

The Great Snowy Owl Invasion

by Robert LaShelle

When nine snowy owls were seen at Cheyenne Bottoms marsh early last December, and scattered reports of others in the state started to come in, BPI put out a news release. The news story, asking the public to report sightings of snowy owls, received widespread use in the state.

The Forestry, Fish and Game Commission also was asked to report sightings by its personnel, as were members of the Kansas Ornithological Society. Response by all was excellent.

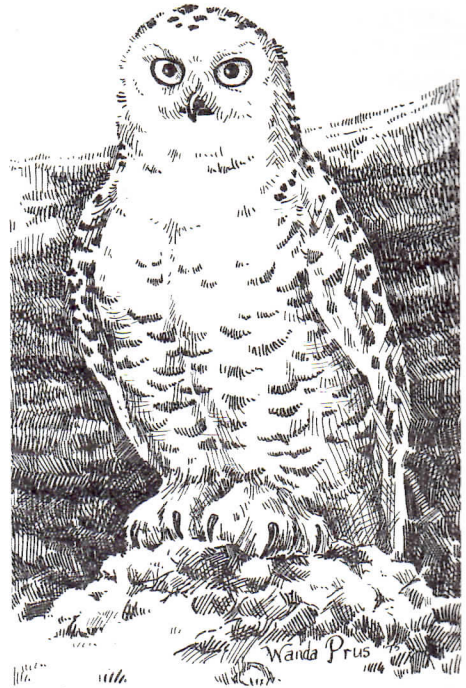
Tom Shane tabulated 81 sightings in Kansas, as shown on the map.

It was shown by A.O. Gross in 1947 that invasions of these large, white birds from the Arctic into the United States occur every four years. The invasions are not uniform over the country, and a few birds enter the United States every winter.

The winter of 1974-75 was the year for an unprecedented invasion of Kansas. Sixteen of the species were reported on the 25 Christmas bird counts in the state — previously reported only rarely.

The first sighting was Nov. 15, 1974; the last was April 15, 1975. About 50 per cent of the sightings were near reservoirs or marshes. Game commission personnel accounted for one-third of the sightings.

A few reports on behavior of the birds were received. An adult was seen to drive away an immature from its territory. A hunter at Cheyenne Bottoms lost a duck he had shot to one of the owls. At least two owls were found injured, reportedly not shot, and were taken to zoos by game commission personnel; one died several months later in captivity. Only one report of finding a dead owl was received.



Records of snowy owl observations in Kansas during the winter of 1974-75 were recorded (below) by Tom Shane. The large figures represent total sightings for the regions outlined by heavy lines.

