

Snowy owl returns to cooler climes



PHOTO BY CHRIS POLK

Oxford's snowy owl, seen at various perches in town, hasn't been seen since about Feb. 19.

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OXFORD The Eastern Shore of Maryland's snowy owls are gone, and the latest sighting of the arctic bird happened March 10 in Havre De Grace.

But it's not likely that bird, or the one or two taking up urban living in Washington, D.C, came from this area, David Brinker, of the Wildlife and Heritage Service, Natural Heritage Program, said Wednesday.

"Who knows where it came from," he said.

The region's first snowy owl this winter came to Assateague about Nov. 10, then one came to Poplar Island, then a second to Assateague right before Christmas, then one in Oxford. But no

one has seen the birds in about a month the warming weather has cued them to go home and find a mate.

"I suspect the birds are starting to go back north, popping up in different places and moving around," Brinker said. "I expect them to leave about this time of year. People think these birds perish and don't make it back. A lot of them do make it back."

Oxford's snowy owl, probably a first-year male about 8 months old, showed up Jan. 27 at the Cooperative Oxford Laboratory. The bird perched on the lab most days, cooperating with birders and photographers, before it left. Lab research pathologist Carol McCollough hasn't seen the bird since about Feb. 19.

The Poplar Island snowy owl left, said Brinker, and a birder last reported seeing the Assateague owl on Feb. 8.

And the region won't see another snowy owl for a while.

"We're not going to see anything like this next year," Brinker said. "We might see one in four years."

Maryland usually gets one snowy owl in the years the food supply crashes, but having four on the Shore is unusual. The last irruption happened about 60 years ago, and before this winter, Talbot County had five sightings since 1974, Bob Ringler said. Ringler is the editor of Maryland Bird Life, a Maryland Ornithological Society publication, and has data on the owl's presence that goes back until at least 1876.

Data on its presence comes from sightings, but tracking its movements requires banding. Brinker tried to band one of the Assateague birds two days before Christmas.

"It was funny to watch," he said. "The bird flew halfway to the trap, landed on the sand, walked over in a comical sort of gait and walked around in circles looking at it. It walked up to it and walked back and only jumped on it once."

Birds usually fly at the trap, run all over it and get caught quickly, Brinker said. The trap is a wire cage, with a gerbil inside, that is rigged with little nooses that catch a bird's foot.

Brinker talked to a man in Massachusetts who uses a different method to trap and band snowy owls a bow net triggered remotely. And an effective method is needed in that state this year, more than 21 birds were removed from runways at Logan Airport.

The birds like the openness of runways snowy owls live in the open tundra, nesting on the ground and eating lemmings. When the food supply crashes, about every four years, the birds fly south in search of food.

A contender for the largest owl, snowy owls have wing spans of four to five feet, an average weight of four pounds and are almost two feet long. Only the great grey owl has a larger

wingspan. The birds will aggressively defend territory and eggs and have talons that reach about one and a half inches long on their feathered feet.

The nomadic birds have traveled as far as from Alaska to Siberia, Brinker said.

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