



Snowy owl

The large white snowy owl (*Bubo scandiaca*) was made famous as Harry Potter's owl, Hedwig

The male snowy owl is almost pure white, while the female is white, fairly heavily barred and speckled in dark brown or grey. Juveniles are similar to the female with more bars and streaks. It has golden eyes and black bill. The feet are feathered, with black talons.

Length: 53-56cm; wingspan: 142-166cm

Status in the UK

Former breeder; unlisted; occasional birds present in summer, winter visitor

Population trends

The snowy owl was a regular winter visitor to northern Scotland and the islands in the early part of the 20th century. But reports declined until a series of invasions in the early 1960s resulted in birds summering on some of the Scottish islands.

This culminated in the first UK breeding record when a pair nested on Fetlar in Shetland in 1967 and for the next eight years. They produced 21 young over the period. A second female joined the pair in 1974 and 1975 and, although she laid eggs, none hatched. In 1976 the male failed to return. The two females summered on Fetlar until 1993, but no further male joined them and no further breeding has occurred since.

However in spring 2008 there was hope that they might breed again when a male and female were seen on North Uist, but sadly the male moved on to Lewis.

Habitat and distribution

These owls are found on tundra and high fells, often near the coast. In Shetland they bred on grass moorland with heather, rock outcrops and scattered boulders.

The birds that stay during the summer mainly occur on the islands of northern Scotland. The species is recorded more widely in winter, especially in invasion years when their prey has crashed in Scandinavia.

Breeding

The nest is a scrape on top of a hummock, ridge or outcrop providing the incubating bird with good views of approaching predators. Such sites also remain snow free in the snowy owl's usual tundra habitat. The number of eggs in a clutch increases when prey is plentiful.

Feeding

The snowy owl hunts mainly in the twilight. In the Arctic it feeds mostly on lemmings, but takes other small mammals and birds when lemmings are scarce. Those nesting in Shetland mainly caught rabbits and some young wading birds. In the owl's winter quarters birds up to the size of ducks and gulls are caught both in flight and on the water.

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