

A "HORNED" SNOWY OWL

by Ken Winkler, Wellesley

Snowy Owls (Nyctea scandiaca) are supposed to be earless, but on January 27, 1981, while looking for birds in Newburyport, I found a Snowy Owl with a tiny black horn above each eye. The bird was perched on a utility pole just east of the Plum Island Bridge. The horns, which were formed by some of the feathers spotting the forehead, extended about one-half inch from the top of the head. I studied the owl for fifteen minutes with 7X binoculars and a 20X spotting scope, twenty-five feet away from the pole.

A Snowy Owl with ear tufts was first described by George Miksch Sutton and photographed by David Parmelee (George Sutton, High Arctic, Paul S. Erickson, New York, 1971). Sutton's bird was a female on the nest. He writes that "after wriggling down into a comfortable position on her eggs, her back plumage sank, her eyes slowly narrowed, and above each eye appeared ... a neat little triangular horn!" When Sutton's owl became excited the horns disappeared; as soon as she became "composed, narrow-eyed, and sleepy-looking" they returned. The horns on my bird were visible whether its eyes were narrowed, closed, or open. At one point the owl hunched over, closed its eyes, and opened its mouth wide as if to yawn. It held this pose, absolutely motionless, for three or four seconds. I was beginning to think that the yawn should be over when a large pellet appeared at the back of the bird's mouth. The pellet passed slowly out of the throat and fell to the ground. The owl passed the pellet casually, without retching, and its ears were erect both before and after. Sutton (personal communication) speculates that passing the pellet may have made the bird "dopey," accounting for the appearance of the horns.

I examined one hundred specimens of Nyctea scandiaca at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. The facial disc of a Snowy Owl is covered by dense, relatively narrow feathers, which are pure white even on the darkest birds in the MCZ collection. Above the disc are broader feathers, which are often tipped with brown. These are the feathers that formed the horns on my bird, but all the specimens in the MCZ collection are completely tuftless. Some have unkempt forehead feathers, and on others the feathers have been flattened by the pressure of the bird on the tray, but none has the striking pair of horns on my bird or Sutton's.

Allan Eckert says of the Snowy Owl that "although there are indeed rudimentary ear tufts, they are very tiny, practically buried in the head plumage, and rarely raised even a little. For all intents and purposes, insofar as external appearances go, Nyctea scandiaca may be considered as being a tuftless owl" (The Owls of North America, Doubleday, New York, 1974).