

Species Sheets: Snowy Owl



photo by Gary Lackie ©

Common name: Snowy Owl

Latin Name: *Nyctea scandiaca*

Field Marks: Length 23 inches
Wing span 52 inches



Unmistakable. Huge white owl from the arctic, present in lower 48 states in winter. Female larger with fine dark bars to better blend in to surroundings on the tundra while nesting. Male all white, or with some dark bars on wings, tail, and/or back. Eyes relatively small and yellow, beak black. Head large and round, and body feathers very dense and heat retaining. First-year birds darker because of heavy barring, males with browner markings. Hawk-like in flight.

Habitat:

Arctic tundra from northernmost reaches of land across Northern Hemisphere south to tree line in summer. Areas with low vegetation, hills, rock outcrops. In winter may venture in to southern Canada and northern U.S., especially in "irruptive years" of low food supply. Then may be seen in agricultural land, airfields, marshes, prairies perched on ground, rock, or fence post.

Behavior:

Diurnal and crepuscular. Feeds nearly entirely on lemmings (arctic rodents) over summer. Also voles, rabbits, hares, ground squirrels. In winter may take more birds, up to the size of a goose. Usually hunts from low perch with swift, direct flight. Locates lemmings under snow using hearing. May be easily approachable.

Vocalization:

Usually silent, except around nest when breeding. Male has harsh, grating bark, and a deep, low hoot. Female call is higher pitched.

Nest and eggs:

Nest on ground, usually on small hill, mound, or rock outcrop to afford view of ground predators like arctic foxes. Clutch size varies with prey availability, and may not nest at all when lemming populations crash. Usually 3-5 eggs, sometimes up to 11. Young may wander from nest on foot at two weeks, leave nest at 20-28 days, fly well at 50 days. Cared for by both parents up to 10 weeks afterwards.

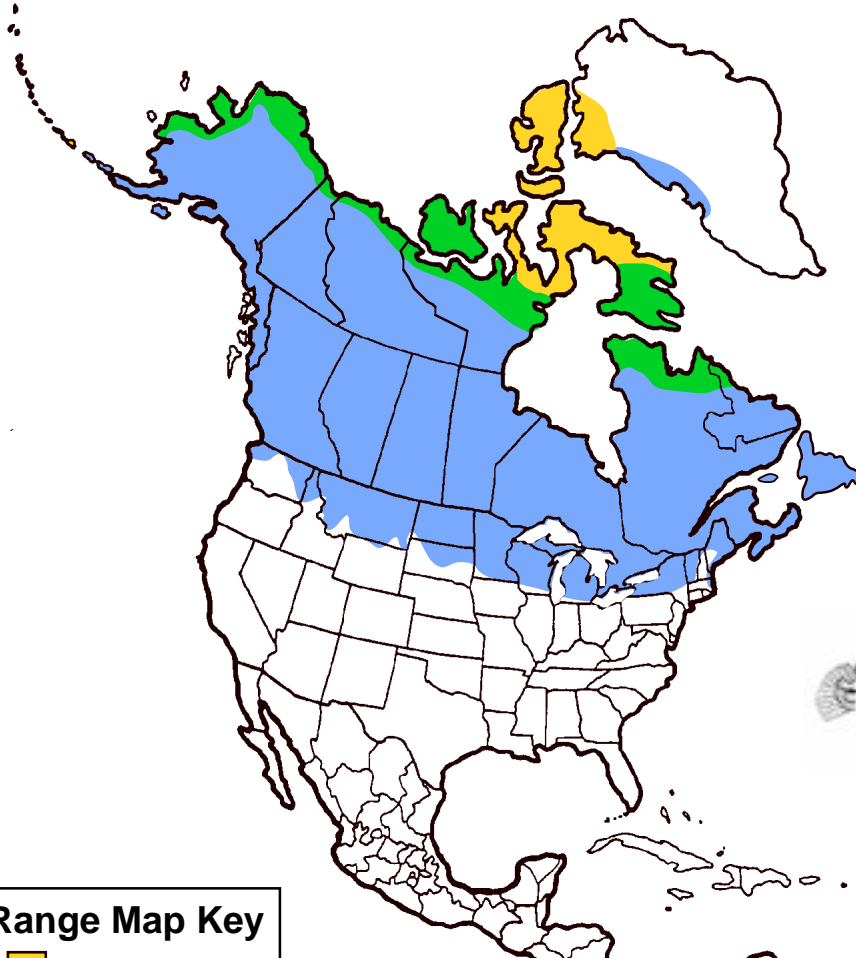
Movement:

Migratory and nomadic. Some remain on breeding grounds when food permits. Numbers in continental U.S. vary year to year.

Interesting Fact:

Largest owl in North America. Hawk-like in habits and lacking the noise-reducing plumage of nocturnal owls. Body feathers very dense and heat retaining. Very long feathers on powerful feet, with talons partly covered. Plumage type and coloring all very adaptive to arctic environment.

Range Map: Snowy Owl



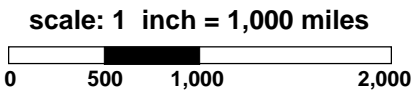
Snowy Owl. Copyright © Gary Lackie



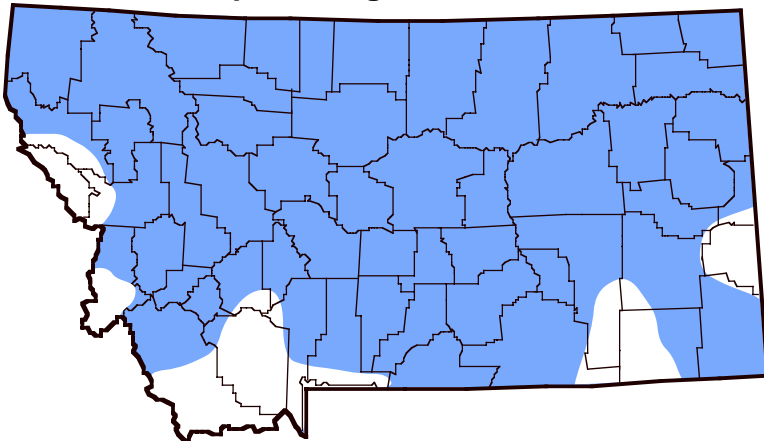
These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

Range Map Key

- Summer
- Year-round
- Winter



Raptor Range in Montana



Montana range maps are based on the Montana Bird Distribution data.