the billows, their colors blending with the ice-blue crests. On a high point of a rock bending over the sea, a great bald eagle sat, his

white head gleaming in the sun. This is surely the summerland of the sea birds, and somewhere near the great white owl was also cuddling her eggs, for she had been seen in the vicinity.

We turned inland again, tramping slowly, heads bent scanning carefully every little knoll. The sound of the sea came faintly to us. In and out and back and forth we went and were following along a ridge that looked down over a lowering slope of rolling tundra. Combing the hummocks, we plodded doggedly along until it became a monotony. I turned off to one side to follow the edge of a little rise, and there on the very top of a knoll in a cup surrounded by a rim of snow was the nest with four dirty-white eggs. I heard the close fanning of wings, and almost beside me was the white mother. She flew ahead of me, dropped in the snow and began a series of comical antics. She lifted her wings, waddled clumsily around, then lay down, got up nervously and hobbled off a little way. She came back and lay on her stomach with her wings spread out on the snow, and began a fine, high whining. All at once the male appeared from somewhere, joined the female in waddling about and waving his wings. Suddenly he changed his tactics and began calling in weird, unmusical, choppy tones. It must have been his war call, for he came at us, almost striking a head. Then both birds joined in a barrage of dry, gritty sounds as if it was a last warning.

We moved around a little way to get a good look at the nest. It was not much of a baby's cradle, for it had a scanty lining, just a little moss and a feather or two. This varies as some mother owls weave a fair bed of moss and feathers - and some place their nests on ledges of cliffs, the eggs lying on the bare shelf hollowed out to keep them from rolling off. Anyway, it was a feather in our caps to have found the nest at all in this sea of confusing hummocks. As it was late, we departed to return another day with the cameras.

In its Arctic summer home, the main food supply of the snowy owl consists of lemmings and other small rodents, when these little fellows

are abundant. But during the periods of scarcity of lemmings and mice, which happens frequently, the owls must find some other food supply or move. In these periodic invasions of more southern regions, they have to subsist on whatever animal life they can find. These may be hares, ground squirrels, rats, moles and shrews. It may also be small birds to feed their young, or worse yet, various sea birds, even ducks, geese, coots, shore birds, ptarmigans and other grouse. In fact, there is a pretty long list of depredations against him. But in a normal season, it is the lemming for the owl, Kipling's little lemming of the high rocks and mossy banks, that small, silky rodent of the Arctic that worms his shallow runways almost on the surface like an intricate system of full veins, and once in many moons of his short life puts on a mad migration which frequently ends in the sea - since perforce the end of land is the sea.

The great invasions of snowy owls into southern regions during the winter undoubtedly occur on account of food scarcity further north. These may happen at the time of periodic fluctuations in the abundance of lemmings and Arctic hares. The winter of 1926-7 was probably the most extensive and heaviest flight of snowy owls of which there is any record. Occasionally when food is plentiful, this owl will remain north nearly to the limits of its breeding range. But during heavy migrations for lack of food, thousands of these big birds were killed wantonly as they moved down through all parts of the United States, even as far as Bermuda. The first record of a snowy owl in Oregon was by Townsend in 1839. In December 1896, there was a general migration of snowy owls into Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, and dozens were killed.

The great white owl is a world traveler, for he is found in the Arctic regions of both hemispheres. It breeds above the limits of trees on the Arctic tundras only short of perpetual ice and snow, where food would be lacking. At that, these birds test the hardihood of their offspring by exposing them at birth on the icy heights, as the Greeks of old did

their new born warriors. Many perished and were found unfit, as also happens to many owl families. This bird usually lays five to seven or eight eggs, and occasionally more.

The adult male has a pure white body, sometimes almost unspotted, but usually marked more or less with fine bars of slaty brown. The female, larger than her mate, is much darker, pure white only on the face, throat, middle of the breast and feet, the head spotted, and the rest of the body barred with dark brown. Some relatives of the snowy owl a little smaller in size range the sub-Arctic regions. The Arctic horned owl inhabits the northern timbered regions of Canada over to Manitoba where it joins with the northwestern horned owl. This owl with the northwestern horned owl, and even our dusky horned owl are close neighbors <sup>to the snowy owl</sup> in their summer homes. The dusky horned owl is found from the coast region of southeastern Alaska to northern California. But the St. Michael horned owl is furthest in his northern range, occupying the coastal regions of Alaska from Bristol Bay to Kotzebue Sound, and especially Point Barrow.

The winnowing of wings of the great ghost owl, *Nyctea nyctea*, and its mellow, yearning call, borne by the wind, now here, now there, over this white landscape under the eery northern lights, is an experience never to be forgotten.