

# Photographing Canada's Illusive Owls

## Bill & Marty Welch



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- Owls are birds from the order Strigiformes, comprising around 200 species.
- They are upright birds with sharp talons, broad heads and feathers adapted for silent flight.
- They are equipped with **binocular vision** – where, with two eyes they see a single three-dimensional image of its surroundings.
- Owls have large, forward facing eyes and ear-holes with a circle of feathers around each eye providing **binaural hearing**. These feathers can be adjusted to sharply focus sounds from varying distances into the ear cavities.
- This gives them the ability to identify the location, or origin of a sound, over both distance and elevation.
- Owls large eyes are fixed in their sockets. They must turn their heads to change views.

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- Owls have been the subject of many myths and superstitions as far back as history is recorded.
- From as far back as the Paleolithic era, owls have been found in cave paintings, often as an object of mystery.



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- The Greeks believed the owl was a symbol of good fortune. They associated the owl with wisdom and was depicted with the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena.
- The Romans were terrified of owls and believe they portended death.
- Russian hunters carried owl claws so that if they died, they could use the claws to climb to heaven.
- The Celts saw the owl as a guide to the underworld.
- In Eastern religions, the owl is an evil spirit and an omen of death.
- In India, there were superstitions regarding how many times an owl hoots. One hoot meant impending death, six hoots meant guests would arrive, and nine hoots meant good fortune.
- In the Lorraine region of France, owls were said to help spinsters find husbands.

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2 of the most sought  
after owls in North  
America.

The Great Gray Owl

and,



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## The Snowy Owl



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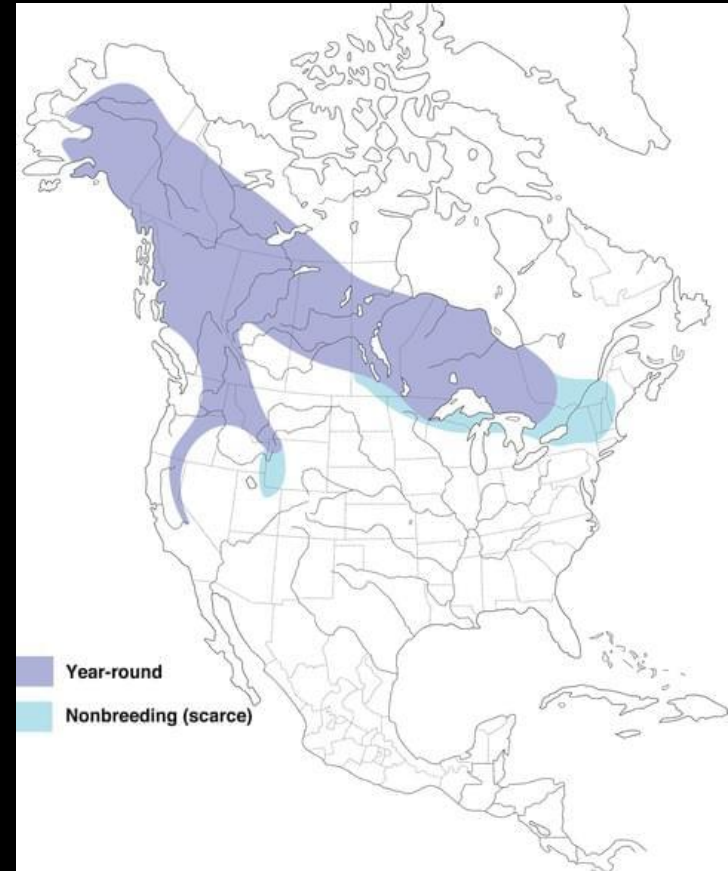
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## The Great Gray Owl

The Great Gray Owl is one of the tallest owls in North America, but they are actually mostly feathers. They average only around 2.5 pounds.

Both the Great Horned Owl and the Snowy Owl weigh more than a Great Gray Owl.

While its range is typically the northern boreal forest, when there is a population crash in the rodent population, Great Gray Owls may drift into the northeast, causing great excitement for birders.



