

**Snowy Owl steals prey from Marsh Hawk.**—This note describes an incident of successful piracy by a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) on a Marsh Hawk (*Circus cyaneus*) on their Massachusetts wintering grounds.

Interspecific piracy or cleptoparasitism, where one species steals prey from another, has been described within a number of avian families including the Procellariidae, Fregatidae, Accipitridae, Stercorariidae, Laridae, Turdidae, Sturnidae, and Laniidae (e.g. Bent 1921, 1922, 1937, 1938; Meinertzhagen 1959; Thomson 1964). In a number of families piracy ranks as the predominant feeding behavior, as in the jaegers (Stercorariidae) and the frigatebirds (Fregatidae). On the other hand, piracy is rare in many families. Of particular interest are the typical owls, Strigidae, which are ecologically similar to the frequently piratic Accipitridae. Within the Strigidae, successful piracy has been reported only for the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Reese (1973) and Bildstein and Ashby (1975) report successful piracies by Short-eared Owls on a European Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) and on a Marsh Hawk. Pitelka et al. (1955) mention what may have been an unsuccessful piracy attempt by a Snowy Owl on a Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) in Alaska.

In contrast to the paucity of piracy records, accounts of interspecific aggression are relatively common for the Strigidae. Bent (1938) notes that the Great-horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) occasionally robs hawk nests and that several of the larger owls prey on smaller members of the family. Short-eared Owls have been recorded chasing Marsh Hawks (Bent 1938) and Pomarine Jaegers (Pitelka et al. 1955). Most of these examples seem to have been motivated by territorial or nest defense.

On 9 December 1974 we were watching Snowy Owls on the salt marshes of the lower Merrimack River near Newburyport, Massachusetts, 42° 50' N, 70° 84' W, one of the best places in the eastern United States to find these diurnal owls in winter. The weather was overcast with a wind of 16-24 kph from the east-southeast, and the temperature was approximately 7°C. We found our first Snowy Owl near the Plum Island airport, actually on the mainland, and watched it for 10 min (1420-1430 EST). We were not able to determine its age or sex. At 1431 the bird flew

to a corrugated metal shack near the runway. As we approached, the owl left its perch (1432) and flew directly at a brown Marsh Hawk (either female or immature) carrying a small rodent of unknown species. The owl came up under the hawk, turned on its back, and grappled very briefly for the prey, which dropped to the ground. The owl followed it while the hawk remained circling overhead and calling before flying off. The owl fed on the ground until 1435 then flew off to a nearby marsh. The behavior of the owl was very similar to that described by Reese (1973) for a piracy by a Short-eared Owl on a European Kestrel.

The Snowy Owl, like most predators, is an opportunist, taking a wide variety of prey through diverse feeding methods. In addition to the typical feeding behavior described by Watson (1957: 421) the species has been known to take ducks on the wing (Fisher 1893), to fish (Audubon 1834: 136), and to eat carrion (Bent 1938, Wiggins 1953). Piracy can thus be viewed as one in a spectrum of feeding methods that permit the Snowy Owl to utilize as many food resources as possible in an unfamiliar and often rigorous environment.

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