

How a Snowy Owl hunts Bonaparte's Gulls on the wing

Stuart A. Mackenzie

Dietary preference and predatory behaviour of the Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiaca*) have been fairly well documented across their range which spans arctic and sub-arctic landscapes of North America and Asia (Parmalee 1992). On the breeding grounds they rely heavily on cyclic populations of lemmings (*Dicrostonyx*, *Lemmus* sp.) (Parmalee 1992, Gilg *et al.*) Predatory behaviours are as diverse as their prey. The faithful 'sit and wait' routine, common among many raptors, appears to be the preferred method for taking small mammals (Boxall and Lein 1982). Taking advantage of opportunity however, often requires creativity. Some of the earliest descriptions of the owls predatory behaviour describe an individual snatching fish out of water holes (Audubon 1840). They are also very capable at catching prey in flight; whether it be chasing down ptarmigan and other birds on the tundra (Parmalee 1992), ducks and grebes along the coasts (Campbell and MacColl 1978, Robertson and Gilchrist 2003), or murrelets and alcids on the Aleutian Islands (Williams and Frank 1979). It is therefore likely that gulls may make up a large proportion of the diet of those owls that win-

ter in the Great Lakes region and other areas where gulls are abundant (other coastal regions and landfills).

There were a large number of Snowy Owls in the mid-latitudes of North America in the winter of 2009 (Ontbirds and other list-serves), with many birds lingering well into April. When the Long Point Bird Observatory staff and volunteers arrived at the eastern Tip of Long Point on 2 April, an adult Snowy Owl was present at the Tip, remaining until the 14th. For those 12 days nary a gull would share space at the Tip with the owl. On our first wander around the Tip we noticed a suspiciously high number of carcasses and remains of Bonaparte's Gulls (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) scattered along the beaches. I suspected that the owl probably had something to do with it, and my suspicions were confirmed on the morning of 6 April when it was observed feeding on fresh remains. In total, the remains of at least 12 different individuals were identified during its residence. It's easy to imagine how the owl could have grabbed sick, injured or sleeping birds off the water or beach, but there is a big difference between opportunistic

and lazy. I've not yet met a raptor that was the latter, and this bird did not disappoint.

The owl spent the vast majority of its time sitting at the extreme eastern end of the Tip, perfectly content to be barraged by wind and blowing sand. It appeared to barely sleep, always having an eye fixed on the horizon, its admirers, or passing passerines and gulls. On most evenings its birding became more deliberate, particularly paying attention to the movements made by flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls. Shortly after sunset on the evening of 8 April the owl took flight, circling over the Tip before slowly descending to the water with purpose. As it approached the surface of the lake, its flight became difficult to discern at times from the white being scalped off the waves by the westerly winds. It quickly became apparent that this evening flight was a well choreographed, practiced routine — the hunt was on.

Within a minute the owl had reached a small roosting flock of about 100 Bonaparte's Gulls, which immediately took flight and proceeded to mob and pursue the owl as it approached. The owl was steadfast and continued west into the wind. Once the chase was initiated the owl stayed just ahead of the mob. Within about 500 meters it reached another roosting flock, this one of more than 500 birds, which also began a relentless chase. Yet again, in a disciplined fashion, the owl continued west, remaining slightly ahead of the mob. The majority of the gulls followed close behind as a circulating group of up to 50 took turns mobbing the owl. Unfazed, the owl continued until all of a

sudden it opened its long wings, which caught the wind like a parachute, slowing the owl to a near stop as it rode the wind into a position up to 6 metres above the now somewhat disarrayed flock. From this position the owl quickly dove into the mob easily challenging as many of the aerial acrobats as it felt was feasible. The owl rarely missed a beat, although of 5 observed 'attacks' (3 on 8 April, 2 on 9 April) only one was successful. When the owl missed, it would immediately re-initiate the chase and wait for the gulls to catch up and drop their guard. A few hundred metres along it would parachute above them again and take its pick of the flock. After a run at the flocks the owl would return to a favourite perch along the beach. Presumably this may have also been a clever way to learn where the gulls were roosting, in order to be able to pick one off under the cover of night.

This is yet another example of the opportunistic use of abundant regional and seasonal prey species by Snowy Owls, and speaks to their extraordinary abilities to track and hunt prey of all shapes, sizes, and niches. It used to be hard to imagine how an already deep respect for these owls could have grown, but as is usually the case, the more you know, the more you know you don't know.

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