



Snowy Owl

Taking a Closer Look at Snowy Owl!

By Merrill Tawse

During the winter of 1927 “Uncle” Charlie Peischer became concerned about the welfare of his chickens and decided to do something about it. With gun in hand he headed out to his field and shot the two perceived threats that had made their way down from northern Canada for the winter. He then took his “trophies” and mounted them in a diorama. Well, like a lot of things the diorama got passed around the family and finally made it way from Alexandra Behnke of New York and then to Charma and Eric Behnke of Mansfield where it then sat for a few years in the basement.

Realizing the value of this unique display the Behnke’s donated it to the Nature Center along with money to purchase the protective case. We decided to mount it “as is”, showing not only these magnificent birds but also to show the “art work” from that time period. The air tight housing is both to preserve the specimens from dampness and to protect the visitors to the Nature Center. We assume that the birds were preserved in the method of the time and that is with arsenic.

Charlie Peischer’s farm was located near the southern shore of Lake Ontario just west of Rochester New York. This flat terrain resembles the tundra where these birds reside the rest of the year. As the prey populations on the tundra go through cyclic downfalls, these birds are periodically driven farther south winters seeking food. In their northern homeland they feed mostly on Lemmings, a small rodent. When they invade for the winter the local Meadow Voles make up a majority of their diet.

Invasion years might occur every three to five or so years. We can annually expect at least a few in the Great Lakes area, but during the invasion years they show up in greater numbers and more widespread. Open areas like airports, golf courses, farm fields and Landfills are the typical haunts. Burke Lakefront Airport along Cleveland’s lake shore usually has at least one residing for part of each winter. A recent invasion year had a Snowy Owl spend time way down near Cincinnati where it was viewed by thousands of birdwatchers. (much to the landowners dismay)

We have had them show up periodically at Mansfield Municipal Airport, once one spent time on the roof of the apartments behind Value City Department Store. My first experience with these large owls was when I was in elementary school I found one high in a tree next to a field off Marion Ave. This is not a typical perch. The bird had probably been scared up out of the field by me, or my dog's activity.

The natural range for these birds is circumpolar throughout the Arctic region. Its species name of *scandiaca* hints to its presence over in the Scandinavian countries. These tuftless owls are the largest, heaviest, and most powerful of the North American Owls. They are diurnal meaning they hunt by day on the small mammals as well as some of the small to mid-sized birds. Younger birds often have more black streaks on them than the adults do.

Dioramas like this one were very common in the late 1800's and into the early 1900's. People often had collections of birds, mammals and other nature-related objects mounted in cases that they hung above their mantels. We have another, not so well preserved, example hanging on the wall in the animal prep room. As you look at the number of small songbirds crammed into the case you can begin to imagine what impact this type of what was widespread collecting would have. Because of its impact on the wild bird population's laws were passed in the early 1900's. These laws made it illegal to kill, keep as a pet, or have any part of the migratory birds, including feathers and eggshells. The Snowy Owls were collected in 1927 (note you can see it penciled in by the "artist" on the lower right area of the "snowy ground"). Legal protection did not come to the Birds of Prey until much later due to the fact they were considered a threat to wild and domestic animal populations. It may even be that Charlie Peitscher could have received bounty money for killing these owls.