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Snowy Owl Populations at Kennedy International Airport, New York: A Twenty-Three Year Study

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The south shore of Long Island is a favored wintering area of the Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*).¹ At the south-west end of Long Island is located John F. Kennedy International Airport, a 5500-acre expanse of tundra-like habitat, adjacent to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is an important stopover area for migrant shorebirds, ducks and geese. From 1964 to the present, I have been employed at Kennedy Airport and so have had the opportunity to regularly census the owls present each winter. Since I work on the grounds of the airport and thus have a chance to observe the area frequently, I am confident that my numbers accurately represent the total number of owls at the airport.

Since 1964, I live trapped and banded 39 owls, using either a bow trap or a bal-chatri. In fact, one was caught by hand—a normal wild bird perched atop a fuel storage tank.² One notable return and recovery has previously been described.³ The other recovery, #568-15090, banded

in December, 1975, was encountered by a Cree Indian guide, named Gabriel, near Attawapiskat, Ontario, on the western shore of James Bay in September 1976.

Many opportune sightings and considerable pellet analyses have disclosed the following prey species taken here at J.F.K.: various small birds up to black ducks, mice, rats, cottontail rabbits and jack rabbits—yes, Black-tailed Jack Rabbits (*Lepus californicus*)⁴, the latter being their favorite prey item. Additionally, I once saw a Snowy carrying a full-grown feral cat in its talons.

As is clear from Table 1, Snowy Owls are usually present at the airport during the winter, arriving from mid-November to early December, with two to six present during the winter. The date of departure varies more from year to year than the time of arrival and the sex ratio was even for the owls present on the airport. Although popular belief has Snowy Owls coming down every third or fourth

Table 1. Sightings of Snowy Owls at Kennedy International Airport, New York.

WINTER	FIRST SIGHTING	LAST SIGHTING	TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS AT KENNEDY AIRPORT	MAXIMUM DAILY COUNT	NUMBER BANDED	PERCENT MALES (OF THOSE BANDED)
'64-'65	11/28	03/22	5	4	1	
'65-'66	a		0	—	0	
'66-'67	01/15	03/26	5	4	5	3
'67-'68	12/08	02/28	2	2	2	
'68-'69	a		0	—	0	
'69-'70	a		0	—	0	
'70-'71	a		0	—	0	
'71-'72	11/24	11/25	1	1	0	
'72-'73	11/22	12/15	2	1	1	
'73-'74	01/05	01/15	2	1	1	
'74-'75	11/08	02/12	4	3	3	2
'75-'76	12/08	04/07	3	3	2	2
'76-'77	01/20	03/06	2	1	1	
'77-'78	a		0	—	0	
'78-'79	12/11	12/11	1	1	0	
'79-'80	a		0	—	0	
'80-'81	11/18	04/24	6	4	6	2
'81-'82	11/12	03/18	4	4	3	1
'82-'83	12/10	03/16	6	4	5	4
'83-'84	11/15	02/24	2	2	2	2
'84-'85	11/20	03/04	2	2	2	2
'85-'86	12/05	03/05	2	1	1	1
'86-'87	11/15	04/10	6	4	4	1
MEAN	12/02	03/05	55	4	39	51%

a = No Snowy Owls observed that year.

year during low food periods, my data indicate that there is no such regularity in their incursions. Table 2 shows age and sex data on the Kennedy owls. The birds were aged and sexed using wing chord and weight along with plumage characteristics, many with the help of Richard Cohen, my master bander for 12 years.¹

During the study period, seven owls were killed by aircraft and another owl was slightly injured and later released.

This last winter, 1986-1987, was an outstanding incursion year for Snowy Owls along the Atlantic Coast.⁵ One was seen and photographed at the northwest corner of Albany, N.Y., on September 26, 1986.⁶ Here at J.F.K. my last sighting was on April 10, 1987, and owls were still present at Boston's Logan Airport early in May 1987.⁷ Accordingly, Snowy Owls were present in the Albany, N.Y. — Boston, Mass. — New York City triangle for over seven months.

Table 2. Age and sex data on Kennedy Airport Snowy Owls.

BAND NO.	AGE	SEX	WING (mm)	WEIGHT (grams)	TAIL (mm)	DATE	BAND NO.	AGE	SEX	WING (mm)	WEIGHT (grams)	TAIL (mm)	DATE
568-15064	HY	F	444	2352	—	03-22-65	608-37245	SY	F	410	2056	225	03-07-81
65	HY	U	425	1870	—	01-22-67	46	SY	M	400	1704	225	03-18-81
66	HY	M	395	2012	—	01-29-67	47	HY	F	425	2145	245	11-13-81
67	HY	U	420	1757	—	02-01-67	48	AHY	M	390	1862	220	02-18-82
68	HY	M	400	1672	—	02-05-67	49	AHY	F	430	2374	245	02-26-82
69	HY	M	360	1388	—	02-22-67	50	U	F	420	1912	240	12-25-82
71	HY	F	440	2017	—	12-08-67	51	SY	M	410	1810	225	01-01-83
73	SY	F	440	2355	—	02-27-68	52	AHY	M	420	1726	225	02-21-83
79	HY	F	440	1940	240	11-23-72	53	AHY	M	410	1764	225	02-22-83
80	HY	U	—	—	—	01-08-74	54	AHY	M	405	1898	236	02-27-83
82	HY	M	400	1703	225	12-23-74	55	SY	M	395	1503	230	01-25-84
85	AHY	F	440	2000	245	12-30-74	56	AHY	M	390	1780	215	02-24-84
87	U	M	405	1704	231	02-11-75	57	HY	M	394	1444	—	11-23-84
89	HY	M	380	1425	252	12-15-75	58	AHY	M	394	1884	234	12-02-84
90	HY	M	400	1544	238	12-29-75	59	AHY	M	410	1683	220	02-19-86
91	AHY	F	432	2174	224	02-28-77	60	HY	F	430	1864	245	11-30-86
608-37241	HY	M	395	1513	215	11-21-80	61	HY	M	425	1767	232	12-01-86
42	AHY	F	432	2020	240	12-17-80	62	AHY	F	445	1987	248	12-03-86
43	SY	F	420	—	—	02-22-81	63	AHY	F	445	2387	248	02-27-87
44	SY	F	410	1936	—	02-22-81							

References

- ¹Cohen. Banding Notes on the Snowy Owl, 1966. *Kingbird* 16: No. 2.
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- ³*North American Bird Bander*, 1987. Vol. 12, No. 3, p. 102.
- ⁴Wilcox. Black-Tailed Jack Rabbits. 1977. *Long Island Forum*, p. 151.
- ⁵*Boston Sunday Globe*, Dec. 28, 1986, p. 44; and *Boston Globe*, Jan. 19, 1987, p. 46.
- ⁶Trimm. *N.Y. State Conservationist*, March/April 1987, pp. 20-21.
- ⁷Norman Smith. Mass. Audubon Society, personal communication.

Attention Ornithologists

The Eastern Bird Banding Association offers a grant of \$250 in aid of research using bird-banding techniques or bird-banding data. Applicants should submit a resume of his or her banding or ornithological background, a project plan, and a budget to Selection Committee Chairman Robert G. Sagar, Biology Dept., Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA 17815. No formal application forms are available. The amount requested should not exceed \$250. Deadline for receipt of applications is March 31, 1988.