



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

February 10, 2023



Snowy Owl on rooftop, photo provided by Los Angeles Animal Services SMART Team

An Unusual Winter Visitor

by Guthrum Purdin, DVM

Here in SoCal, we're used to hearing about celebrity sightings. A movie star spotted at a coffee shop or a famous musician getting a snack at an all-night hamburger joint after a concert at the Hollywood Bowl. But recently there was a celebrity of a very different sort electrifying the internet and regional chat lines. The newest member of the glitterati is an arctic Snowy Owl!

This species is normally only found in the far north of Alaska, Canada, and Eurasia. At first, there were only rumors of this unusual visitor to sunny California. A sighting was first reported in San Pedro, near the Port of Los Angeles in November and the local birding community immediately mobilized with hardcore birders prowling the port area searching for a fabulous new addition to their "life lists" of species. The owl proved as elusive as Elvis for weeks until they were definitively identified in December on a rooftop in the town of Cypress in Orange County. Here the far traveling Snowy Owl decided to take up residency for a while, spending the days relaxing on open rooftops in clear view of the previously peaceful streets. Then the paparazzi arrived in force!

The day I went to see the owl, I knew where to stop when I saw a group of three dozen fellow birdwatchers massed down a side street with fancy spotting scopes and expensive cameras aimed at a nearby rooftop. The owl was relaxing and preening, acting completely nonchalant towards the crowd of starstruck admirers. The local homeowners were amazingly tolerant of the horde invading their street and the mood was upbeat. The neighbors I talked to were happy to have such a fascinating visitor. Rarities like this do sometimes show up in residential neighborhoods and it's hugely important that visiting birders be respectful of property, not block streets or driveways, stay quiet, and allow locals to go about their days in peace. Fortunately, this owl was a real chance for everyone to get together and enjoy the presence of a remarkable ambassador from the wild world.

Snowy Owls are closely related to Great Horned Owls but have a characteristic brilliant white plumage peppered with brown flecks. The owl in Cypress is probably a female, based on her plumage and size (males tend to be whiter and smaller). Owls usually eat small prey like rodents whole, then regurgitate the indigestible bones & hair in castings called pellets. Although far from home, she chose a good location, with open parkland nearby providing ample opportunities for hunting. Based on the bones found in her pellets, she was doing her part to control local rodent populations. Food can be hard to come by during arctic winters, and snowys will hunt opportunistically, taking much larger prey. Photos were taken of this owl eating a type of wetlands waterbird called a coot. Not your usual California cuisine!



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It's important to keep your distance from wildlife. Even with the best of intentions, humans getting up close has a negative impact. For some animals, they can become habituated to human presence, which can lead to them being injured, mistaken as aggressive, or becoming nuisances like a raccoon dependent on cat food left on a patio and unable to forage for themselves. In the case of a bird like this, close approaches can cause the animal to become stressed, driven from perch to perch, unable to rest, and more susceptible to disease. Happily, what I witnessed were admirers staying back a long way, using their telescopes and telephoto cameras to get clear, high-res images like the one attached to this article. When I arrived on site, the owl was at first hard to spot, but word on the street was she liked to rest close to spinning turbine roof vents. With this advice and a pair of field glasses, I had great views of our feathered leading lady.

The Cypress owl would regularly arrive on a local rooftop around dawn, then depart shortly before sunset. The afternoon I was there, there was a well-deserved round of applause as she went off for a night's work hunting. Her last day in the spotlight was January 16th. As twilight approached, she departed on cue, making a dramatic turn past the fascinated crowd. Where is the Snowy Owl now? No one knows. Why she was here is as much of a mystery. Hopefully she's found her way back home to the chilly north after a relaxing winter vacation. She'll soar in the hearts of her fans forever.