

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

2 Snowy Owl *Strix nyctea* Linnaeus

Now known as *Nyctea scandiaca* (Linnaeus)

(PLATE CXXI)

'This beautiful bird is merely a winter visitor of the United States,' wrote Audubon, 'where it is seldom seen before the month of November, and whence it retires as early as the beginning of February. It wanders at times along the sea coast, as far as Georgia ... in Massachusetts and Maine it is far more abundant than in any other parts of the Union.' He also found the Snowy Owl as far inland as Ohio and Kentucky, but today its appearance is limited to the most northerly States, and even then only in certain years.

A denizen of the open stretches of the Arctic tundra, the Snowy Owl ranges round the North Pole in North America, Europe and Asia. In these regions the summers are virtually nightless, so that this owl, unlike most of the species, hunts by both day and night. It feeds mainly on rodents, especially lemmings, but it will often prey upon other small mammals, birds, and even fish.

Audubon observed them catching fish beside rock-fissures at the Falls of the Ohio, near Louisville. '... they invariably lay flat on the rock,' he wrote, 'with the body placed lengthwise along the border of the hole, the head also laid down, but turned towards the water. One might have supposed the bird sound sleep, as it would remain in the same position until a good opportunity of securing a fish occurred, which I believe was never missed; for, as the latter unwittingly rose to the surface, near the edge, that instant the Owl thrust out the foot next the water, and, with the quickness of lightning, seized it, and drew it out.'

The nest of the Snowy Owl is merely a depression in the top of some small eminence on the ground, lined with moss and feathers. There are usually five to eight creamy white eggs, which the female incubates while the male defends the nest and feeds his mate. The eggs are laid over an extended period, the number and spacing depending on the food supply. Each hatches after a month's incubation so that the young can vary considerably in size and age. At hatching they are fluffy white balls of down; later they develop a thick coat of gray down through which the heavily marked feathers of the young fledglings eventually emerge.

The setting that Audubon chose is very unusual for Snowy Owls and probably harks back to one he specially noted near Louisville: 'It was perched on a broken stump of a tree in the centre of a large field; and, on seeing us, flew off, sailed round the field, and alighted again on the same spot. It evinced much impatience and apprehension, opening its wings several times as if intending to fly off...'

In straight flight this owl is strong and silent, while over its prey it hovers intricately. It utters resounding barking calls and whistles. Altogether, with its robust physique and wintry camouflage, this fine bird provides an appropriate ornithological symbol for the great open spaces of the Far North.

The painting for this plate, a particularly rich example of Robert Havell's aquatint, was probably done on the East Coast in 1829. The male owl is shown above the more heavily marked female.