

Iowa's Tundra Tourist by Coralee Bodeker

I spent my morning exploring the fields surrounding Hayden Prairie in search of the rare, well-camouflaged Snowy Owl. Several of these Arctic Circle residents had been spotted in the vicinity this winter due to an irruptive cycle. The day broke bright and relatively mild for February, but the howling wind rolled clouds across Northern Iowa's expansive sky. As we drove past tundra-like fields, my objective seemed simple: find a big, white bird perched on a telephone pole



framed against the vivid azure, as I had seen in recent photographs of this particular winter visitor. I quickly realized, however, this visitor might be sitting out on the dormant agricultural fields. A Snowy Owl's feathers would match the brown and white expanse flawlessly, making the bird nearly impossible to spot. Frustration began to simmer as we drove up and down the section's gravel roads. We pulled over to confer with some fellow owlers training their binoculars onto a flanking field. The sun cast a beam of light across a slight rise, about 40 feet out, and a large snowy lump was suddenly illuminated next to a dirt clod. The lump moved its head and a drowsy face was staring right at us. Its thick white feathers ruffled in the wind and the piercing-yellow eyes gazed steadily ahead. The owl had rather light-streaking on its chest, wings, and back {which meant it was more than likely an immature male} and I could just barely make out two heavily-downed talons

nestled beneath the fuzzy mass. The owl's head moved like clockwork—once to the left, then to the right, then to the back as he constantly checked the area. A couple Horned Larks landed only a few feet from him and began to scratch and peck at the ground. He seemed undisturbed. Then, as if a switch was flicked, the sky darkened and a tempest descended, nearly blowing the larks off their feet. The air thickened with horizontal snow and mist. Like a lost sailor, I scrambled to find my lighthouse. Through the raging white din I could barely make out a few fluttering specks and a large, blurry lump still rooted to the spot. The snow blew for close to fifteen minutes and then, just as quickly as the disturbance arrived, it was whisked away.



The owl hadn't even moved.