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## The Snowy Owl

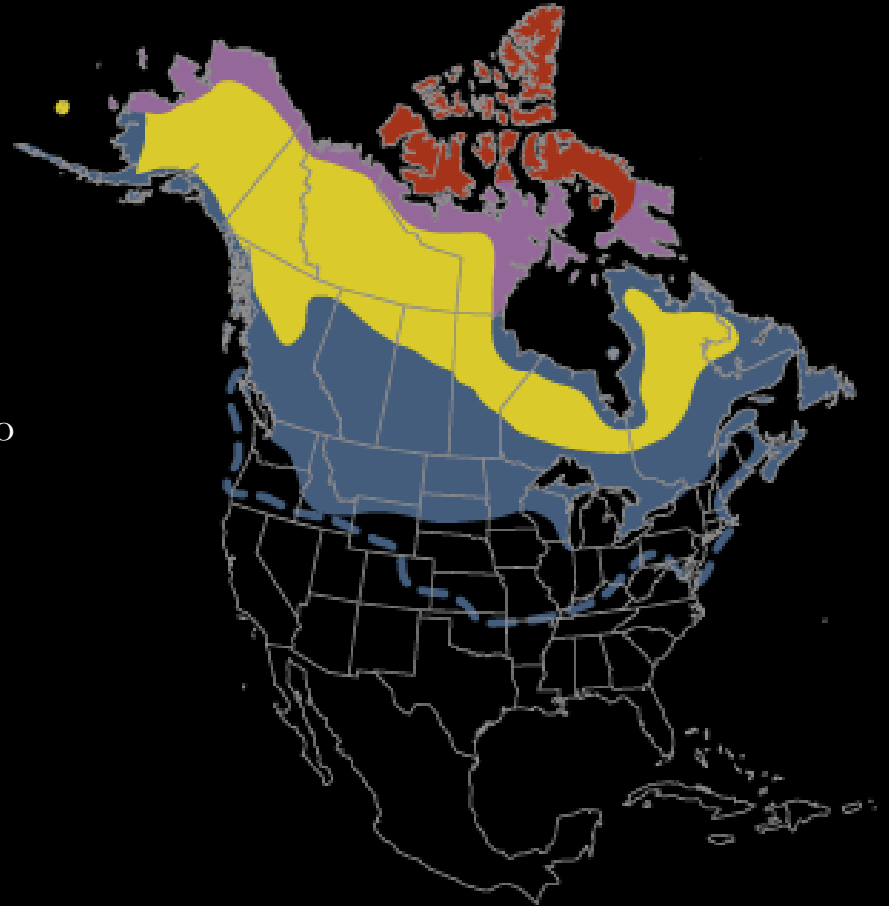
The snowy owl is native to Arctic regions of North America and Eurasia. Males are almost all white, while females have more flecks of black plumage.

Snowy Owls like treeless, wide-open spaces.

They often sit right on the ground to hunt and they prefer rolling terrain where they can find a vantage to survey the surrounding area.

On their wintering grounds they'll also perch atop a fencepost, hay bale, telephone pole, grain elevator - anywhere with a good view.

Snowys also experience irruptions where they may go much further south than their typical winter range.





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- In February 2017, Marty and I get an opportunity to photograph Snowy Owls, on their typical winter range in Saskatchewan.
- We were invited to fly to Saskatoon and meet up with 4 other photographers, one was a good friend from our trip to the Arctic to photograph polar bears.
- Frank Johnson was our guide.
- I'll speak to logistics and other specifics later.

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The first trip – Saskatchewan

2017



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- In June of 2017, we were signed up to attend Alan Murphey's "Loons and More" workshop in Kamloops. British Columbia.
- The workshop was only for 5 days, but we extended the trip to 17 days.
- We added the extra time to look for, and hopefully photograph the Great Gray Owls on our own.
- We arrived a couple days before the workshop and begin searching around Kamloops for wildlife to photograph.
- The very first morning, we found a Great Gray Owl!

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Trip 2 – Kamloops 2017





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- The Great Gray Owls were a lot of fun for us since we found them, by ourselves rather quickly.
- We actually worked 2 pairs of Great Grays, that had babies.
- Since we had Great Gray Owls within an hour of where we were staying, we stayed there the entire 2 weeks, photographing them nearly every day.
- Lenses used were 300mm – 600mm.
- Tripods were used except for flight shots, which were handheld.
- The Loon workshop continued, for the next group while we were still there.
- Marty and I were given walkie-talkies and we would scout, and find the owls every afternoon for the rest of the workshop participants.

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## 2018 - Back for more Snowy Owls

- Photographing Snowy Owls in 2017 was a lot of fun and we got some decent images. But, mostly all we were able to photograph were the solid white males.
- We really wanted some images of the female. So, we started planning a trip for February 2018, and eventually we had 6 other photographers committed to the trip.
- Again, we were using Frank Johnson as the guide. We had been in communication with him and knew that he had a nice female he was working with this year.
- Plus we knew what worked and what didn't, on the first trip, and we were better prepared this trip.

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Trip 3 –  
Kamloops  
2018



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Things to know about  
Photographing Snowy  
Owls in Saskatchewan.

- It can be extremely cold.
- -35° to -7° F
- You head out in the dark, during the coldest time of the day.
- We did not come back until after dark.



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- Your equipment will hate you
- 3 cameras completely quit working
- 4 people got frostbite



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### Equipment used for Snowy Owls

- 300mm – 500mm lens
- Most of our flight shots were taken with either a 70-200 + 1.4, or 300mm lens
- Several people used 100-400mm lenses
- Our Cameras were Canon 5D Mark IV's
- Tripods were seldom used.



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- This is without a doubt the most difficult photography we have done.
- We got up at 5:00 a.m. every morning. The drive out and back was around an hour and a half.
- It was very hard to operate the camera with frozen fingers. It was very hard to feel buttons on the camera.
- View finder was constantly frosted up and frozen. Batteries do not last very long.
- The Snowy Owls fly a lot faster than we ever expected. They were difficult to track.
- It didn't seem like we were walking that much, but at the end of the day, the car was suddenly pretty far away,
- We stayed out in the cold until after dark every day.

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Frank Johnson Snowy Owl Tours

<http://www.snowyowlphototours.com/>

Alan Murphy

Loons and More Workshops

<http://www.alanmurphyphotography.com/>

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**[www.anaturalselection.net](http://www.anaturalselection.net)**

**Get out and shoot something!**