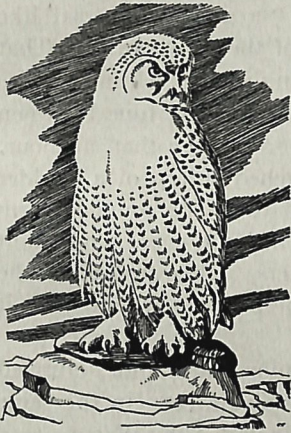


THE SNOWY OWL :

AN ARCTIC BIRD IN THE CAIRNGORMS

ALEX. TEWNION



NOT many birds haunt the high plateaux of the Cairngorms in summer. Of the few species which regularly do so, three are classed as rare—the dotterel and the snow bunting, both of which breed there in very limited numbers, and the golden eagle, which comes only to hunt for prey. The recent summer occurrences of another rare species, the snowy owl (scientifically named *Nyctea scandiaca* (Linnaeus)), are therefore of special interest not only to ornithologists but to all familiar with the region. Climbers particularly will be very interested, for to them is due the credit for the most recent observations in the Cairngorms; and it is very probable, too, if the solitary snowy owl concerned returns in future years, that its movements will be traced chiefly from climbers' reports.

There is no mistaking the snowy owl for any other species. Chiefly a diurnal hunter, it is one of the most impressive of birds : a very large, white, round-headed owl, with a half-hidden black bill and fierce-looking yellow eyes. The male stands about 20 inches high and the female 2 or 3 inches more. The wing span is broad, not much short of 4 feet. Such a large bird can look very intimidating in flight, and one young lad confessed to me that he felt quite alarmed when he saw the Cairngorms bird in 1952. It is reassuring to know, however, that except at its breeding grounds, which lie in Spitzbergen, Greenland, Baffin Land and other Arctic countries, it does not attack human beings. The male's plumage may be snowy white all over, sometimes lightly flecked or barred with brown, especially on the wings. The female is also white but is generally much more barred with brown. From available descriptions, the bird which has been frequenting the Cairngorms seems to have been a male. In the *Scottish Naturalist* (Vol. 64, pp. 176-177), where its occurrence was

first recorded, it is described as "exceptionally immaculate, and appeared wholly white except on the closest scrutiny."

The interest in this bird centres chiefly on the fact that it is the first of its kind known to have summered in Britain. The species is an irregular visitor here, mainly to north Scotland in winter; but a few birds have been seen in summer, generally on passage. Then at the end of May 1952, Miss V. Cromar, daughter of Mr Charles Cromar, warden at Glenmore Lodge, saw "a great white owl like an eagle" flying across the high plateau of the Cairngorms. That was the first time it was sighted, but Mr Van den Bos, a Lincolnshire ornithologist, saw and recognised it as a snowy owl on June 19, when he followed it about across a shallow corrie for more than an hour. Describing it later, he said that when it perched on top of a boulder it looked just like a small snowman, with the same rounded form and three black dots in its face marking its bill and eyes. One habit he noticed was also stressed by later observers: when disturbed, the owl nearly always alighted in a prominent position which gave it an all-round view.

On June 21, Messrs Adam Watson, senior and junior, climbed to the corrie and saw the owl; and it was again seen in the same corrie on June 29, by a party of five which included the Watsons and Professor V. C. Wynne-Edwards. After that it disappeared from human ken. But in the summer of 1953 it returned—for it is scarcely conceivable that another very white snowy owl would appear so soon after in the same place. Although it was seen by various parties, the earliest sight record that I know of occurred on July 19, when Miss E. J. Lawrence and Messrs J. E. Bothwell, R. L. Mitchell and R. Still saw it on the plateau about half a mile from its customary corrie. It was perched, very white and conspicuous, on top of a rock. At first they thought it was a peculiarly shaped piece of quartz which someone had placed there; but on approaching closer they realised it was a strange bird standing there, quite motionless, except for its head, which gradually turned to watch them as they drew nearer. When they were about twenty yards away the owl rose and flapped silently across the plateau towards the top of some distant cliffs. This party thought the owl was about the size of a big herring-gull, and considered the whiteness of its plumage very impressive. They also remarked on its lack of fear, and its absolute silence on the ground and in flight.

The latest eye-witness account came from Mr James Bruce, of Aberdeen, who with a friend encountered the owl on September 13,

about a mile north-west of its favourite haunt. On examining the surrounding area they decided it had frequented the spot for some time past, as they found the skeleton of a mountain hare, picked quite clean, also several skeletons of grouse-like birds, probably ptarmigan, and numerous castings which consisted chiefly of fur and feathers. They marked the site by building a small cairn. Mr Colin Murdoch, of Kingussie, has since then told me that he and Mr Richard Perry, of Newtonmore, investigated a report of a snowy owl seen at the end of September on the Drumochter hills. They failed to see the bird, but possibly it was the same one.

Since it is hoped that this Arctic visitor will return, it is not considered advisable to disclose the exact locality it frequented. Its habitat lay on the plateau above the 3,600 feet level, partly in a big, shallow stony corrie with patches of alpine grassland, partly on the gravelly wastes and alpine meadows surrounding this corrie. This type of ground is in many ways very like that found at its Arctic homeland, where the species feeds on lemmings, voles, mice, Arctic hares and various birds. The Cairngorms bird vies with the eagle by living on similar prey, and also perhaps on smaller fry like voles, mice, shrews and small passerines.