

# The plight of a juvenile snowy owl

## Birds I View



## Bill Montevecchi

“Dad - a snowy owl has been hit by a car on Portugal Cove Road at Higgins Line.” Nick was listening to VOXM Nightline when a call came in asking if someone could help.

Well – got nets and nooses and catch birds - so we headed to town. In the Tim Horton’s lot, we met Paula Macdonald and Donald Young who had seen the owl on the road and called Nightline.

The owl last seen flying low in the parking lot was nowhere to be found. As luck would have it after about 45 minutes the owl flew from a roof landing atop a telephone pole. We watched and waited then after a while assumed that if the owl could fly that well things might turn out OK [0 Killed].

On the way home, Nick suggested that the owl may have been carrying a rat or some other prey and was flying low over the road when struck. We decided to investigate and turned

around. Owls – most often small ones like boreal owls though sometimes large ones like great horned owls [for example the mount in my office] – are relatively frequent road-kills. Roads provide highly exposed hunting habitat for owls in pursuit of scurrying rodents. This hunting option may even be better [though much riskier] when the rodent is lit up in a vehicle's headlights – hence the problem.

Back at the scene, we searched for a prey kill to no avail. What did attract our attention though was that the owl was gone. This we took as a good omen.

Driving in for a 9 AM class the next morning, I was stunned to see the owl on a roadside slope. Unable to do anything at the time, I called Salmonier Nature Park. An animal caretaker called the conservation officer at Butterpot Park who could not secure the white bird. Following the owl to the TCH then to an area near the Marine Institute, he kept me posted if there might be a chance to net the roving owl.

The next day an email from an office worker indicated that the owl was in the parking lot of the ReMax building. When I arrived the owl was atop a telephone pole being harassed mercilessly by a murder of crows but was not budging. After few photos I moved on.

The following morning another office worker who had seen the owl the previous day flushed it from the soccer field at Airport Heights. I was there in a flash, but the owl wasn't.

Sporadic sightings were made in the area but nothing substantive until 22 March when Lee Hedd texted that a snowy owl was off Stamps Lane near the rugby pitch and tennis courts. I searched the field perimeters again to no avail.

Lee texted again the next day that the owl was on the roadside opposite the tennis courts. I immediately sighted the white one atop a rise overlooking the road. A westerly gale was blustering, so knowing that the bird would attempt to take flight into the wind, I sought that advantage by moving forward slowly on an angle to get beyond the owl with the wind at my back.

The owl did not allow me that option. The magnificent bird fluttered into the wind. Yet unforeseen circumstance worked in my favor. The owl came up against a long chain-link fence and could not gain flight. It could only flutter along the fence-line. Every time it did, I moved at an angle to restrict its flightpath and shortened the distance between us. We rested and stared at each other. I reassured the owl [and myself] that I would catch it but there needn't be any doubt or fear about it.

Eventually, we were barely 10 feet apart watching each other intently. I talked to calm the bird. When the owl attempted a getaway it went straight into fence.

With the beautiful creature wrapped securely and safely in net, it was back to Portugal Cove for rest and rehab in Janet's greenhouse. A smorgasbord of foods, including murre, smelt, a freshly trapped rat, etc. were offered but the owl showed no interest in any of it.

We decided that the owl needed hydration and force-feeding. As we were heading to Musgrave Harbour for the Easter weekend, I called Salmonier Nature Park for help. I reached Michelle Simms working on Good Friday. We delivered the owl on our way out of town. It was a good Good Friday, and I was hoping for a resurrecting Easter.

Last week, I called the park for an update and was told that owl had been put down. I was taken aback deeply saddened. I knew the owl had an unrepairable wing but one-winged snowy owls and bald eagles enjoy a sedentary life in the park. Somehow I felt confident that “my owl” would also.

Surely somewhere there must be space for a beautiful one-winged Arctic spirit. Somewhere ... We so desperately need a wildlife rehabilitation organization in Newfoundland and Labrador. Here’s hoping on the silent wings of an Arctic owl.

### **More on the murre hunt**

Positive responses from hunters reaffirmed the rationale of the March column on abuses in the murre hunt. Public discussion will help improve the ways we exploit, appreciate and respect wildlife.

### **Birds in our area**

At March’s end, red-breasted mergansers and great cormorants were in Portugal Cove Harbour [Robert Picco], and double-crested cormorants were in Bowring Park [Walter Harding].

Greater scaup have been at the Narrows [Chris Brookes], and kittiwakes are mating at the base of Signal Hill [Rick West]. A male common goldeneye rippled the mirror surface of Neary’s Pond in mid-April [Janet Montevecchi].

Belted kingfishers have returned to Portugal Cove [Marina and Janet Montevecchi]. Rick West captured stunning images of a female hairy woodpecker on the Voisey’s Brook Trail. Rick’s photos can be by googling [seeitnow.ca/birds](http://seeitnow.ca/birds).

Bird feeders benefit wintering seed and suet eaters, but the predictable aggregations attract hawks. Northern goshawks have taken crows at feeders in Portugal Cove [Jon Garvin] and St. John’s [Rose McFarlane Chaulk].

A spring harbinger fox sparrow arrived at Imelda Dalton’s feeder in Angel’s Cove on 5 April, few days later they were singing gloriously over the northeast Avalon. An American goldfinch flock was attracted to larch on Old Broad Cove Road [Alanna Penney], and five sought-after red crossbills were feeding on black oil sunflower seeds at Sue Willis’s feeder in Portugal Cove.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>

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