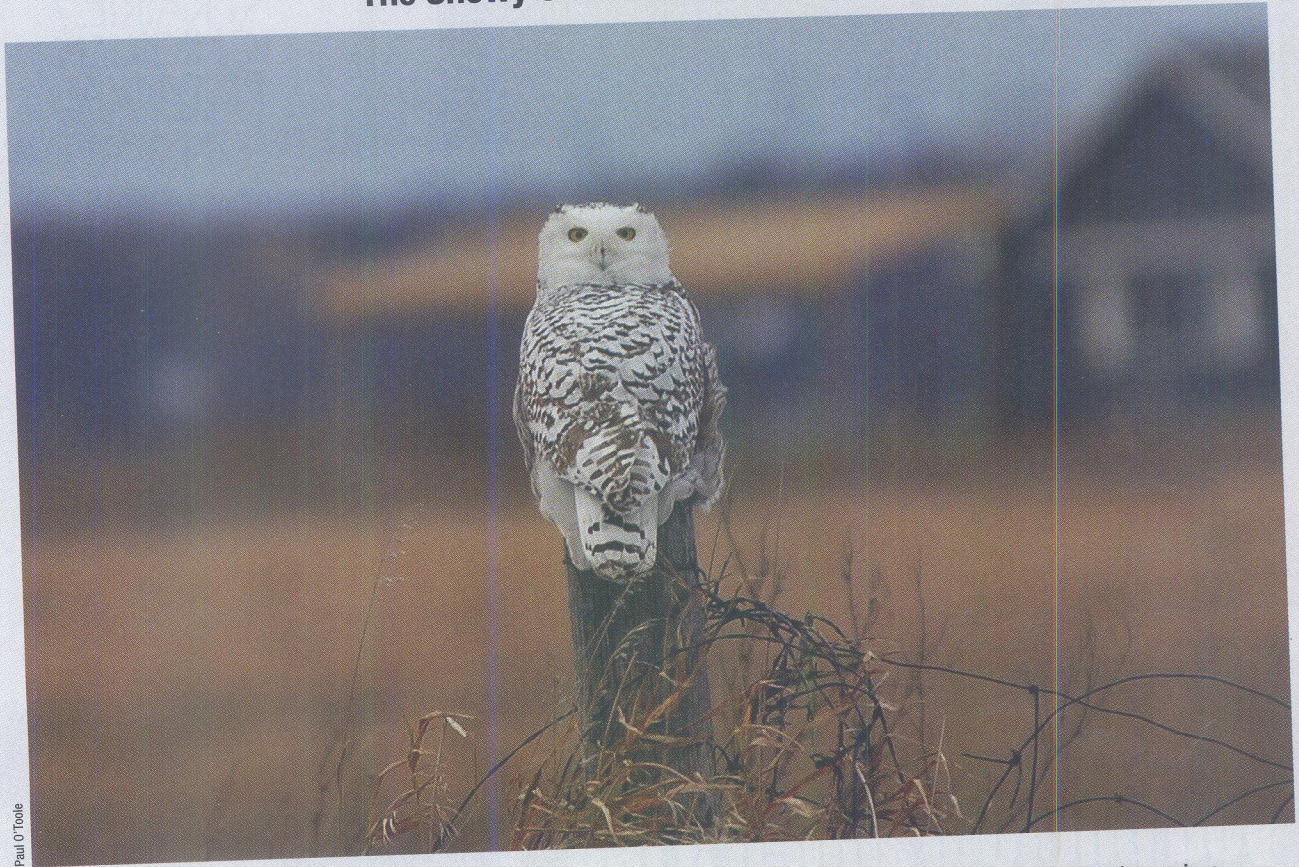


birding**briefs**

Snowy Owls, Chicago's Green-breasted Mango, a high-flying godwit, and recent rare bird sightings

The Snowy Owl invasion of 2008-09



Paul O'Toole

HEAD-TURNER: A Snowy Owl on Amherst Island, south of Kingston, Ontario, turns its head around to check its surroundings. Photographed in December, the Snowy was one of perhaps hundreds spotted in the southern provinces and northern states in the winter of 2008-09. Experts say a boom in the arctic lemming population apparently led to

high numbers of young owls fledging successfully the previous summer. By fall and winter, adults forced the younger birds to leave their territories. Many flew south, finding wintering areas along coastlines and in farm fields and suburban areas from North Dakota to New York, from Quebec to Maryland, and from Kansas to Tennessee.

Most satellite-tracked Snowy Owls winter on sea ice

We noted above that lots of Snowy Owls turned up in southern Canada and the northern United States last winter, but new research suggests that appearances can be deceiving.

Canadian scientists who trapped adult female owls and fitted them with satellite transmitters say many Snowies don't wander south in winter but remain in the far north, living on arctic sea ice.

The researchers captured and released the owls in summer 2007 on an island north of the Arctic Circle. Six of the birds subsequently spent most of the winter of 2007-08 on pack ice south of the Arctic Circle, as far as 100 miles (160 km) from the nearest coast.

"As for what the birds were doing there, they were possibly preying on seabirds," says Gilles Gauthier, a biologist at the Université Laval in

Quebec. "Bird researchers at coastal field sites have observed Snowy Owls attacking eiders in winter. This hypothesis will be strengthened if we can match up the locations of our birds with the position of open water leads in the ice as recorded by other satellite data."

Three owls did not winter on sea ice. One flew to the eastern point of Newfoundland. The second covered

more than 3,260 miles (5,253 km) on its way to North Dakota. And the third bird wintered on Ellesmere Island, about 250 miles north of where it was trapped.

The owls began migrating again in March and found nesting sites from late April to mid-June. None of the birds, however, returned to the previous year's breeding grounds, settling an average of 455 miles (733 km) away.